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The Cultivation of Virtue in Buddhist Ethics

Charles K. Fink¹

Abstract

One question pursued in Buddhist Studies concerns the classification of Buddhist ethics. Damien Keown has argued that Aristotelian virtue ethics provides a useful model for understanding Buddhist ethics, but recently other scholars have argued that character consequentialism is more suitable for this task. Although there are similarities between the two accounts, there are also important differences. In this paper, I follow Keown in defending the aretaic interpretation, although I do not press the analogy with Aristotelian ethics. Rather, I argue that Buddhist ethics corresponds to a more generic, act-centered virtue ethics. Buddhist moral reasoning is often strikingly consequentialist, but I argue that this does not support the consequentialist interpretation. Analyzing the concept of right action must be distinguished from

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² Plato seems to have held such a view. In the *Republic*, Plato characterizes virtue as the

providing a justification for living a moral life and from formulating a procedure for making moral decisions.

In *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Damien Keown argued that Aristotelian virtue ethics is the closest Western analogue to Buddhist ethics, and this interpretation is now widely accepted. However, it has recently been challenged by writers, such as Charles Goodman and Barbra Clayton, who argue that Buddhist ethics should be understood as a type of universalist consequentialism. Specifically, they argue that Buddhist ethics corresponds to what Philip Ivanhoe refers to as “character consequentialism”—a type of consequentialist ethics in which the cultivation of character takes center stage. In what follows, I defend a version of the aretaic interpretation, arguing that Buddhist ethics corresponds to an act-centered virtue ethics. This interpretation finds textual support in the Pāli canon and in the writings of Indian Mahāyāna thinkers, and so provides a general framework for understanding both Theravāda and Indian Mahāyāna ethics. Against Goodman and Clayton, I argue that although consequentialist considerations play an important role in Buddhist moral thinking, this does not show that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist. The task of normative theory is to give an analysis of right action, and this should be distinguished from providing a justification for living morally and from formulating practical criteria for reaching a moral decision.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is often presented as an alternative to deontic or “duty-based” ethics—a category that includes both consequentialism and deontology. Deontic ethics is concerned with the concept of moral obligation. It is, in this sense, “act-centered.” Virtue ethics takes a different ap-

proach; it is not primarily concerned with how we should act but with what sort of people we should be. It is not “act-centered” but “agent-centered.” As Goodman describes it, “A practitioner of virtue ethics . . . takes her own virtue as her central ethical goal; she is to develop the skills, habits, and attitudes of mind necessary to be the best agent she can be” (42). Understood in this way, virtue ethics is essentially egoistic or, at best, agent-relative. For the virtue ethicist, the overarching goal to be sought in all we do is our own good, understood as virtuous character. To the extent that our own good is tied to that of others, virtue ethics includes others within our circle of concern, but only a select few. It is in this sense “agent-relative.” According to Goodman, “Such a view gives each agent the aim of that agent’s own flourishing, where the flourishing of each agent involves the flourishing of the small group of people that the agent cares about” (43).

There are, however, a number of problems with this characterization. First, although virtue ethics is commonly described as an ethics of “being” as opposed to an ethics of “doing,” this is somewhat misleading. We use the language of the virtues and the vices not only to describe people, but to describe the things that people do. There are kind people and there are acts of kindness. There are cruel people and there are acts of cruelty. In fact, “doing” precedes “being.” We *become* kind by acting kindly and we *become* cruel by acting cruelly. Keown (“Karma” 344) refers to this as the “intransitive” effects of moral action. According to Buddhism, moral action has a transformative effect upon the actor, registered in the form of *saṃskāras* or “mental formations.” *Saṃskāras* explain our mental dispositions, habits, or tendencies, and hence our tendencies to act virtuously or viciously. Every virtuous or vicious deed leaves a *saṃskāric* imprint on the actor’s mental stream, which accounts for the actor’s tendency to repeat the same type of action. (By acting on an angry impulse, I reinforce my tendency to experience anger and hence to act angrily.) Insofar as character traits are stable dispositions to

act, speak, think, and feel in certain ways, people create their characters—over innumerable lifetimes, Buddhists believe—through their moral conduct. In this way, as Keown puts it, “one becomes what one does” (“Karma” 343).

Virtue ethicists believe that the goal of morality is to become a virtuous person, but within this teleological framework there are different ways of accounting for the moral value of our actions. An *agent-centered* virtue ethics is a type of consequentialist ethics. What gives an action its moral value is its transformative effect upon the agent’s character. Acts of compassion, generosity, or patience are good, but only because they help to instill the corresponding character traits. The goal of morality is to become a virtuous person, and moral conduct is only a means to this end; it is instrumentally, not inherently, good.² As will become apparent shortly, this is one important respect in which an agent-centered virtue ethics resembles character consequentialism. This, however, is not the only way of accounting for the moral value of our actions within the aretaic framework. According to an *act-centered* virtue ethics, what gives an action its moral worth is that it is a virtuous act—an act of kindness, for example, or an act of generosity, patience, honesty, or forgiveness. A virtuous act is not good because of its transformative effect upon the actor. Even if it has no lasting effect, a kind deed is still a good

² Plato seems to have held such a view. In the *Republic*, Plato characterizes virtue as the “health and beauty and well-being of the soul” and vice as “the disease and weakness and deformity of the same” (IV 444e). Vice and virtue are, in the soul, “what disease and health are in the body” (IV 444c). Just as some physical activities lead to health and others to disease, “good practices lead to virtue, and evil practices to vice” (IV 444e). This comparison strongly suggests that, for Plato, good practices are only instrumentally good. It is good to exercise regularly, but only because this promotes a healthy body. Analogously, moral conduct is good, but only because it promotes a healthy soul.

deed. The goal of morality is to become a good person, but virtuous action is not simply a means to this end; it is good in itself.

