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The Metaphysical Basis of Śāntideva's Ethics¹

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Abstract

Western Buddhists often believe and proclaim that metaphysical speculation is irrelevant to Buddhist ethics or practice. This view is problematic even with respect to early Buddhism, and cannot be sustained regarding later Indian Buddhists. In Śāntideva's famous *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, multiple claims about the nature of reality are premises for conclusions about how human beings should act; that is, metaphysics logically entails ethics for Śāntideva, as it does for many Western philosophers. This article explores four key arguments that Śāntideva makes from metaphysics to ethics: actions are determined by their causes, and therefore we should not get angry; the body is reducible to its component parts, and therefore we should

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neither protect it nor lust after other bodies; the self is an illusion, and therefore we should be altruistic; all phenomena are empty, and therefore we should not be attached to them. The exploration of these arguments together shows us why metaphysical claims can matter a great deal for Buddhist ethics, practice and liberation.

Introduction: Buddhist Metaphysics and Buddhist Ethics

Among Western Buddhists, it is commonplace to claim that metaphysical speculation is irrelevant to Buddhism. A key text cited for this claim is the *Shorter Māluṅkyā Sutta* in the Pāli Canon. The monk Māluṅkyāputta comes to think:

These speculative views (*diṭṭhigata*) have been undeclared by the Blessed One, set aside and rejected by him, namely: 'the world is eternal' and 'the world is not eternal'; 'the world is finite' and 'the world is infinite'; 'the soul is the same as the body' and 'the soul is one thing and the body another'; and 'after death a Tathāgata exists' and 'after death a Tathāgata does not exist' and 'after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist' and 'after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist. (MN i.426; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 533)³

³I cite Sanskrit and Pāli texts other than Śāntideva's using a reference both to the translation and to the original (chapter and verse if it exists, or the Pali Text Society page numbering where it does not). Translations of Śāntideva are my own unless otherwise noted, so I cite only chapter and verse.

Māluṅkyaputta wants to know the answers so much that he is ready to leave the monkhood and become a layman if the Buddha doesn't answer him. The Buddha responds, not by answering any of the questions, but by chiding Māluṅkyaputta with his famous parable of the arrow:

Suppose, Māluṅkyāputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say, 'I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a brahmin or a merchant or a worker.' And he would say: 'I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me. . .' (MN i.429; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 534)

The Buddha then gives many more examples of similar questions irrelevant to removing the arrow, adding: "All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die" (MN i.430; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 535). And so similarly, Māluṅkyāputta's questions are a distraction from the urgent task at hand: "Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why I have left it undeclared" (MN i.431; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 536).

Now what does this parable imply? Thich Nhat Nanh reads it as follows in *Zen Keys*:

Buddha always told his disciples not to spend their time and energies in metaphysical speculation. Each time he was asked a question of a metaphysical kind, he remained

silent. He directed his disciples toward practical efforts. . .
 Life is short; it must not be spent in endless metaphysical
 speculations which will not be able to bring the truth.
 (Nhat Hanh 38–39)

One can find this remark of Nhat Hanh's quoted all over the Internet. And there is a similar interpretation in Taitetsu Unno's *River of Fire, River of Water*:

This inability to know extends to metaphysical truths. In the famous parable of the poison arrow found in early Buddhism, a young monk, Malunkyaputta, is unhappy because the Buddha refuses to answer metaphysical questions. They include fourteen unanswerable questions, such as whether the universe is finite or not, whether the world is eternal or not, whether a saint lives after death or not, and so forth. The Buddha informs the monk that his teaching does not deal with metaphysical questions, because his Middle Path is a practical one meant to solve the immediate problems of living. (184)

Both these quotes are misleading at the very best.⁴ Neither Unno nor Nhat Hanh defines "metaphysics," and by describing the Buddha of the *suttas* as unconcerned with an undefined "metaphysics," they imply (whether they mean to or not) that he was unconcerned with a number of topics that he in fact identifies as being of the utmost importance. In these descriptions the Buddha of the *suttas* sounds much like a modern pragmatist, concerned only with immediate results and not with

⁴ As I understand it, Nhat Hanh's understanding is quite consonant with his Zen/Thien tradition. It may fit Unno's Pure Land tradition as well. What it does not fit is the Buddha of the early *suttas* that they see fit to quote, nor the tenor of Indian Buddhism more generally.

understanding the nature of the world in any respect; such an interpretation would be a gross misunderstanding.

What is metaphysics? Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan note that the term is very difficult to define. The Greek term literally means “beyond physics”; it goes back to the work of Aristotle’s intended to be read after his *Physics*. Aristotle introduces the *Metaphysics* as dealing with the causes and principles that underlie existent things, at a level deeper than physical (including biological) explanation; it deals with what they fundamentally are. Van Inwagen and Sullivan, for their part, describe the kinds of questions studied under the rubric of metaphysics in the past three or four centuries. Among others, these include the question of whether composite entities (such as the self) have real existence, and freedom of the will.

