

**Moral Responsiveness in Buddhist philosophy:  
Buddhist Ethics and the Transformation of Experience.**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Buddhist approach to ethics rejects the image of an autonomous self independently giving rise through mysterious free agent causation to actions. We are physical organisms whose most interesting properties are not our simple physical properties, but the norm-governed properties we acquire in virtue of our participation in a network of discursive and social practices, including those of moral cultivation and criticism. We are constituted as the persons we are in part by the continuum of processes on which we supervene, in part by the social complexes in which we figure and which shape us, and in virtue of conventions of individuation and ascription of ownership and responsibility. Who we are emerges not from any individual essence, but from the network of dependencies that constitute our being as *persons*, as those who occupy roles. We cultivate ourselves and each other on this model in order to improve our efficacy as interdependent members of a common lifeworld, and the practices of cultivation cause us to see the world in a more salutary way and to act in it in a more salutary way. These modes of being or comportments are more salutary not because they serve a transcendent value, but because they more accurately reflect the reality of our lifeworld and because they make us more successful both in realizing our own aims or *purṣārthas*, and in facilitating others' realizing their aims. On the Buddhist account, we are expressing a rationally grounded comportment to the world and others based in the recognition of our interdependence, and in the consequent attitudes of impartiality, benevolence, care and sympathetic joy that emerge naturally from that realization.

I will discuss three domains of moral reflection in which Buddhist ethics can teach us something: (1) moral cultivation; (2) moral agency; and (3) the response to egoism. Western ethical theory, however valuable, is dominated by “output ethics,” the view that morality is about what we *do*. Deontological ethics is concerned with our rights and duties. The deontological framework is enormously influential in contemporary moral theory and politics, underlying most liberal democratic constitutions. But deontology does its work on the output side of the moral project: it concerns what we *do*, and *why* we do it; but is silent about how we see the world.

Consequentialists take the moral worth of actions to be determined by their consequences. Consequentialist theories have been influential in the formulation of public policy, forcing us to a kind of neutrality between individuals, fairness in outcomes, and a bent towards social welfare. Nonetheless, consequentialism, like deontology, grips on the output side of moral life—concerning what we do, not how we experience the world.

The third major theoretical trajectory in Western moral thought is the areteic tradition. Theories in this tradition share an Aristotelian understanding of virtue as a disposition to action. Courage is a disposition to stand one’s ground in danger; generosity a disposition to give, etc.<sup>1</sup> Areteic theory is influential in moral education: curriculum is often aimed at developing character. Once again, though, areteic ethics focuses on action. So, all three of the major Western traditions fall on the output side.

Buddhist ethics, on the other hand, is aimed at personal transformation from a state of pervasive suffering to freedom from that suffering; it is about the transformation of our *experience* of the world. This is why Śāntideva places so much emphasis on the cultivation of habits of mind, including attention and patience. The four noble truths provide the most general map for that transformation.

The suffering in question is caused by the fact that our lives and experiences are subject to countless causes and conditions that are beyond our. To escape from that suffering is not to escape from interdependence—that would be impossible—but to transform our affective and cognitive reaction to that web. The cessation of suffering is possible because its causes are internal. As Śāntideva puts it in *Bodhicāryāvatāra*, there is not enough leather to cover the entire world, but I

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<sup>1</sup> Now, some (Bommarito 2017) have urged that this tradition can be extended to comprise a set of “inner virtues” concerned not with action, but with perceptual or affective sets. But this is not part of the mainstream tradition, and are motivated by engagement with Buddhist ethics.

can protect myself from all of the hazards of the road by putting on a pair of sandals. Pain is not necessarily suffering, as any athlete will tell you; change and aging are only suffering if we are averse to them and committed to remaining “forever 21.” And interdependence is only a source of suffering if one is committed to a fantasy of pure autonomy. So, moral progress consists in the elimination of egocentric attraction and aversion through ceasing to take my own pleasures and pains as the default matters of concern, and by cultivating sensitivity to the interests of others. This is a transformation not of my actions or motives, but of my experience of reality. This is why such aspects as right *view*, right *meditation*, and right *mindfulness* are central to the eightfold path.

There are certain advantages to this moral phenomenology. Let me consider two: a greater sense of humanity in ethics development; and a more easy naturalization of moral value. Let us begin with the connection between ethics and personal humanity. Recall Bernard Williams’ “one thought too many” problem. You are in the hospital, and I, your friend, visit. We have a pleasant conversation, and your spirits are lifting. Then you thank me for visiting. I reply, “no need to thank me. Although I didn’t really want to come to see you, I realized that it (a) was my moral duty to do so; or (b) would maximize the amount of happiness in the world were I to do so; (c) or was what a friendly person would do.” Any of these answers is one thought too many. What appeared to be a friendly act now merely amounts to a discharge of an abstract responsibility.