A problem specifically with Goodman's characterization of virtue ethics concerns the claim that a practitioner of virtue ethics takes her own virtue as her "central ethical goal." For the virtue ethicist, the goal of morality is to become a virtuous person, but from this we should not conclude that virtue ethics is necessarily egoistic. According to the egoist, my moral obligation is to seek my own good. If it is good for me to be a virtuous person, then my moral obligation is to seek virtue. The problem is that if I take my own virtue as my central ethical goal, I am not acting virtuously, at least not as this is understood in Buddhism. For example, I might recognize that it is good for me to be generous and seek to cultivate this virtue by sharing what I have with others. But if I give away my possessions with the intention of becoming a generous person, I am not acting generously. To act generously I must give with the intention of benefiting others, not myself. Indeed, according to Buddhism, I act virtuously only when I act with altruistic intentions. If I become a virtuous person by performing virtuous deeds, and if I perform virtuous deeds only when I seek to benefit others, then I cannot become a virtuous person by taking my own virtue as my central ethical goal.

Finally, just as it is misleading to describe virtue ethics as egoistic, it is also misleading to describe it as agent-relative. According to Goodman (43), "all versions of universalist consequentialism are agent-neutral. They give to all agents: that the lives of all sentient beings go as well as possible." By contrast, virtue ethicists "place common-sense limits on [benevolence], and argue that other moral considerations, such as family obligations, can often override its demands." Here, Goodman is wrong on both counts. First, it is false that "all versions of universalist consequentialism are agent-neutral." Confucian ethics, as Goodman acknowledges, is a version of universalist consequentialism, and yet Con-

fucius recognized family loyalty as a virtue (cf. *Ivanhoe* 57). Second, while Aristotelian ethics places “common-sense” limits on benevolence, the virtue ethicist need not recognize family loyalty, patriotism, or any other form of partiality as a virtue. Impartiality is recognized as a virtue in Buddhism (as one aspect of *upekkhā*), and there is no reason why the virtue ethicist cannot represent the moral outlook of the virtuous person as one that embraces all sentient beings equally.

From this discussion it is clear that “virtue ethics” can mean different things, and whether or not Buddhist ethics should be classified as a virtue ethics may well turn on exactly what is meant by the label. The version of virtue ethics defended in this paper, and the one which, I believe, is most closely analogous to Buddhist ethics, is one that is: (1) act-centered as opposed to agent-centered; (2) altruistic as opposed to egoistic; and (3) agent-neutral (impartial or egalitarian) as opposed to agent-relative. Buddhist ethics, like virtue ethics, is goal-directed. But in Buddhism, the moral life is not just the good life, or the happy life, but the holy life. Certain behaviors are regarded as polluting, others as purifying, and Buddhist practice seeks to promote and maintain the purity of the practitioner. “Do not what is evil. Do what is good. Keep your mind pure. This is the teaching of the Buddha” (Dh v. 183). The goal is not simply to become a good person, but a holy being, a *bhagavant*. And this is to be accomplished by living the holy life, by purifying oneself of all negativities or “defilements” (*kilesas*) and cultivating the altruism, impartiality, and other qualities of an enlightened being.

In Buddhism, the root defilements are greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion or ignorance (*moha*). Character traits are commonly understood as deeply ingrained habits or tendencies, and this is precisely how the three defilements are understood in Buddhism. These “vices” are to be eradicated by cultivating the opposite character traits: the “virtues” of non-greed (renunciation and generosity), non-hatred (loving-

kindness and compassion), and non-delusion (wisdom). Thus, in one *sutta* the Buddha instructs his disciples: “But what, friends, is the reason unarisen hatred does not arise and arisen hatred is abandoned? You should answer: ‘The liberation of the mind by loving-kindness’” (AN 3:68/I 201). Indeed, *nirvāṇa* is often characterized in these terms, as the eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion. “For this, *bhikkhus*, is the supreme noble peace [*nirvāṇa*], namely, the pacification of lust, hate, and delusion” (MN 140.28/III 246; see also AN 3:55/I 159).

Buddhist ethics is, in this sense, teleological, but good conduct is not simply a means to an end. In a memorable verse from the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha describes goodness or merit (*puñña*) as something accumulated over time, like drops of water filling a water-jar, by performing good deeds:

Hold not a deed of little worth, thinking ‘this is little to me’. The falling of drops of water will in time fill a water-jar. Even so the wise man becomes full of good [*puñña*], although he gather it little by little. (Dh v. 122)

One becomes “full of good” by doing good deeds because one’s goodness is nothing other than the cumulative goodness of one’s good deeds. Thus, Winston King describes the Buddhist conception of merit as follows:

It is the favourable balance in one’s kammic account produced by past good deeds. . . . It is the totality of one’s accumulated or stored-up goodness, which will manifest itself in good fortune of various kinds, both in this life and in lives to come. (50)

Merit is not to be identified with the future effects (*vipākas*) of virtuous actions (which have yet to materialize), but with “the accumulated beneficial kammic force that virtuous actions and attitudes create” (51). This

stored-up goodness can manifest itself in worldly rewards,³ but, importantly, it is also essential to the attainment of Buddhahood. As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains:

Merit produces mundane benefits, such as good rebirth, wealth, beauty, and success. It also serves as an enhancing condition for supramundane benefits, that is, for attaining the stages along the path to enlightenment. (*Words* 151)

In the Mahāyāna tradition, one consciously dedicates one's merit to the attainment of this goal—a practice known as “merit transfer” (*puṇya-pariṇāmanā*). As Jan Nattier describes it, a bodhisattva performs “the mental act of transferring his merit from (as it were) one karmic bank account to another, so that it will contribute not to his rebirth in heaven or to other worldly rewards, but to his future attainment of Buddhahood” (114).⁴ In both Theravāda and Mahāyāna thought, the accumulation of merit is integral to Buddhist practice, and one accumulates merit by performing meritorious deeds (in body, speech, and mind).⁵ But it is not the case that meritorious deeds are good *because* they lead to

³ “If one seeks happiness, look to the result of merit, [the result of] wholesome deeds” (AN 7:62/ IV 89).

⁴ Here Nattier is describing how the practice of merit transfer is presented in the *Ugra-pariṇṛcchā Sūtra*, an early and highly influential Indian Mahāyāna text. This, however, is not the only way of understanding the practice. I shall return to this point briefly in the following section.

⁵ At the very least, one must be reborn in circumstances favorable to spiritual development, and the nature of one's rebirth is karmically determined. The notion of merit (Skt. *puṇya*) is especially important in Mahāyāna Buddhism. As the tradition evolved, it came to place increasingly greater emphasis on the accumulation of merit, so much so that merit came to rival or, some would argue, even surpass wisdom in importance (cf. Clayton *Śikṣāsamuccaya* 83).