Such questions (the ultimate nature of things, the real existence of composite entities, freedom of the will) are not *in themselves* practical questions; they do not *on their own* solve the immediate problems of living. But the Buddha did not dismiss them in the *Shorter Mālunkya*; indeed, the Buddha of the *suttas* spoke a great deal about the unreality of the self, and emphasized the significance of this fact for liberation from suffering. We will see in this paper that for at least one major Indian Buddhist philosopher, questions of this sort had direct implications for the ways we should react to the problems of living—which is to say, for ethics.⁵

Now there are indeed certain specific metaphysical questions that the Buddha identifies as less pressing in the *Shorter Mālunkya*, such as the eternity of the universe. What he does not do, however, is rule them out as part of any general indigenous category that one could

⁵ By “ethics” I intend roughly the broad sense of the term suggested by Martha Nussbaum (23–25): reflection or inquiry on the question of how one should live.

translate as “metaphysics.” The word that describes these views in the *Shorter Māluṅkya* (rendered by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi as “speculative views”) is *diṭṭhigata*, “going to views” or “resorting to views.” But *diṭṭhi* (views) as such are not dismissed in the *suttas*; indeed the very first element of the *suttas*' Eightfold Path in *sammādiṭṭhi*, right view, which, when spelled out, can include understanding metaphysical questions like the origin of consciousness.⁶ And even when the Buddha dismisses *diṭṭhis* such as the eternity of the world, he does not say that such questions should not be asked or even that they are not part of his teaching. He merely points out that they are not the most urgent questions to be asking; others are more immediately relevant to one's suffering.⁷

Since the early days of the tradition, a large number of Buddhists have indeed spent significant time and energy exploring metaphysical questions as well as questions in related abstract philosophical fields like epistemology. In reading many such texts one can get the impression that their speculations may be questions of just the sort that *are* dismissed in the *Shorter Māluṅkya*: questions with no relevance to Buddhist practice, ethical conduct or liberation. Of the “Buddhist logic” of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, for example, Theodore Stcherbatsky claimed: “In the intention of its promoters the system had apparently no special connection with Buddhism as a religion, i.e., as the teaching of a path towards Salvation” (Stcherbatsky 2). Stcherbatsky's claim is overstated; Helmut Krasser points out that their writings were aimed at

⁶ For example in the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* (MN 1.47-55, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 132-144). Peter Harvey (11-12) notes a passage at MN iii.72 outlining other elements of reality contained in *sammādiṭṭhi*.

⁷ In this regard one might even extend the parable of the arrow. The parable proclaims that if one has been shot with an arrow, one needs to have it removed before asking who shot it. Once it has been removed, however, if one wishes to help other people and the shooter is still out there, one would do very well to ask detailed questions about who the shooter is, that one might find him and stop him.

non-Buddhists with the attempt to get them onto the Buddhist path. Still, specific practical implications of their theoretical claims can sometimes be difficult to imagine.

The implications are not so difficult to imagine in the increasingly well known eighth-century Indian Madhyamaka philosopher, Śāntideva. His *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (“Introduction to the Conduct of the Bodhisattva,” here abbreviated BCA) not only makes many metaphysical arguments amid its claims about how human beings should live their lives, it directly emphasizes the relevance of the former to the latter.

That metaphysical arguments provide a basis for ethical claims is often taken for granted in Western philosophy. Plato identifies the cosmic One with the Good; Aquinas derives his ethics of natural law from a teleology in nature; Kant’s ethics rest on a distinction between the autonomous and heteronomous will. But Buddhist philosophy is often not taken to work this way; its sophisticated rational arguments about the world and the self are treated as if they have little if anything to do with ethical conduct. It is in this context that Damien Keown can deny that such a thing as Buddhist ethics even exists:

While Buddhist teachings include normative aspects, such as the Five Precepts and the rules of the *Vinaya*, these are typically presented simply as injunctions, rather than as conclusions logically deduced from explicitly stated values and principles. In other words, the Precepts are simply announced, and one is left to figure out the invisible superstructure from which they are derived. Thus although Buddhism has normative teachings, it does not have normative ethics. (“Morality” 50)

I have discussed before (“Revaluation” 45–49) why I think Keown’s claim is invalid with respect to Śāntideva, and I think this article provides further demonstration of the point. I think it is relevant that Keown elsewhere—before he said Buddhism had no normative ethics—seemed to have himself taken the position that metaphysics was not helpful for ethics: “to pursue the issue of the ultimate ontological constitution of individual natures in this context is to confuse ethics with metaphysics, and does not make for a fruitful line of enquiry” (*Nature* 19). By contrast, I offer the suggestion that metaphysical arguments like Śāntideva’s are among the most fruitful resources for Buddhist normative ethics. Indeed, by making an interconnected system of metaphysical and ethical arguments, Śāntideva appears more clearly than many other Indian thinkers to be engaging in the traditional Western conception of philosophy as an interconnected system of theoretical and practical philosophy, like Aristotle’s or Kant’s.⁸