From the Buddhist standpoint, this problem emerges from cultivating the wrong end of our moral life, focusing on what one ought to *do*, rather than on how one ought to *feel*. If one has not cultivated the *maitri* or benevolence that would lead one simply to want to visit a friend in the hospital simply because she was ill, then any other reason would constitute one thought too many. If on the other hand one has cultivated an orientation to the world that is characterized by *maitri* and *upekṣa*, and so has shed egocentricity, the desire to visit a friend in the hospital arises spontaneously. No extra thought is necessary.

Naturalism is a great challenge to any moral theory. We are biological organisms who live in concrete societies. Facts about us, including moral facts, should be broadly explicable in the language of the natural or social sciences. But this has been notoriously difficult, giving rise to the so-called *is-ought* gap and the problem of explaining the normative in purely descriptive terms. Buddhists take perceptual and affective states to be the primary target of moral development; we can explain how these states arise naturalistically, and we can explain why these states are beneficial to people like us because of their consequences. There is then a possibility of

naturalizing without committing any naturalistic fallacy, a matter difficult for those of a deontological or consequentialist bent.

Another dimension on which Buddhist ethics differs from virtually every Western ethical tradition is that concerning the relation between autonomy and moral responsibility. Whereas virtually every Western moral theorist takes human freedom to be presupposed for morality to make sense, and takes determinism to be at least a *prima facie* threat to ethics, no Buddhist moral theorist does; Buddhist ethicists uniformly embrace the deterministic Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination together with a strong moral orientation.

In Western ethics, freedom is generally taken to be a condition of agency. Agency is typically spelled out in terms of Augustinian free will. Freedom in this sense is the absence of the determination of our action by external causes. (Garfield 2014/2017) When we hold somebody responsible for his actions, on this view, we assume that he performed those actions freely. In the law, demonstrating that an act was done under constraint, or even that it was *caused* by mental illness or trauma, is exculpatory, suggesting that when we are not ill, when we are full agents, our actions are *uncaused*.

This emphasis on freedom takes us to an conclusion: moral theory can be endorsed. It is simply impossible to deny that the physical world is governed by causal laws. It is equally hard to deny that that psychological, social and behavioral facts supervene on the physical. Augustinian freedom is hence a simple metaphysical impossibility. So, any moral theory that takes freedom to be a condition for agency or moral responsibility is hard to take seriously. And it would be unwise to try to save the day by adopting an error theory of moral discourse. For that is not a theory we can endorse in good conscience, either theoretically or practically. Consider, by analogy, economic discourse. Nobody seriously believes that the relative values of the dollar and the euro have any reality that transcends human discursive practices. Nonetheless, we do not adopt an error theory for economic discourse. Instead, we grant that the grounds of the truth or falsity of economic claims lie in human practices. Similarly, if we think that human social and discursive practices constitute the moral realm, this is not a reason to think that our claims about ethics are false, only to think that their truth conditions are determined by our practices.

Moreover, agency is not only compatible with determinism, but it presupposes it. If our behavior were not caused, it could not be caused by our intentions; that would not be freedom, it would be impotence; if our intentions were not caused by our standing beliefs, desires, perceptions, etc, this would not be freedom, but self-alienation. To be free requires not only that we are not constrained

by alien forces, but also that we are able to act on our intentions, and that we are able to form intentions that cohere with our values and experience, and these in turn required that determinism is true even at the psychological level. So, any account of agency and moral responsibility that presupposes the falsity of determinism thereby presupposes the impossibility of the minimal freedom we need in order to be responsible agents in any sense. (See Garfield 2014 for more on this.)

All of this takes us to the core of the metaphysical problems besetting so much Western moral theory: the view that the moral agent is an independent self. For all of this talk about agent causation, freedom and autonomy is in the end talk about a subject/agent that stands over and against the world, insulated from the forces that govern the world. This is a self, as opposed to a person; an autonomous, independent entity that can be the subject of the natural world, that can act on the natural world, but which is not itself a part of the natural world.

The Buddhist approach to ethics rejects this entire image of an autonomous self independently giving rise through free agent causation to actions. The Buddhist account of the person begins with the doctrine of no-self, the view that we are nothing but a continuum of psychophysical processes in an open causal relation with the external world, with no core, no independent basis, and no supernatural existence. This means that ethical thought must proceed on the assumption that our actions are just as much caused as anything else, and that we are just as much a part of the natural world as anything else. Moral assessments will then be assessments of the states and acts of persons in terms of perfectly natural properties.