Buddhahood; rather, the reverse is true: meritorious deeds lead to Buddhahood because they are good.

In Buddhist ethics, the basic unit of moral evaluation is *cetanā*. “It is volition [*cetanā*], bhikkhus, that I call kamma; for having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind” (AN 6:63/III 415). *Cetanā* is usually translated as “motive,” “intention,” “will,” or, as it is here, “volition,” but there is no exact English equivalent. According to Keown (*Ethics* 218), *cetanā* has both an affective aspect (suggesting “motive”) and a cognitive aspect (suggesting “intention,” “will,” or “volition”). Good actions (*kusala kammās*) are well-motivated and well-intentioned. For example, a kind deed—such as giving a homeless person a coat on a cold night—is well-motivated (by compassion) and well-intentioned (aimed at alleviating someone’s suffering). But good motives and good intentions are not enough. Many of the wrongs that people do, from animal sacrifices to parricide, are done out of ignorance (*moha*). As Keown remarks, “the ritual slaying of animals is not meritorious merely because Brahmins believe it to be so; nor is euthanasia for aged parents morally right even though it is the custom in certain countries.” There are objective requirements for virtuous action. “For *cetanā* to be virtuous it must conform to these requirements, and even acts performed from a good motive are wrongful if based on *moha*” (*Ethics* 221). Right conduct has an additional epistemic component: a good deed is one that is well-motivated, well-intentioned, and wise. Good deeds have good consequences, both for the individual actor and for others, but it is our *state of mind* that determines the moral quality of our actions. “Bhikkhus, whatever qualities are wholesome, partake of the wholesome, and pertain to the wholesome, all have the mind as their forerunner. Mind arises first followed by the wholesome qualities” (AN 1:57/I 11).

In all important respects, then, Buddhist ethics resembles a virtue ethics. Buddhist ethics, like virtue ethics, is goal-directed. The goal of

morality is Buddhahood, which encompasses the perfection of character; but moral conduct is not simply a means to this end. To achieve Buddhahood, one must accumulate merit, and one accumulates merit by performing meritorious deeds. Buddhist ethics is “inward-looking” in its approach to morality and evaluates actions as good or bad (*kusala* or *akusala*) in consideration of the mental states—*affective, cognitive, and epistemic*—of the actor. In this respect, Buddhist ethics resembles, specifically, an act-centered virtue ethics. According to Buddhism, what makes an action good is that it is well-motivated, well-intentioned, and wise; and this can be understood as a general analysis of virtuous conduct. To act generously, for example, one must act from a benevolent motive and with an altruistic intention. I am not acting generously if I donate to charity so that I will be praised as a philanthropist. Moreover, it is not implausible to say that an act of giving is not truly generous unless it is wise. It is not, strictly speaking, “generous” to give a bottle of scotch to a recovering alcoholic, but foolish. The accumulation of merit and the cultivation of virtue are correlative notions. We accumulate merit by performing meritorious deeds, and we cultivate virtue by engaging in virtuous conduct. If a meritorious deed is a virtuous deed, then the accumulation of merit tracks the cultivation of virtue.

If this is correct, then Buddhist ethics, though goal-directed, is not consequentialist. The goodness of an action is not a function of its consequences but of factors internal to the action. In the remainder of this paper, I enlarge upon the argument of this section, first, by taking a critical look at character consequentialism, and then by examining the role of consequentialist thinking in Buddhist ethics.

Character Consequentialism

The goal of universalist consequentialism is to maximize benefits for everyone. But how is this to be achieved? According to character consequentialism, the most efficient or reliable way to maximize utility is to promote virtue. Although this idea merits attention in its own right, it was originally proposed by Philip Ivanhoe as a way of understanding early Confucianism. “Confucius and Mencius,” he writes, “both sought to benefit the world and thought the key to accomplishing this was to maximize the number of virtuous individuals in society and raise the general level of virtue among the people” (65). Virtuous people not only live deeply satisfying lives, they are also strongly motivated to do the right thing or to act in ways that benefit others. As a general strategy for promoting happiness, then, it makes sense to focus on the cultivation of character.

Ivanhoe is not the first to make this observation. John Stuart Mill also spoke about the importance of virtue, arguing that the cultivation of character is a more effective strategy than the threat of punishment in incentivizing right conduct and leads to a greater net balance of pleasure over pain. But for Ivanhoe, the cultivation of character is not just a strategy for maximizing utility. Virtue has its rewards, both for the virtuous person and for society, but he emphasizes that virtue cannot be pursued for the sake of these rewards. The reason is that “Realizing some goals requires a commitment that abandons the calculus of advantage altogether or at least does not employ it as the sole or primary source of motivation” (65). The pursuit of virtue, he believes, falls into the category. In order to become a virtuous person (or, at least, to cultivate certain virtues), it is necessary to pursue virtue for its own sake and not merely because of its rewards. Moreover, there is no necessary connection between the possession of virtue and the goods ordinarily associated with it. Although “the possession of certain virtues *usually* leads to the realiza-

tion of certain good consequences above and beyond the possession of the virtue itself,” these consequences “are not guaranteed to the one who pursues or possesses the virtue” (56). Unlike classical utilitarianism, character consequentialism includes virtue itself in its “basket of goods.”

This may seem like a minor modification, but it has significant implications for utilitarian theory. To appreciate this, consider the following notorious case. Suppose we could save the lives of ten hospital patients but only by killing and dissecting one healthy person whose organs could then be used in transplant procedures. Although this would be morally reprehensible, classical utilitarians seem to be committed to saying that this would be the right thing to do. Ivanhoe has a response. “Human beings simply cannot commit heinous acts,” he writes, “without becoming to some degree heinous individuals” (63). Character consequentialism, unlike classical utilitarianism, takes into account the effects that actions have upon the character of the agent. “If we dissect one healthy person and use this person’s organs to save ten terminally ill people, our characters will be deeply, perhaps indelibly, stained” (63). By weighing the costs to one’s character in the balance, we reach the conclusion that it would be wrong to perform the procedure.