Śāntideva is not alone in his use of metaphysics as a foundation for ethical claims. Most notably, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*’s connection of metaphysics to ethics has close resonances to the “four illusions” with which Karen Lang titles her translation of Candrakīrti’s commentary on Āryadeva’s *Catuhśataka*. These, too, are metaphysical errors which lead to ethical missteps. Āryadeva’s list of metaphysical errors—perceiving the impermanent as permanent, the painful as pleasant, the impure as pure and the non-self as self—is a widespread Indian list of four “inversions” (*viparyāsa* or *vipallāsa*). The list of four goes back at least to the Pāli *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, with a related formula in the *Aṅguttara*

⁸ Others have often noted Śāntideva’s arguments from metaphysics to ethics individually: Goodman and Siderits on the move from dependent origination to patient endurance, Gómez and Williams (“Absence”) on selflessness (and to a lesser extent emptiness). It is far less common to note just how many different and separate arguments from metaphysics to ethics pervade the text.

Nikāya itself, and is also found in non-Buddhist texts, most notably the Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra*; it takes on other permutations in *tathāgatagarbha* texts (Bohanec). But it is notable that Āryadeva and Candrakīrti specifically make ethical criticisms based on the four metaphysical inversions; each one leads us to bad behaviour. Grief and attachment come from the illusion of permanence; pleasure-seeking comes from illusion of pleasure; lust comes from the illusion of purity; egotism comes from the illusion of self (Lang).

Śāntideva, by contrast, is not relying on a stock list of inversions and does not systematize them as a list of four. His text is in many respects more innovative. As we will see, he has a different list of illusions and their consequences, and his ethical exhortations are therefore quite different (though not necessarily incompatible). Roughly, Śāntideva shares a critique of attachment and lust with Āryadeva and Candrakīrti. But he adds a critique of *anger*, based on causality, and his critique of selfishness is more far-reaching. Candrakīrti limits that critique to the political sphere, against the egotism of a king; Śāntideva urges an attack on all self-concern.

Moreover, Śāntideva's four claims are structured differently from Candrakīrti's: they are *progressive*. They occur in a specific order. The first two could be shared with non-Mahāyāna traditions, but the third is specifically Mahāyāna and the fourth specifically Madhyamaka, in a way that supersedes the previous three. Despite Candrakīrti's fame as an expositor of Madhyamaka in his other works (such as the *Prasannapadā* or *Madhyamakāvatāra*), this is not a move that he makes. Candrakīrti simply lays out the four errors and their consequences; for Śāntideva they are embedded in a larger whole.

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and its Metaphysical Sections

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is a poetic, beautiful and *mostly* accessible text. For that reason it, or selections from it, often serve as an introduction to Mahāyāna and to Buddhist ethics. It is widely taught in first-year Buddhism courses and excerpted in anthologies, some not even specifically about Buddhism (such as Cooper).

Most such treatments, however, skip the text's ninth chapter—a notable exception to the accessibility of the rest of the BCA. This chapter, devoted to the perfection of *prajñā*, focuses almost entirely on metaphysical questions. It is unquestionably difficult. As a result, it is rarely excerpted; many introductory classes instruct students to skip it or skim it.⁹ (These include classes I have taught myself.) Pema Chödrön takes this approach in her print commentary, recognizing the importance of the ninth chapter but claiming it “requires a book in itself” (xv–xvi).

Chödrön's decision is defensible: the ninth chapter *is* more difficult than the rest of the work, and commenting on it does take up more space. For that reason I paid it relatively little attention in my own dissertation on Śāntideva; but that decision did come at a cost. In the later portions of the dissertation that dealt with constructive application, I identified the arguments that Martha Nussbaum makes against thinkers like Śāntideva and showed how he would respond. But what I was not able to do there was turn it around and identify the arguments Śāntideva might make against thinkers like Nussbaum—in part, I would argue here, because such arguments would rest on the very metaphysical claims that the dissertation was not able to explore.

⁹ The argument for determinism in the sixth chapter, discussed below, is often given the same treatment.

More generally, something of great importance to the BCA is left out when its metaphysical sections are left out. Those difficult parts contain Śāntideva's own reasoning for his ethical claims, his arguments. As this paper will demonstrate, Śāntideva logically deduces much of his ethics from this metaphysics. Without understanding that metaphysics and the reasoning from it, we will not understand the ethics.

