

# Dueling about Dualism: A Reply to Walter Gulick

Milton Scarborough

ABSTRACT Key Words: Dualism, nondualism, emptiness, nothingness, mindbody, middle way, *namarupa*, Life-world.

*This essay replies to Walter Gulick's review of my book. It points out the book's double purpose, namely, finding both a Western middle way and also a middle way between East and West. It clarifies the flexibility of my use of "dualism" while emphasizing my consistency in the use of "middle way" as referring to a larger and more concrete reality as the source of abstracted dualisms. It compares the Buddha's namarupa with the mindbody of Merleau-Ponty and Poteat. It articulates six benefits of my approach. Finally, it justifies my emphasis on Hebrew thought about covenant, history, and knowledge.*

Walter Gulick's review of my book *Comparative Theories of Nonduality: the Search for a Middle Way* has both praised it and also raised critical questions about it. For both I am appreciative. I will attempt to respond to the latter with more clarity and greater persuasiveness.

Gulick finds helpful my sketch of an epistemological middle way (learning) between the dualities of ignorance and absolute knowledge. On the other hand, he finds my metaphysical middle way less compelling. Perhaps one reason is that although he rightly sees that my project "calls the reader to something more radical than a metaphysics of mediation or compromise," he may not fully appreciate that not only do I seek to find a Western middle way inspired by but not identical to that of Buddhism, but I also speak of the "need to find a middle way between East and West" (26). Indeed, my original title for the book was *The Search for a Middle Way: West, East, and Middle East in Dialogue*. The middle way that I envision is a conceiving of dualism, nondualism, and the middle in a way that could work for both Buddhism and the West.

It may be helpful to say that there are three kinds or levels of dualism and nondualism. The first kind consists of a single pole with two constituents. Thus, it may be called "monopolar dualism." In philosophical anthropology the two constituents are, for example, mind or soul, on the one hand, and a material body, on the other. In cosmology, they might be God and the world or the supernatural and the natural. In India, Samkhya, Yoga, and Jainism are examples of the former, while Madhva's cosmological dualism is an example of the latter. In the West Descartes's thinking substance and extended substance are an obvious example of the former, while classical theism is an instance of the latter. For the most part, monopolar dualism has been the only kind known in the West until recently.

The second kind or level of dualism, however, has two poles. This dipolar dualism is typical of Buddhism. Here is an example from Buddhist ethics. At one extreme is attachment (to food, as in gluttony, for example). At the other extreme is detachment (from food, as in self-starvation, which was a practice among the Jains). The dualism, then, is attachment vs. detachment. Nondualism is non-attachment. Because nondualism rejects both extremes, it is called a "middle way." This middle way does not consist, however, of consuming some intermediate quantity of food but rather of giving up the preoccupation with food that both poles exhibit. Because nondualism undercuts both attachment and detachment, it could just as well be called "non-detachment." Gluttony, however, is more common than self-starvation; therefore "non-attachment" is preferred. This pattern is analogous to our

saying that an act is neither moral nor immoral but amoral.

The same dipolar logic exhibited above works for both metaphysics and epistemology, and, as was the case with the first kind of dualism, it can work in both Asia and the West. The number of constituents for each pole, however, may vary. Pluralism vs. monism, for example, is many vs. one, while Idealism vs. Realism opposes one vs. one. Indeed, I envision great flexibility in what can be opposed to what. This is implied when I distinguish “the meaning of dualism in the West and in Asia” from the somewhat less restrictive way I use the term “in the remainder of” the book (24). Hence, the two poles may be mere oppositions and not necessarily polar oppositions. What matters for the nondualism I am proposing is not the specific nature of the dualism so much as the method used to eliminate the dualities. That method does not consist in finding an intermediate position between extremes but in showing the dualities (of whatever kind) to be abstract and reified derivatives from a larger, more concrete reality, which is the middle.

The third level of dualism is reflected in the question raised by Gulick about the possibility that in opposing nondualism to dualism I may have fallen into self-contradiction. We might call it “meta-dualism.” A similar concern was expressed about Nagarjuna when he was suspected of wishing to eliminate conventional truth (expressed in dualistic language) in favor of ultimate truth (nondualism). Nagarjuna, however, had no such intention, as is clear when he affirmed that between the two truths (conventional and ultimate) “there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.” In other words, he was simply trying to dissolve the sclerosis (fixed identities, essences, or substances) of the conventional world so that it could be properly affirmed in its fullness.