This is Ivanhoe’s best argument in support of character consequentialism, but it also raises a difficult question. How *exactly* is virtue to be weighed against other values in the moral balance? In Ivanhoe’s treatment of the organ transplant case, we are led to believe that the preservation of virtue is worth the price of several lives. Clearly, the collective value of ten lives outweighs the value of one (assuming that these lives are of equal value). To tip the scales against performing the transplant procedure, there must be some intrinsically bad outcome to be weighed in the balance. What is this? It is that “our characters will be deeply, perhaps indelibly, stained.” Thus, Ivanhoe’s solution to the problem works only if it is assumed that ten lives (or nine lives, subtracting

the life of the one healthy person in this thought experiment) are not worth the price of one's character. But, then, how many lives *are* worth the price? A hundred? A thousand?

Suppose I am offered a deal by a sadistic killer. The killer's victim is strapped to an electric chair. I am told that *I* could pull the switch—and assuming that I did so quickly, the victim would die quickly—or that the sadistic killer will pull the switch—who, I am assured, will pull the switch quite slowly, torturing his victim to death. What am I to do? Unlike the organ transplant case, this appears to be an instance in which I should be willing to jeopardize my character. But how do I weigh the potential damage to my character against the suffering that will otherwise be inflicted upon the victim? Suppose I could prevent the sadistic killer from torturing his victim to death, but only by telling a lie or committing some other minor moral infraction. How do I weigh the *degree* of damage done to my character against the victim's pain and suffering?

The problem is not just that these are difficult questions, but that it seems ludicrous to even raise them. If what gives an action its moral value is that it is a virtuous act, and if we become virtuous people by performing virtuous acts, then doing the right thing *never* conflicts with being a good person. In the case just imagined, it seems plausible to say that I would not actually jeopardize my virtue by pulling the switch, assuming that I acted from compassion for the victim (and also for the sadistic killer by sparing him the dreadful karmic consequences of the evil he was about to commit). This differs importantly from the organ transplant case. Here we could not possibly act from compassion (but only with callous disregard) for the one person whom we kill and dissect. If this is correct, then it is a mistake to represent either case as an instance of utilitarian balancing.

Nonetheless, there may be reasons for thinking that Buddhism sanctions utilitarian balancing. Barbra Clayton ("Virtue" 23) suggests

that one distinguishing feature of universalist consequentialism is “that the principle of maximizing benefit may require agents to violate moral norms that seem independently compelling.” This distinguishes universalist consequentialism from virtue ethics, she believes, because “the idea that one might have to sacrifice one’s own welfare is something not characteristic of virtue ethics, which seek the flourishing of the ethical agent.” She points out that Mahāyāna ethics permits bodhisattvas to break precepts when doing so is beneficial to others. Referring to the writings of Śāntideva, she notes, “bodhisattvas are permitted to steal, give gifts of intoxicants and weapons, violate the monastic vow of celibacy, and even murder to prevent someone from committing a deadly sin.” In these cases, “the bodhisattva must be willing to offer life or limb, physically suffer, and accrue demerit.” This apparently shows that Mahāyāna ethics subjects virtue to utilitarian balancing.

Goodman makes the same point, illustrating it with the story of King Anala from the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*.

In this story, the aspiring bodhisattva Sudhana is advised by one of his teachers to go and visit King Anala and ask him for instruction. But when Sudhana arrives in the city, he discovers that the king is surrounded by frightening wrathful demons who are constantly engaged in meting out severe punishments to those who violate the city’s laws. (85)

This, of course, is a flagrant violation of the Buddhist injunction against violence, and Sudhana is shocked by the King’s behavior. But the King explains, “the wrathful guardians and their criminal victims are actually illusions created by Anala’s magical powers” (85). Through this act of deception, the actual citizens are deterred from vice and established “in the path to the omniscient state” (86). King Anala, then, “is prepared to tell lies—thereby, perhaps, impairing his own virtue—in order to bring

about a much greater total amount of virtue among the populace” (86). If the moral imperative of virtue ethics is to seek virtue, and if Mahāyāna ethics would sometimes have us sacrifice our virtue for the benefit of others, then Mahāyāna ethics is *not* a virtue ethics.

But are these actually cases of utilitarian balancing? It is important to notice that, even in Clayton’s and Goodman’s framing of the issue, an aspiring bodhisattva must be *willing* to accrue demerit for the benefit of others. From this, it does not follow that a bodhisattva actually *does* accrue demerit. In fact, it is clear from the Mahāyāna literature that the willingness to sacrifice oneself for others and, in particular, to accrue demerit for the benefit of others, is itself tremendously meritorious. Far from sacrificing one’s virtue, one actually builds good character and accrues merit (at least under very narrowly circumscribed circumstances) by violating moral norms.

This important point is supported by Stephen Jenkins in a recent paper on the theme of “compassionate violence” in Indian Mahāyāna texts. Jenkins writes that “A review of the remarkable spectrum of great Buddhist thinkers who have discussed this issue . . . shows general agreement that compassionate violence can be an auspicious merit-making opportunity without negative karmic consequences” (300). One representative example is a hypothetical case discussed by Asaṅga concerning a thief who is about to commit mass murder. The thief’s victims will be *arhats*, bodhisattvas, and *pratyekabuddhas*, and so the crime will have the worst possible karmic consequences. A bodhisattva, recognizing this, preemptively kills the thief. The bodhisattva realizes that this is a serious ethical transgression, but he is prepared to suffer the karmic consequences for the murder and take the thief’s place in hell. Because of this, we are assured, the bodhisattva “becomes blameless and produces abundant merit” (301). This apparently self-sacrificial act is not truly self-sacrificial because of the purity of the bodhisattva’s

motives and intentions. Jenkins notes that Asaṅga drives this point home with multiple examples of compassionate ethical transgression, “repeatedly closing with the final phrase expressing the bodhisattva’s faultlessness and generation of abundant merit, *anāpattiko bhavati bahuca puṇyaṃ prasūyate*, a total of nine times” (302). The same point, he notes, is made repeatedly in Indian Mahāyāna texts.⁶ According to these sources,

The bodhisattva dramatically shortens the path to buddhahood, precisely because of being willing to sacrifice his own spiritual progress. The motivational conception and its actual results can be completely different. In fact the motivation can produce the opposite of what is intended; those who intend to endure hell realms do not, precisely because they are willing to do so.
(319)

Virtue ethics, as Clayton correctly points out, does not advocate self-sacrifice. But in the cases of compassionate ethical transgression discussed in the Indian Mahāyāna literature (including, Jenkins argues, cases discussed by Śāntideva), bodhisattvas typically do not sacrifice themselves for others; on the contrary, they benefit themselves, advancing along the path to Buddhahood, by their *willingness* to sacrifice themselves for others.⁷ Thus, the idea that we should sometimes violate moral

⁶ In fact, Jenkins writes that he has “not yet located an example where a compassionate killer suffers negative karmic consequences,” although he acknowledges that Bhāviveka may provide a “highly qualified” exception (320). Bhāviveka’s discussion of the issue suggests that a bodhisattva who commits murder out of compassion “bounces in and out of hell” without being touched by the flames (cf. 320-322).