Classical Indian and Tibetan sources recognized the ninth chapter as significant. The *Subhāṣitasamgraha*, one of the only extant Indian texts to quote Śāntideva, draws its quotes primarily from that chapter (Bendall viii). Prajñākaramati, Śāntideva's extant Sanskrit commentator, devotes far more space to it than to any other chapter (even though the eighth chapter is slightly longer). Michael Sweet notes that Tibetan commentators also devoted much more space to the ninth chapter than the others. He claims that this fact is evidence that the commentators viewed the ninth chapter to be the "intellectual pinnacle" of the BCA ("Śāntideva" 6). I don't think this fact is sufficient evidence for that claim; it may just be they devoted so much space to the ninth chapter because they knew it was so much harder (as when Chödrön promises a separate book on it). Nevertheless, what is indisputable is that the commentators *did* treat the ninth chapter as a valuable, significant and integral portion of the text.

From a literary or philological perspective, we will understand the BCA's ninth chapter better if we recognize that its claims are not a bizarre idiosyncratic addendum to the rest of the text. This article will show how the ninth chapter's claims follow a pattern established in chapters that precede it: metaphysical arguments lead to ethical conclusions. It is an integral portion of the BCA, just as the classical commentators believed it to be.

The paper will highlight what I take to be the four arguments in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* that explicitly derive ethical conclusions from

metaphysical premises—only the last of which is featured in the ninth chapter. Each one describes a way in which ordinary people make a mistake about the nature of reality, and this mistake in turn leads them to act in inappropriate ways. We ordinary people think that there is independent agency, and as a result we get angry; we think that human bodies have existence as wholes, which allows us to be lustful; we think that there is a self, so we act out of self-interest; and we think there is substantial existence, and therefore feel attachment.

We think that these are reasonable ways to behave in practice because we make these metaphysical mistakes. The logical conclusion Śāntideva draws from knocking down each error is that we should act differently, and he believes that if we understood how the world really was, we *would* feel differently and do things differently. It is a move from fact to value, from is to ought.

These arguments occur within the *BCA*'s overall context, which depicts the bodhisattva's progressive journey. Its first chapter begins with reasons that becoming a bodhisattva is urgent, followed by a confession of bad karma that indicates how lowly we are to start. The text then moves through the cultivation of the bodhisattva's perfections (*paramitās*). Chapters six through nine of the *BCA* are explicitly identified with four of the six perfections of the bodhisattva: *kṣānti* (patient endurance), *vīrya* (heroic strength), *dhyāna* (meditative concentration) and *prajñā* (metaphysical insight).¹⁰

Before proceeding to examine the *BCA*'s metaphysical-ethical arguments in detail, a few text-critical notes are in order. In this article I

¹⁰ The perfections are traditionally held to be in an order that gets progressively better, with these four, in this order, being the last of the six. Śāntideva's phrasing in *BCA* V.83 seems to endorse the idea that the perfections are progressive. The *Pāramitāsamāsa* of Āryaśūra similarly describes the structure of the perfections in order (see Meadows).

am referring to the “canonical” recension of the *BCA*, the one known to later Indian and Tibetan tradition, rather than the earlier recension found at Dunhuang (on which see Saitō). I use the name “Śāntideva” to refer to the redactor of this recension, as opposed to the author of the older version who went by Akṣayamati.¹¹

This article relies generally on P. L. Vaidya’s edition of the *BCA* (which is based on Louis de la Vallée Poussin’s), with one significant exception: the numbering of verses in the *BCA*’s key ninth chapter. Crosby and Skilton (113) claim that Vaidya and Poussin numbered the verses based on a mistake made in one Sanskrit manuscript of the text, which had copied the equivalent of a single verse twice. The alternative numbering that Crosby and Skilton follow is found in other Sanskrit manuscripts, throughout the Tibetan tradition, and in most translations, so I adhere to it instead of to the Sanskrit (i.e., Poussin and Vaidya) editions.

Dependent Origination against Anger

The first major metaphysical discussion in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is in chapter six, praising the virtue of patient endurance (*kṣānti*) against anger. Śāntideva appears to divide patient endurance into three varieties which, as Crosby and Skilton (45) note, effectively correspond to sections of the chapter¹²: the patient endurance that is the enduring of suffering

¹¹ For a discussion and defense of this approach to Śāntideva, see Lele Revaluation 13–29. There I also defend reading the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* together with the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, which plays a larger role in the dissertation than it does here.

¹² The list of three varieties of *kṣānti* does not appear in the *BCA* proper, but it appears both in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, traditionally attributed to Śāntideva (ŚS 179), and in Prajñākaramati’s commentary on *BCA* VI.9 (BCAP 172).

(*duṣkhādhivāsanakṣānti*); the patient endurance from reflecting on the dharma (*dharmanidhyānakṣānti*); and the patient endurance that is patience toward others' wrongdoing (*parâpakāramarṣanakṣānti*).