Such is also my intent. I am not attempting to expunge all binaries in language—that is almost certainly impossible—but to eliminate the hardening that converts them from useful, contextualized, limited distinctions into hardened dichotomies. In the end, Gulick seems to understand that when he concludes that “Scarborough’s opposition is best understood as not eventuating in a new dualism of delimited terms that occludes our understanding of reality, but as an expansion of our understanding and appreciation of the depth and breadth of reality. His approach does not founder upon self-contradiction.” Gulick’s interpretation, in effect, reiterates what I say on page 24 of the book: “The affirmation of nonduality intends to point to a wider, deeper, more comprehensive context as the source of dualities.”

Buddhism is very familiar with all three forms of dualism (although it does not bother to distinguish them) and has attempted to dissolve each of them in a nondualism based on the concept emptiness or nothingness. The West has given scant attention to the second type, and only recently has it become acquainted with the third. Dissolving dualism is not central to Western philosophy, and its typical middle is not nondual. I am, nevertheless, urging the West to take advantage of the logic of nondualism in relation to all forms of dualism. In some quarters this is, in effect, already taking place. Confronted with the anthropological, monopolar dualism of a material body plus a permanent, eternal mind, the Buddha put forward his *namarupa* (name/form or mind/body), a nondualistic, psychophysical concept of human beings in which body, feeling, perceiving, dispositions, and minding are always already interdependent, integrated, and changing. Yet his solution is remarkably similar, even in name, to the mindbody of Merleau-Ponty, who uses phenomenological intuition and description to reveal a similar, fundamental interdependence of body, motility, perception, affectivity, and speaking that recalls the Buddha’s definition of “emptiness.” Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s view, along with that of Poteat, could with some fairness be regarded as instances of a nondual middle way.

Gulick prefers to call my philosophy a “metaphysics of depth.” I do use that and other spatial terms

throughout the book, as I did in the quote above from page 24, as a way to make the middle way intelligible. Depth language is more familiar to the West. But I also use “greater whole,” “more comprehensive context,” and “world” (as in Husserl’s or Merleau-Ponty’s “life-world”). Such terms are also familiar to many Western philosophers, have analogies in Buddhism, and are less one-dimensional.

The benefits of my approach are multiple. First, it helps build a bridge between Asia and the West. Second, the very use of “middle way” and “nondualism” alerts us to our ingrained habit of being satisfied with the oversimplifications of our analyses and descriptions of reality in merely binary terms. Third, it warns us against the zigzag effect, an important concept in my book. It refers to our tendency in the West to embrace one view and then flee in the opposite direction. We have zigzagged from Rationalism to Empiricism, from Classicism to Romanticism, from Essentialism to Existentialism, from modernity to post-modernity, from religion to secularity, from Realism to Idealism, from faith to reason, from absolutism to relativism, and much more. Fourth, it militates against privileging one duality over another, with all the negative social consequences that entails. Fifth, it helps us to recognize that polarities are abstractions and militates against reifying them. Sixth, it helps keep us focused on the concrete life-world or nothingness as the ground from which our theoretical concepts arise. These, I would contend, are significant benefits.

Somewhat puzzling to me are Gulick’s comments about my attention to ancient Greece and Israel. He observes that ancient Israel was not so different from surrounding cultures of the time and that Abraham, on whom I focus, has links to Sumer and Babylon. And he points out that ancient Greece contains “mystery religions and other archaic elements that have much in common with the Hebrew worldview.” All this I am happy to acknowledge. In fact, it was acknowledged in Chapter 2, where I state, “To be sure, Hebrew culture was not monolithic, and it must not be essentialized. It contained elements drawn from such sources as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, Persia, and eventually Greece and Rome, and its makeup was ever changing. Consequently, my interpretation of it will of necessity be a selective activity” (27). Moreover, I restrict myself to Israel “insofar as it manifests itself in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)” (26).

The passage cited above goes on to speak of Greece: “The same must be said for Greek culture, although I will pay much less attention to it and that attention will be narrowly focused on Parmenides, Heraclitus, and the Socratic thinkers (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle)” (27). As for the mystery religions (Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic), they tend to be dualistic in a double sense: they separate (1) ethical action from mystical union and (2) mortal existence in this world from an immortal existence in another world after death. While Reality is surely filled with mystery, mysticism is, I suspect, the final and extreme resort of one who chafes against the inherent limitations of a visualistic model of knowing.