⁷ One of the ethical transgressions cited by Clayton is the gift of intoxicants. In the *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra*, a scripture frequently quoted by Śāntideva in his *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, the gift of intoxicants is mentioned in the context of the perfection of giving (Nattier

norms does not serve to distinguish universalist consequentialism from virtue ethics; nor does it support the claim that Buddhism subjects virtue to utilitarian balancing.⁸ In fact, there are good *consequentialist* reasons for rejecting this claim. It is understood that it is only as a fully enlightened being that one can do the greatest amount of good for others and that the accumulation of merit is necessary to achieve this status. By sacrificing our virtue, we postpone indefinitely, perhaps for eons, the opportunity to make spiritual progress. In the long run, then, we can do the most good for the most beings by guarding our virtue.⁹

Just as the willingness to accrue demerit can be a source of merit, so can the willingness to relinquish merit. As the practice of “merit

232): “To fulfill all their desires is to carry out in full the bodhisattva’s perfection of giving.” Thus, a lay bodhisattva is advised, “when the spirit of giving away all his property enters [into him] and he thinks to himself, ‘I should give food to those who desire food, and drink to those who desire drink,’ he even gives alcohol to others.” As it is presented in the *Ugra*, when done in “the spirit of giving away all his property,” a lay bodhisattva’s gift of intoxicants is not a self-sacrificial act but a way of cultivating the virtue of generosity (*dāna-pāramitā*).

⁸ Nonetheless, the story of King Anala, discussed by Goodman, raises the interesting question of whether Mahāyāna ethics might condone compromising one’s honesty for the greater good. Of course, this depends on what it means to be honest. Understood in an unqualified sense, an honest person never lies or deceives anyone, no matter what the reason. This seems to be the Theravāda conception of honesty (cf. MN 76.51/I 523 and MN 61.3-6/I 414). Understood in a qualified sense, an honest person never lies or deceives anyone, *except when there are morally compelling reasons for doing so*. Understood in the first way, King Anala compromised his honesty by deceiving his people; understood in the second way, he did not. If honesty, properly understood, never conflicts with compassion, then the argument can be made that even an honest person is sometimes deceptive, and this may be the lesson of the story of King Anala.

⁹ Again, the accumulation of merit and the cultivation of virtue are correlative notions. We accumulate merit by performing meritorious deeds and we cultivate virtue by engaging in virtuous conduct. If an act is meritorious if and only if it is virtuous, then to accumulate merit is simultaneously to cultivate virtue, and vice versa.

transfer” is presented in some Mahāyāna texts, a bodhisattva, rather than dedicating his merit to the attainment of enlightenment, transfers his merit to others, contributing directly to *their* welfare, not his own. As Goodman sees it, this shows that Mahāyāna ethics, unlike virtue ethics, “both allows actions to be moral that don’t promote the well-being of the agent and places the virtue of all beings above the virtue of the individual agent” (76). But this seems to misrepresent the significance of the practice. Clearly, one cannot give away *all* of one’s merit because the gift of merit is itself meritorious. Through the ritual of merit transfer, one *multiplies* one’s merit, which, in addition to benefitting others, contributes to one’s spiritual advancement. Far from supporting Goodman’s consequentialist interpretation of Mahāyāna ethics, this illustrates an important insight of altruistic virtue ethics and a characteristic theme of Buddhist ethics: that by promoting one’s own good, one promotes the good of others; and by promoting the good of others, one promotes one’s own good. “Protecting oneself, *bhikkhus*, one protects others. Protecting others, one protects oneself” (SN 47:19/V 169).

The Importance of Intentions and Motives

One difference between consequentialist ethics and virtue ethics concerns the importance of the *intended* as opposed to the *actual* consequences of an action. Suppose I rescue a drowning child. My intention, of course, is to save the child’s life, not to bring about the greatest possible balance of good over evil. And whether or not my action has this eventual outcome seems to be irrelevant to forming a moral judgment about it. Even if the child grows up to be a serial killer, this would not show that my rescuing the child was not, after all, a good deed. Utilitarianism sees things differently. For the utilitarian, whether an act is right or wrong has to do with its actual consequences, not its intended consequences. But, as Keown observes (*Ethics* 177), “In Buddhism there is no *ex post facto*

conferral of rightness upon actions as there is in utilitarianism.” This means that “wrong (*akusala*) acts cannot turn out ‘in the event’ to have been right by virtue of their proximate or remote effects; nor can right (*kusala*) acts turn out to have been wrong in view of their consequences.” Actions are right or wrong in their inception. This is one important respect in which Buddhist ethics agrees with virtue ethics and disagrees with utilitarianism.

Goodman is aware of this, but argues that Buddhist ethics can nonetheless be understood as a consequentialist ethics. His argument turns on the distinction between “subjective” and “objective” utilitarianism:

Although objective utilitarians think that acts that appeared to be right could later turn out to have been wrong, since they happened to have bad consequences, subjective utilitarians, like Buddhists, would hold that if you do what you expect to have the best consequences on the whole, your action is morally right, no matter what its actual consequences are. (184)

In illustrating this, Goodman refers to the case of Channa, who, according to the legendary account, innocently offered the Buddha a meal of poison mushrooms, tragically but unexpectedly causing his death. The objective utilitarian would condemn Channa for acting wrongly because his offering had such bad consequences. However, “a subjective utilitarian would praise Channa for acting rightly, since he thought his action would have the good consequences of sustaining the Buddha’s life and making merit for himself” (186-187). This allows Goodman to agree with Keown that an action cannot turn out after the fact to be right or wrong because of its actual consequences. What matters, according to Goodman, are the consequences *expected* by the agent.