I have examined the first and third varieties elsewhere ("Revaluation" 102–113). Here, I am concerned with the second variety, the patient endurance from reflecting on the dharma, which is treated in BCA VI.22–33. From the context, the term "the dharma" here refers to the metaphysical nature of beings—specifically, that they are beings without free will, without agency. They are part of the chain of cause and effect, and this point has consequences for how we should react to them and their behaviour.

Śāntideva begins his argument on this topic with an analogy that sets human beings' bad actions in the context of the physical and biological universe: "even when my bile and so on make great suffering, I have no anger. So why is there anger at sentient beings? They too are angry with a cause" (VI.22).¹³ When we have a stomach ache we may get upset or unhappy, but we do not get *angry*—because we understand that there's a reason it happened, even if we don't know what it is, and we just deal with it. Śāntideva is asking us to react to other people's bad behavior the same way that we would a stomach ache: it is just a bad thing we have to deal with, not something worthy of pain or anger.

He extends the analogy with a psychological point about our anger and others': "Just as this sharp stomach pain arises even though it

¹³ Śāntideva appears to be making a pun in this verse. The normal Sanskrit words for anger, which he uses liberally, are *dveṣa* and *krodha*. Here, instead, he uses *kopa*, which does mean "anger"—but also, in medical texts like the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, has the sense of "morbid irritation of the humours of the body," the same kind of humours (*pitta* "and so on") that he has just referred to earlier in the verse. One could preserve the sense of the pun in English with "we do not feel bilious toward our bile."

is undesired, so anger arises involuntarily (*balāt*), even though it is undesired. A person does not think ‘I am enraged’ and become enraged by his own wish. And anger does not arise thinking ‘I will arise’” (VI.23-4). Others’s anger comes about because of external causes and not intentionally; so too does our own. We don’t decide to become angry, and anger itself doesn’t decide to happen; we need to think of it all as part of the chain of causes.

Those first verses elaborate Śāntideva’s basic claim, drawing an inference from the metaphysics of causation to an ethics of patient endurance. So far he has retained the poetic, image-rich style of the majority of his text, but in the following verses, he turns briefly to technical metaphysical arguments in a similar style to those in chapter nine. Why? Because he needs to answer *objections*. A determinist denial of free will was a controversial one in India as elsewhere, and if Śāntideva is going to make the points of verses 22-24 stick, he needs to defend them against the theoretical grounds on which others might oppose them.

In VI.25 he makes the claim more starkly: “any various offenses and bad karma (*pāpa*) whatsoever all arise from the force of a causal condition (*pratyaya*), and nobody sees them arising independently.” He adds in VI.26 that the totality of causes does not think “I will create,” nor does what is created think “I am created.” This is an articulation of a basic Abhidharmic (and not specifically Madhyamaka) metaphysics: the world is a chain of causes working according to impersonal dependent co-origination, and nothing more than that. But for Śāntideva this metaphysical claim has ethical implications that are rarely drawn out in earlier texts: *because* the world is causally dependent, it makes no sense to blame anyone and get angry at them.

With his position stated, Śāntideva is now in a position to answer key objections: he looks to every possible site where there could be

agency or decisions, and therefore blame. Verses 27–28 rebut the Sāṃkhya view, which distinguishes between *puruṣa* (spirit, self) and *prakṛti* or *pradhāna* (matter or nature). Verses 29–30 rebut the idea of an eternal insentient self, associated with the Vaiśeṣika view.

A typical modern reader skims over these verses quickly—understandably, because they are difficult and require a great deal of context. But their points are important for Śāntideva as a way of establishing firmly that there is no agency anywhere—so that there is no legitimate place to put blame.

That is Śāntideva's ultimate upshot. He draws his final conclusion in verse 33: “Therefore, whether one has seen an enemy or a friend doing unjust acts, one should think ‘it has such causes,’ and become happy.” It is an ethical conclusion from the metaphysics. Everything is subject to a cause, with no agency, so don't blame, and don't get angry.¹⁴

This metaphysics is essential to the larger argument of the chapter. The specific verses about Sāṃkhya and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika may be less important in a context where such views are not live options, but the overall project of establishing a determinist metaphysics is central to Śāntideva's reasoning against anger.

The metaphysics in question is *pratītya samutpāda*, a pan-Buddhist metaphysical claim that any Buddhist, Mahāyāna or otherwise, could support. The critique of anger is likewise a stock feature of many Buddhist texts. What is unusual in Śāntideva is the *connection*: because the world is causally dependent, it makes no sense to blame anyone or get

¹⁴ There is an ongoing debate between Charles Goodman (e.g., “Resentment”) and Mark Siderits (e.g., “Freedom”) on the interpretation of this section. Siderits takes Śāntideva to be a “paleo-compatibilist,” arguing that blame and moral responsibility can still legitimately be assigned on his view; Goodman denies this, assigning Śāntideva a hard determinism.

angry at them. That connection is far less frequently made in other texts; for example, anger is not identified as one of the products of Candrakīrti's four illusions.