Finally, Gulick suggests that I may be “advocating a nostalgic retrieval of an archaic worldview in serious conflict with the scientific understanding of the world that is characteristic of the Western worldview, as well as being at odds with Buddhist thought.”

Perhaps it was in connection with this point that he called me “brave,” but only as a euphemism for “foolhardy.” Here I can make only a few brief comments. First, to appreciate the Hebrews’ covenantal ethics, their concept of history as future-oriented, and their tendency to empiricism in the practice of watching history (40) is hardly to endorse the entirety of their worldview. Second, Hebraic thought as selectively encapsulated in the Bible influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and helped lay the foundations, along with Greece and Rome, for Western civilization, including modernity. That alone, seems to justify paying it serious attention.

Third, while I do not deny there is much in the Hebrew worldview that is at odds with science, the same is true of ancient Greece; nevertheless, modern science is precisely one of the places Hebrew culture has begun asserting itself. For the first time in science Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* portrayed the earth as historical and introduced narrative into scientific discourse. Darwin's theory of evolution rejected the fixity of the species that was rooted in Aristotle and made biology historical. Nowadays, the entire universe that stems from the Big Bang is regarded as historical, and our museums that feature nature are "museums of natural history." In Deconstruction, Hebraic thought has begun to affect even our intellectual standards. I cite John Caputo's assessment that "Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence... is actually just good old Jewish theology" (26). Finally, when Polanyi, no slouch as a scientist, explained the scientific method—the very heart of science—by appealing to faith, hope, and grace, he both offered an explanation and a critique of science that is rooted, as he explicitly states, in the views of St. Paul, the former Jew. As for the relation of Hebrew thought to Buddhism, the very inception of my book took place at a luncheon meeting with former Old Testament Professor at Princeton, Patrick Miller, whom I cite frequently in chapters 2 and 3 and who referred in his own writing to Hebrew nonduality.

If, as Polanyi claims, we say more than we know, intellectual exchange with another person helps clarify what was said. In that regard, I am very appreciative of Walter Gulick's helping me to know my own mind.

## Notes on Contributors

**Jon Fennell** ([jon.fennell@hillsdale.edu](mailto:jon.fennell@hillsdale.edu)) is Associate Professor of Education and Dean of Social Sciences at Hillsdale College. He has written on figures ranging from Rousseau and Nietzsche to Leo Strauss, Allan Bloom, and Richard Rorty, as well as on such topics as rationality and character education. His primary interest is in issues that arise at the intersection of philosophy, politics and education.

**Charles Lowney** ([lowneyc@wlu.edu](mailto:lowneyc@wlu.edu)) is currently at Washington and Lee University in Virginia where his teaching focuses on applied ethics and the social and political issues surrounding poverty. He is primarily interested in the limits of understanding and expression in the analytic tradition and on moral epistemology. Lowney's recent writings (other than his series of three recent *TAD* essays) emphasize tacit knowing ("Frege and the Tacit" in *Polanyiana*, 17:1-2, 2008, pp. 19-37), the irreducibility of the person ("Seeing Saying and Being the Gestalt: Further Reflections on Wittgenstein and Polanyi on the Concept of the Person" in *Appraisal*, 7:1, 2008, 21-38) and how tacit knowing & Aristotle's philosophy can provide a new understanding of value as emergent and real in contemporary culture ("Authenticity and the Reconciliation of Modernity," in *The Pluralist*, 4:1, 2009, 33-50). Lowney is a member of the Polanyi Society Speakers Bureau and is willing to speak at colleges and universities on these and other Polanyi-related topics.

**Milton Scarborough** ([milton.scarborough@centre.edu](mailto:milton.scarborough@centre.edu)), a native of Gulfport, Mississippi, earned a B. A. from University of Mississippi (1962), a B.D. from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (1965) and a Ph.D. from Duke University (1972) in religion (Christianity and Culture). He taught at Centre College from 1969 to 2005. In addition to his new book discussed in this issue, his 1994 book, *Myth and Modernity: Postcritical Reflections* was reviewed in *TAD* 21:2.

**Walter Gulick** ([WGulick@msubillings.edu](mailto:WGulick@msubillings.edu)), a former President of the Polanyi Society, has been the *TAD* Book Review editor for many years. He is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Humanites and Religious Studies at Montana State University, Billings. Gulick taught the spring semester of 2009 at the University of Tartu, Estonia, where he offered a graduate course on Polanyi's thought.