Is this plausible? To my knowledge, no philosopher other than Goodman defends this particular version of subjective utilitarianism, and it is easy to see why. If all that matters is what we *expect* will happen, then nothing is off limits. The Brahmins criticized by the Buddha for their sacrificial rituals acted rightly because they *expected* these rituals to sustain the cosmic process. A drunk driver does nothing wrong if she does not *expect* to cause an automobile accident. Even a child molester acts rightly so long as he *expects* to bring his victims pleasure rather than emotional trauma. More plausible versions of subjective utilitarianism hold that whether an action is right or wrong is a function of its predictable, foreseeable, or likely consequences, not its expected consequences (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong). This is accounted for in Buddhist ethics by saying that a good deed must not only be well-motivated and well-intentioned, but also wise. Seen in this way, Channa did nothing wrong in offering the Buddha a meal of poison mushrooms because his offering was well-motivated, well-intentioned and, if not wise, at least not foolish (assuming that there was no reason to suspect that the mushrooms were poisonous). The same, however, cannot be said about a well-meaning child molester.

But even if Goodman adopts a more plausible version of subjective utilitarianism, he is still unable to account for the moral importance of an agent's intentions. To appreciate the problem, consider Judith Jarvis Thomson's famous example of a runaway trolley:

Edward is the driver of a trolley, whose brakes have just failed. On the track ahead of him are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. The track has a spur leading off to the right, and Edward can turn the trolley onto it. Unfortunately, there is one person on the right-hand track. Edward can

turn the trolley, killing the one; or he can refrain from turning the trolley, killing the five. (70)

What should Edward do? Most people (including Thomson herself) will say that Edward should divert the trolley onto the alternate track, and the utilitarian would agree. Diverting the trolley would certainly have the best predictable, foreseeable, or likely consequences and, we may suppose, the best actual consequences. But let us look at the situation from Edward's point of view. Suppose that Edward is indifferent to the five people on the main track but loathes the one person—call her Edna—standing on the alternate track. In fact, Edward redirects the trolley, not to save the lives of five people, but to kill Edna. For the utilitarian, these details should make no difference in our assessment of the case. Diverting the trolley will still have the best consequences—actual, predictable, foreseeable, or likely—and Edward can still reasonably *expect* that his decision will have the best consequences. But from a Buddhist perspective, Edward would be doing something terribly wrong by seizing the opportunity to kill Edna.

Virtue ethics, unlike utilitarianism, agrees with Buddhist ethics in its assessment of this case and others like it. According to virtue ethics, an action cannot be evaluated as right or wrong without taking into consideration the agent's motives and intentions. If Edward does the right thing in diverting the trolley down the alternate track, he must be acting with the intention to save the lives of five people, not with the intention of killing Edna. He must be acting from a benevolent motive, not from hatred. This seems commonsensical, but motives and intentions are not among the consequences of an action, nor do they necessarily influence the consequences of an action. It is difficult to see, then, how they can play any role at all in consequentialist theory. I have argued that Goodman is unable to account for the moral importance of an agent's intentions. The intended consequences of an action are not the same as its ex-

pected consequences, or even its predictable, foreseeable, or likely consequences. Is he able to account for the moral importance of an agent's motives?

Goodman is a consequentialist in maintaining that what makes an action right or wrong are its (expected) consequences, but he also says that included among the morally significant consequences of an action are the character traits thereby instilled. Because of this, motives matter, because differently motivated actions will have different effects on the agent's character. He argues:

Buddhists would agree with Aristotle that, over time, habitual actions can shape your character, for good or bad. Since, as I have claimed, Buddhists consider character traits to be intrinsically morally important, they will regard effects on character as among the more important consequences of our actions. Insofar as similar actions performed out of different motives have different effects on character, they have different consequences. (187)

This is not implausible. By habitually acting from compassion, we become compassionate people. By habitually acting from malice, we become malicious people. The motives on which we act affect the character traits that we come to have, and insofar as good character traits are intrinsically morally important, the character consequentialist can account for the moral importance of motives.

It will be noticed, however, that Goodman has here abandoned subjective utilitarianism in favor of an objective theory. Are we to think that someone who acts from a bad motive is doing something wrong simply because she *expects* that this will corrupt her character? Or is it because it *actually* will? For Goodman's account to have any plausibility, it must be assumed that an act performed from a bad motive is wrong

because of its actual effect upon the agent's character. But then his explanation of the moral importance of motives is inconsistent with his earlier attempt to explain why an action cannot turn out after the fact to be right or wrong because of its actual consequences.

Another problem with Goodman's argument concerns the evaluation of actions that are "out of character." Even good people occasionally do bad things, and it is implausible to assume that an occasional bad deed does irreparable damage to a person's character. Telling an occasional lie does not make someone a liar, no more than having an occasional drink makes someone an alcoholic. Given this, Goodman is unable to explain why it would be wrong to act *occasionally* rather than *habitually* from bad motives. Yet, surely we would not want to excuse such actions for consequentialist reasons. We would not want to say, for example, that it would be excusable for Edward to murder Edna assuming that this was an exceptional act that would not corrupt his character.

Goodman's final attempt to account for the moral importance of motives and intentions relies on the doctrine of karma. He argues (187), "karmic consequences are among those that need to be considered in evaluating an action" and "motives and intentions control what kind of karma we receive from an action." Given that "karma is a powerful source of future happiness and suffering," it follows that motives and intentions must be taken into account in evaluating an action. This suggests a consequentialist explanation of why it would be wrong for Edward to kill Edna. Given Edward's motives and intentions, he will suffer the karmic consequences for killing Edna (even a hellish rebirth), and these consequences must be taken into account in evaluating Edward's decision to divert the trolley. By taking into consideration *all* the relevant consequences, then, we might reasonably conclude that Edward's decision to redirect the trolley will not maximize utility, which provides

a consequentialist explanation of the moral importance of Edward's motives and intentions.