The Atomized and Devalued Body

The second significant metaphysical discussion in the BCA, in verses VIII.40-83, takes an atomistic biology as an argument against lust—against attachment to others' bodies as well as one's own. Of the four lines of argument Śāntideva takes, this one is probably the most commonly found in wider Buddhist tradition. It is found in Candrakīrti (Lang 164–185), and in plenty of early Buddhist texts for that matter.

Śāntideva's metaphysical claim is that when understood properly, the body is no more than its component parts. But only the whole body is capable of exciting desire; the parts do not. For that reason, lust is an illusion. Outside of Śāntideva's works, this lesson was perhaps most memorably expressed in the story of Subhā in the Pāli Therīgathā. Trying to seduce a nun named Subhā, a man sings her a lyrical love poem about how beautiful her eyes are; Subhā plucks one of her eyes out and hands it to him, saying that if he likes it so much he can have it. The man begs her forgiveness (TG XIV.1; Thanissaro).

Śāntideva follows a very similar line of reasoning, deconstructing the body: it is composed of bones, meat, feces. Crosby and Skilton (92) have a memorable translation of BCA VIII.49: "They produce both spit and shit from the single source of food. You do not want the shit from it. Why are you so fond of drinking the spit?" At VIII.63-4 Śāntideva urges his readers to look at a corpse, and then notes: you don't want the body when the skin is ripped off; why do you want it with the skin on?

One finds an interesting variant on the deconstruction of the body earlier in the text for a different purpose, in chapter five. Here the metaphysical argument appears in a collapsed and more practical and meditative form, and for a different ethical conclusion. He says:

First, with your own intellect, act on this bag of skin just as you release meat from its cage of bones, with a sword of wisdom. Having done this to the bones, see the marrow inside and reflect to yourself: “What is the essence here?” Having sought in this way, you see no essence here. Now say: why do you still guard the body? (BCA V.62–64)

Here again the body is reducible to its component parts; the metaphysical claim is very similar. But the body at issue here is not a loved one's, but one's own. From these verses, the ethical conclusion is that one's own body is not worthy of special protection, and so one should subjugate it. That is, here the argument is a justification for the precisely regulated details of monastic comportment offered in the fifth chapter—about how one eats, points, walks. The body has no worth in itself, only for alleviating suffering, and so one should control it and regulate it in a manner that serves that purpose.

The argument about the body is more concrete than the other metaphysical arguments discussed here, but it takes the same approach that they do: reasoning from metaphysics to ethics. The world is a certain way; therefore, we should act and feel a certain way. Just as the unreality of agency means we shouldn't blame or get angry, so the unreality of the body means we should neither protect it nor lust. As with anger and agency this is a point found in non-Mahāyāna texts, and this metaphysics-ethics connection is made more often than the

connection on anger. It is worth noting here because it is one more example of the metaphysics-ethics connection in the BCA.¹⁵

Non-self against Self-interest

No doubt the most famous of Śāntideva's metaphysics-ethics connections is the third one, found in BCA VIII.90–119. The verses following this section in chapter eight are the major source for the Tibetan Lojong (*blo sbyong*) meditation tradition (Sweet "Mental Purification" 245), with their meditative practice of "exchange of self and other": imagining oneself in another's place and vice versa. What is of interest here is the previous section on the "equalization" of self and other, a philosophical argument. The exchange of self and other follows this argument because it tries to put the argument's conclusion into practice, realize it.

The argument of BCA VIII.90–119 has become more well known independently in recent years. It is now even excerpted in an introductory ethics textbook (Cooper) alongside the likes of Kant and Mencius—the only Buddhist text in that book—likely because it is so visibly a logical argument to ethical conclusions, of the sort that Keown ("Morality") finds so rare in Buddhist thought. The argument has become controversial in contemporary discussions; Paul Williams even argues that through this argument Śāntideva has "destroyed the bodhisattva path" (*Altruism*). Many have argued against Williams (e.g., Clayton); there is no room to get into that debate here. The important point here is that this argument, though overall Śāntideva's most

¹⁵Or two, depending on how one counts. From the one metaphysical premise of the body's reducibility there are two arguably separate ethical conclusions: the uselessness of lust and the subjugation of the body.

innovative, fits neatly into a more general pattern found in many places in the BCA: an argument from metaphysical premises to ethical conclusions.

Specifically, Śāntideva argues from the metaphysics of non-self to ethical selflessness. Here, for the first time, we get a specifically Mahāyāna ethics; the previous two points could have been found in any kind of Buddhism. Of course there is nothing specifically Mahāyāna about the pan-Buddhist metaphysical idea of *anātman*. What is peculiarly Mahāyāna is selflessness in an ethical sense: not just that we *are* selfless, in the sense that the self is not real, but that we *should* be selfless, in the sense of altruistic: trying to save all beings, and not only ourselves, from suffering. And what is remarkable and innovative in Śāntideva, beyond other Mahāyāna thinkers, is that he *connects* the two kinds of selflessness—as he connected dependent co-origination with non-anger. Mahāyāna texts before him praised altruism and agreed with non-self, but did not try to show that the former *followed from* the latter.