The key to this assessment is a second core commitment of Buddhist philosophy, the universality of dependent origination, that everything that occurs is the effect of a complex network of causes and conditions; that Every complex is dependent upon its parts, and every individual phenomenon depends upon the larger context in which it occurs; and that everything depends for its identity and significance on conceptual imputation. A 10 Euro note depends for its existence on printing presses, manufacturers of ink, on an atmosphere that does not corrode paper, and so forth; depends upon all of the particles that constitute it. But it is also dependent upon its role in the banking system and upon those of us who imbue currency with value by accepting it in exchange for goods and services.

We are just like that banknotes. We are physical organisms whose most interesting properties are not our simple physical properties, but the norm-governed properties we acquire in virtue of our

participation in a network of discursive and social practices, including those of moral cultivation and criticism. We are constituted as the persons we in part by the continuum of processes on which we supervene, in part by the social complexes in which we figure and which shape us, and in virtue of conventions of individuation and ascription of ownership and responsibility.

Ethical cultivation and assessment then, from a Buddhist perspective, presume not independence and autonomy, but rather interdependence and contextual identity. We cultivate ourselves and each other on this model in order to improve our efficacy as interdependent members of a common lifeworld, and this causes us to see the world and to act in it in a more salutary way. These modes of being are more salutary not because they serve a transcendent value, but because they more accurately reflect the reality of our lifeworld and because they make us more successful both in realizing our own aims, and in facilitating others' realizing theirs.

Among the qualities we are urged by Buddhist moralists to cultivate are the four *Brahmavihāras*, or divine states, including *maitrī* (benevolence), *karuṇā* (care), *muditā* (sympathetic joy) and *upekṣā* (impartiality). Each of these, as I emphasized above, lies on the *input*, not on the output side of our moral life, but we can now see that each plays a central role in the development of agency, where agency is seen not in terms of free agent causation, but in terms of the performance of a role, of a *persona*. By rejecting autonomy, by rejecting a foundational self, and by rejecting independence in favor of an interdependent person with a constructed identity, Buddhism gives us a more easily naturalized account of agency, one that dovetails better with our considered view of the nature of the world in which we live.

One more important task for ethical discourse is to motivate moral decency. The target of much moral discourse is the egoist, who believes that the rational thing for any individual to do is to pursue his/her own self-interest, and that moral reasons for action are not compelling at all. The egoist is no straw man: contemporary economic theory takes rationality to consist in the pursuit of one's own narrow self-interest, or individual utility maximization. A great deal of economic policy is built on this foundation. This is bad news because once this premise is granted, it is very hard to argue anyone out of that position.

But, we should ask, how do you get egoism to sound *prima facie* rational? You begin with the idea that the fundamental unit of social analysis is the autonomous individual. You add to that individuals are mutually independent, with independent utility functions reflecting only the benefits and harms to the individuals themselves. Finally, you add the premise that the only

rational driver of action is one's utility function. From these three premises, it follows that the only rational thing for anyone to do is to follow his/her own narrow self-interest. Since morality is all about putting that narrow self-interest to the side, morality can only be irrational. And if this is where you start dialectically, it is impossible to provide a compelling refutation: any refutation would have to be a rational argument, appealing either to general demands of reason or to one's own self-interest. In this case, these coincide, and both support egoism.

This is another place where the Buddhist philosophical tradition can help. As we have seen, Buddhist reflection on the person begins from the standpoint of no-self; there is no ego standing behind my thoughts, experiences and actions; there is only the constantly changing, causally interrelated sequence of psychophysical states. That is the wrong kind of thing to have narrow self-interests in the first place. Moreover, the idea that individual actors are autonomous and mutually independent—the ground of the mutual disinterest condition on economic rationality—is a non-starter when we take seriously the interdependence of all processes and beings. The very idea that my good or ill is independent of those around me starts sounding simply stupid in the context of dependent origination.

So, when a Buddhist position is one of the alternatives, there is a shift in the burden of proof in the dialogue with the egoist: the Buddhist takes the default position to be that we are interdependent selfless persons, with shared interests in living rationally and flourishing as a community. The burden of proof is then on the egoist to explain why the interests of only one individual should be taken seriously (even by that individual), and that will be a burden difficult to shoulder. On the Buddhist account, we are not asking the egoist's question—what is in my own interest?—rather, we are expressing a rationally grounded comportment to the world and others based in the recognition of our interdependence, and in the consequent attitudes of impartiality, benevolence, care and sympathetic joy that emerge naturally from that realization. Starting from that position, egoism just looks stupid: irrational, self-defeating, and unmotivated. So, here is a third reason to take Buddhism seriously in moral discourse: it helps us to solve the moralist's problem, to demonstrate the rationality of moral motivation.

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