This is a plausible explanation, but only assuming that Edward's decision to divert the trolley will have seriously bad outcomes for Edward, such as a rebirth in hell. This *seems* to be implied by the doctrine of karma, but Buddhism teaches that the karmic potential of an action is affected by many factors. In one *sutta* (AN 3:100/1 249-254) we are told that whether a bad deed results in a hellish rebirth is affected by the character of the agent. A lump of salt dissolved in small bowl of water makes the water undrinkable, but the same lump of salt dissolved in the river Ganges has no discernible effect. In the same way, a bad deed performed by someone of "mean character" might result in a hellish rebirth, but the same deed performed by someone of "lofty character" need not have this effect. This *sutta* specifically mentions only "trifling bad kamma," and so its implications for seriously wrong actions, such as Edward's murdering Edna, are unclear. But Tibetan Buddhism teaches that there is *no* negative karma cannot be purified by applying the "four opponent forces" (cf. Gyatso). If we accept this, then, given that Edward's decision to divert the trolley will otherwise maximize utility, an implication of Goodman's account is that it would *not* be wrong for Edward to murder Edna so long as he subsequently purified the negative karma. Obviously, this is an unacceptable implication and a perversion of Buddhist teaching.

The Role of Consequentialist Reasoning in Buddhist Ethics

The central task of normative ethics is to analyze the concept of right action—that is, to explain *why* an action is right. But this is not the only issue dealt with in moral philosophy, nor is it the only moral issue addressed by Buddhism. In this final section, I argue that consequentialist

moral reasoning plays an important role in Buddhism but that this is consistent with a nonconsequentialist understanding of Buddhist ethics.

One long-standing problem in moral philosophy concerns the ultimate justification for morality: Why be moral? Answering this question amounts to explaining why morality is important or why it should matter to us.¹⁰ Buddhism approaches this issue from a consequentialist perspective, providing a threefold justification for morality (corresponding to different levels of moral or spiritual development).¹¹ First, according to the doctrine of karma, morality is important because it leads to happiness both in this life and in lives to come. Happiness is an important goal and it is something that people naturally seek. Hence, the doctrine of karma provides both a justification for morality and an incentive to live morally. Second, Buddhism teaches that morality is important because it liberates us from *saṃsāra* (or, at least, is integral to the path

¹⁰ This question has a long history in Western philosophy, beginning with Plato's famous treatment of the issue in the *Republic* (II 359d-360d). For a recent discussion, Peter Singer's *How Are We to Live* is highly recommended. To appreciate the problem, suppose I find a wallet containing a large sum of money lying on a deserted sidewalk. I might keep it, or I might return it to its owner. I realize that the right thing to do would be to return the wallet. But why do the right thing? Why should being moral matter to me? Many philosophers (including Plato and Singer) try to incentivize moral conduct by arguing that it is in our rational self-interest to be moral. (It should be apparent that there is no necessary connection between how this problem is solved and how the concept of right action is analyzed. Plato is a virtue ethicist and Singer a utilitarian, but they both argue that there are good self-interested reasons for being moral.) We might wonder, though, whether this appeal to self-interest actually undercuts morality. If I return the wallet, but only because I believe I will somehow be better off as a result, am I acting morally? As I argue in this section, what is ingenious about the Buddhist approach to the problem is that it connects morality to increasingly lofty incentives, beginning with rational self-interest but culminating in the compassionate aspiration to benefit all sentient beings.

¹¹ Here I am alluding to the three levels of spiritual attainment described in the Lam Rim. For an overview, see Gyeltsen (11-24).

leading to this result). This explains why morality is important and it also provides an incentive to live morally. But people do not naturally have this incentive; they must be convinced that *saṃsāric* existence is inherently unsatisfactory, which is one of the preliminary goals of Buddhist practice. Finally, Buddhism teaches that morality is important because it benefits *all* sentient beings. Moral development leads to Buddhahood, and this is good in itself; but by becoming an enlightened being, one can also benefit others as a teacher, a moral exemplar, and a source of merit. Obviously, this explains why morality is important and it also provides an incentive to live morally. But to have this incentive, a practitioner must have compassion for all sentient beings, and developing such compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) is one of the central or highest goals of Buddhist practice.

According to Buddhism, then, morality is important because of its beneficial consequences. Living a moral life leads to worldly happiness, liberates us from *saṃsāra*, and ultimately benefits all sentient beings. But from this it doesn't follow that what *makes* an action right is that it has these beneficial consequences. Giving an analysis of right action is one thing; explaining why morality should matter to us is quite another. Thus, even if Buddhism gives a consequentialist justification for morality, we should not conclude from this that Buddhist morality is consequentialist.

Giving an analysis of right action must also be distinguished from formulating a procedure for reaching a moral decision. For example, the Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—does not explain why an action is right, but it does provide a useful criterion for making a moral decision.¹² There is a difference between moral

¹² Because this is an important and often-neglected distinction, let me give an additional example. According to the divine command theory, the essence of morality is obedi-

theory and moral practice, between how a theory analyzes the concept of right action and how the theory is applied in moral decision making. A criticism often made of virtue ethics is that it fails to provide moral guidance. The guiding principle of virtue ethics—"Do what the virtuous person does"—is not especially helpful. But the same objection can be raised against utilitarianism. The guiding principle of utilitarian ethics—"Do whatever has the best long-term consequences"—is not especially helpful either, given that we can never know in advance what actions *will* have the best long-term consequences. This leads not only to moral skepticism, but to moral paralysis. Should I save a drowning child? There is no way to answer this question if I must know in advance what course of action (or inaction) will have the best consequences days, years, or centuries in the future.