How does Śāntideva make this argument? His major claim is that distinctions between selves are illusory. Supposedly distinct selves are all the same in their nature to both experience suffering and desire its end:

When happiness is equally dear to me and to others, then what is special about myself that I strive after my happiness alone? When fear and suffering are not dear to myself or to others, then what is special about my self that I protect it and not another? (VIII.95–96)

This argument is clearly important to Śāntideva; the portion about suffering is repeated at the very beginning of the root text (*kārikā*) of his other work, the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*. The claim can sound bizarre at first. One could certainly defend the difference between self and other,

in the name of self-interest. The obvious objection to Śāntideva is: others' suffering doesn't *affect* me, so why should I prevent it? It is in response to this objection that I think Śāntideva's argument gets most interesting. He has a reply to it:

If I don't protect another because his suffering cannot hurt me, the sufferings of my future body are not mine. Why is that hurt protected against? "I am the same even then" is a false conception, because the one that dies is very different from the one that is born. (VIII.97–98)

This reply requires a bit of unpacking. Some have taken the "born" and "dies" literally—there is a different body in the next life than in this one, across rebirths. Prajñākaramati, Śāntideva's Sanskrit commentator, reads the verse this way, as do many Tibetan commentators.

But others have taken it in a very different way: the "future body" is my body in the future of *this life*. Some Tibetan commentators do this, like Gyaltshab Je (*rgyal tshab rje*) and Sonam Tsemo (*bsod nams rtse mo*) (Williams "Absence" 32–34). Moreover, this is also the interpretation in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, the other major work attributed to Śāntideva. The *Śikṣā* gives these exact same passages and glosses them as follows:

When the fetus is dead another is born, the child; when childhood is dead, adolescence; from the destruction of that comes the youth. And from destruction of that, the old man. How is the one body dead? Thus at every moment the body is different, like hair, nails and so on. (ŚS 358)

Here, the meaning is: my body is different *from moment to moment*, and what I do to protect my body *now* affects a *different body* five seconds

from now. I argue that in thinking about Śāntideva's ethics we have good reason to take this second interpretation, from the *Śikṣā*. This is partially because of the attribution of common authorship,¹⁶ but perhaps more importantly, simply because the *Śikṣā*'s interpretation is philosophically much more powerful: it works much better as a refutation of the selfish objector.

As I understand it, if one thinks "I'm not going to prevent others' suffering because it doesn't affect me," Śāntideva's response is: "Well, preventing *your* suffering doesn't affect you either, because you five seconds from now is not you now." If I brush my teeth now, it's a different person whose cavities are prevented; even if I decide to eat a piece of chocolate now, it's a different person who gets to enjoy it. For Śāntideva here, *anātman* is expressed as a time-atomism with respect to the self; the continuity of self across time is a fiction. The discussion of the body earlier in the BCA broke the self down in space; this discussion now breaks it down in time.

Śāntideva then provides a second and related argument: "If you say 'only the person who has the suffering should guard against it,' the foot's suffering is not the hand's, so why does the one protect the other?" (VIII.99). That is, the distinction *between* persons is no bigger than the distinction *within* persons, between the hand and the foot. If I say "I feel the pain and you don't," the same is true of the foot and the hand. When we think in these terms, we no longer have a reason to protect self over other. The nature of suffering is free-floating. It is

¹⁶ Later Buddhist tradition has unanimously viewed the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and *Śikṣāsamuccaya* as compositions by the same author. Modern scholars do not dispute that the texts had an author in common, though the nature of that authorship is difficult to establish because they are composite texts. Beyond that, the BCA itself (V.105) recommends that one consult the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*. See Lele ("Revaluation" 8–28) for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

something to be prevented, but doesn't belong to anyone in particular: "All sufferings are unowned because there is no difference among them; they should be prevented just because they are suffering. Why a restriction in this regard?" (VIII.102).

Now if suffering does not belong to us, as Śāntideva has been saying, then we may well start wondering why we should bother preventing it at all. To this Śāntideva replies: "If you say 'why should suffering be prevented?': because that is not disputed by anyone. If it should be prevented, all of it should be. If not, this goes for oneself as for everyone else" (VIII.103). This comment, I submit, is intended to work similarly to John Stuart Mill's famous remark in the fourth chapter of *Utilitarianism* that "the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it." G. E. Moore famously saw this claim of Mill's as a fallacy resting on linguistic equivocation, but I think Alasdair MacIntyre's more sympathetic reading is more helpful:

He treats the thesis that all men desire pleasure as a factual assertion which guarantees the success of an *ad hominem* appeal to anyone who denies his conclusion. If anyone denies that pleasure is desirable, then we can ask him, But don't you desire it? and we know in advance that he must answer yes, and consequently must admit that pleasure is desirable. (MacIntyre 152)

Similarly, Śāntideva does not think anyone is *seriously* going to dispute that suffering should be prevented. If they really tried to dispute that, it would be just for the sake of argument, not because they actually believe it. So there is no need to argue against such an objection, whereas there is a need to argue against the many real people who would try to prevent only their own suffering and not others'.