Faced with this problem, utilitarians typically argue that other criteria must be employed in making moral decisions (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong). We are told, for example, to base our decisions upon the *predictable* consequences of our actions. Of course, this will not ensure that we make the *right* choices. That an action has the best predictable consequences is no guarantee that it will have the best actual consequences. But in this way we can at least approximate the utilitarian

ence to God: what *makes* an action right is that God commands it. This view is not uncommonly held by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike, and it is illustrated by Abraham's unwavering obedience to God. Yet, one implication of this analysis is that God could make *anything* right just by commanding it (including rape, torture, racism, and setting dogs on fire). Confronted with this, many theists reject the theory, although they continue to look to the Bible (or other scripture) for moral guidance. That is, they believe that God's commandments provide the correct criteria to live by even though they do not believe that an action is right simply *because* it is commanded by God. Again, it is the task of normative theory to explain *why* an action is right, and this should be distinguished from providing criteria for making moral choices. Often the two coincide, but not always.

ideal. Virtue ethicists face a similar problem. The aretaic analysis of moral conduct, like the utilitarian analysis, cannot be applied as a decision procedure. The imperative to follow the example of a virtuous person does not solve the problem, because we also want to know how a virtuous person makes a moral decision, and virtuous people do not decide what to do by asking themselves what they're going to do.

Buddhism is a practical philosophy, and so we should expect Buddhism to provide practical criteria for making moral decisions. With this in mind, consider the following passage from the *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda Sutta* (MN 61) in which the Buddha presents a criterion for distinguishing between wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*) actions:

When you reflect, if you know: “This action that I wish to do with my body would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results,” then you definitely should not do such an action with the body. But when you reflect, if you know: “This action which I wish to do with the body would not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,” then you may do such an action with the body.
(MN 61.9/I 415-416)

Goodman quotes this passage in support of his interpretation of Buddhist ethics as “a clear statement of a consequentialist ethical principle” (48). But, I think, a more careful reading of the *sutta* (and several others in which the same advice is given) reveals that the Buddha is not explaining *why* an action is wholesome or unwholesome but rather presenting a procedure for reaching a moral decision (like the

Golden Rule). We are to ask ourselves whether an action will have harmful consequences for anyone affected. If so, the action is to be rejected. However, if an action harms no one, and if it has beneficial consequences (presumably, for at least some of those affected), then the action may be chosen. (It will be noticed, incidentally, that in this passage the Buddha specifically *rejects* utilitarian balancing. We are to harm *no one* even if in that way we might benefit ourselves or others.)

Barbra Clayton cites numerous examples of consequentialist moral reasoning in Śāntideva's writings. She points out ("Virtue" 25), for example, that implicit in Śāntideva's discussion of generosity is not only the idea that generosity is an intrinsically valuable character trait, as one might expect from a virtue ethicist, "but that generosity can also help or harm beings, and so when making decisions bodhisattvas need to consider and calculate this potential benefit and harm." In these examples, she rightly concludes, "we seem to have a decision rule: bodhisattvas should do whatever will ultimately yield the most benefit to sentient beings." This is true, but there is a difference between a "decision rule" and a moral theory. A bodhisattva may well engage in consequentialist moral reasoning, but from this we should not conclude that bodhisattva ethics is consequentialist.

Bearing in mind the distinction between moral theory and moral practice, we can make the following important observation. Although utilitarianism and virtue ethics are fundamentally different theories, they can nonetheless employ the very *same* procedure for making moral decisions. According to Buddhism, a virtuous person is *motivated* by love and compassion for all sentient beings and so *intends* to benefit them in the most meaningful ways possible. Being *wise*, the virtuous person would understand what is beneficial for all sentient beings and would know how to act for their benefit. That is, the wise person would know what the *right* thing to do is, as the utilitarian understands this, or at

least what course of action will have the best predictable consequences. And this is precisely the course of action that the virtuous person would choose: the one that is maximally beneficial for all sentient beings (insofar as this is predictable). To choose any other course of action would point to a deficiency either in motivation, intention, or wisdom. Thus we read:

[A] wise person of great wisdom does not intend for his own affliction, or for the affliction of others, or for the affliction of both. Rather, when he thinks, he thinks only of his own welfare, the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world (AN 4:186/II 179).

I am not suggesting that the consequentialist model is the best or the only way to represent Buddhist moral reasoning. Moral rules are also important, especially in Theravāda ethics. The Buddhist precepts are commonly understood as descriptions of how enlightened beings behave, and hence as guidelines for the rest of us to follow. This is another way of addressing the problem of moral guidance. But one shortcoming of this approach is that it does not explain how an enlightened being reaches a moral decision. Perhaps the answer is that enlightened beings do not need to deliberate about how to act; they *spontaneously* act in the right ways. Still, the consequentialist model provides a more satisfying solution. Not only is it more instructive than the imperative “Do what the virtuous person does,” it accounts for how a virtuous person reaches a moral decision.

I have argued that virtue ethics provides a useful model for understanding Buddhist ethics. Buddhist ethics, like virtue ethics, is goal-directed. Buddhist practice aims at transforming the practitioner into an enlightened being, and this involves eradicating vice and cultivating virtue. We advance toward this goal by accumulating merit, but meritorious conduct is not simply a means to an end; it is good in itself. In this re-

spect, Buddhist ethics is analogous to an act-centered virtue ethics. According to the latter, we become good people by doing good deeds, but what makes an action good is that it is a virtuous act. According to the Buddhist account, what makes an action good or “wholesome” is that it is well-motivated, well-intentioned, and wise. The two accounts are parallel because whether an act is virtuous critically depends upon the motives, intentions, and epistemic states of the actor. Indeed, the Buddhist account can be understood as a general analysis of a virtuous action. Against the character consequentialist, I have argued that Buddhism does not countenance utilitarian balancing. Indian Mahāyāna texts condone compassionate ethical transgression, but in such cases a bodhisattva typically does not sacrifice himself for the greater good; rather, a bodhisattva accrues merit, builds good character, and advances along the path to Buddhahood by his *willingness* to sacrifice himself for others. The idea that it is good for *oneself* to be altruistic is not characteristic of universalist consequentialism, but it is characteristic of an altruistic virtue ethics and a central theme of Buddhist ethics. I have also argued that the character consequentialist is unable to account for the moral importance of an agent’s motives and intentions. Given the considerable importance that Buddhist ethics attaches to an agent’s mental states, this by itself is a decisive objection to the consequentialist model. Finally, I have offered an alternative account of the role of consequentialist reasoning in Buddhist ethics. If I am correct, Buddhism addresses not one but several issues in moral philosophy. It gives an analysis of right action, furnishes criteria for making moral decisions, and provides a justification for living morally.

Abbreviations

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

MN *Majjhima Nikāya*

SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

Dh *Dhammapada*

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