This, then, is a third argument from metaphysics to ethics—this time from metaphysical selflessness to ethical selflessness. *Because* the self is not real, we should not privilege it over others.

This argument became influential in Tibet, but it was relatively new with Śāntideva. It is instructive, for example, to compare it to the approach of Āryadeva and Candrakīrti to self and egotism. They too identify self as a key metaphysical error (as one might expect), and Āryadeva's first verse on the subject sounds similar to Śāntideva's: "What wise person would have pride in thinking 'I' and 'mine', since all objects in the cycle of existence are common to all embodied beings?" (Lang 186).

But as it turns out, in that text the *pride* ends up being more important than the "I" and "mine." Āryadeva's argument, and Candrakīrti's commentary on it, turn out in fact to be directed at egotism—egotism in the narrow sense of being puffed up, rather than of self-interested action—and specifically at the egotism of a king. Candrakīrti explains: "Since the king certainly has egotism and selfishness in abundance, primarily the king is advised here about their removal" (Lang 186). So their discussion turns out to be above all a *political* theory, telling a king not to rule oppressively.

Śāntideva, by contrast, is not interested in politics; his chief advice to kings (in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*) is to give their entire kingdoms away. (See Lele "Compassionate" for more on Śāntideva's politics, or lack thereof.) His critique is more in line with common Mahāyāna views: not about criticizing self-absorbed kings, but about criticizing self-interested action more broadly.

While Śāntideva's ethical conclusion to this question is characteristically Mahāyāna, neither the premise nor the conclusion is specifically Madhyamaka, since suffering itself is not (yet)

deconstructed. Crosby and Skilton (82–87) identify it more specifically with a Cittamātra (Yogācāra) view, because Cittamātra typically sees the highest truth in the absence of duality. They read this as translating into the absence of *self-other* duality. I am skeptical about that interpretation, at least if “other” is considered to be “other sentient beings,” as it seems to be here. But they are quite right that what we’re dealing with is a Mahāyāna argument that is not Madhyamaka.

Crosby and Skilton are also quite right to note that the ordering of Śāntideva’s metaphysical arguments suggests a progress in the text. The first two arguments are pan-Buddhist; Buddhaghosa could have agreed with them. This argument is specifically Mahāyāna, but it is not Madhyamaka. The final argument, however, is at the highest, Madhyamaka, level. I turn to that argument now.

Emptiness against Attachment

Having seen the metaphysical arguments of the preceding chapters and their significance, we are now in a much better position to understand the BCA’s ninth chapter. In previous chapters of the BCA, metaphysics played a relatively small role (between ten and thirty verses of a chapter); here, it takes center stage, featuring in the vast majority of the chapter’s 167 verses. But the role played by metaphysics here is quite comparable to the role in the previous chapters: it underpins an ethical argument, an argument about how human beings should live.

The ninth chapter articulates the Madhyamaka view that everything is empty (*śūnya*), not ultimately real. Anything we can perceive or speak of exists only at the level of conventional usage. Śāntideva’s method for establishing this point is similar to the method used in chapter six (above): refute all the objections to it that he can

imagine.¹⁷ And the ethical upshot of this argument is that one should not feel any attachment to worldly goods, like possessions or lovers. Because they have no real existence, they are not worthy of that attachment.

The nature of the position of emptiness is that it supersedes everything—including all the positions Śāntideva has taken in previous chapters. Parts of chapter nine recap each of the metaphysical claims of previous chapters: verses 71–77 deconstruct the self and causality, 72–78 deconstruct the body, while 57–60 deconstruct both self and body. But Śāntideva's arguments in this chapter imply that each of the metaphysical claims he has made before is itself inadequate in its own way.

Recall that the critique of anger rested on the idea that everything has a cause, in the chain of dependent co-origination. By the end of chapter nine, however, Śāntideva has rejected causality too. In IX.145 he asks: “For an existing entity, what's the need for a cause (*hetu*)? And for a nonexisting entity, what's the need for a cause?” That is, if something really existed, it wouldn't need a cause to bring it into being; if it didn't, it really wouldn't need a cause at all. There are now echoes of the Sāṃkhya view that nothing is really created or destroyed, and therefore *doesn't* have a cause. From here he proceeds to a more radical point:

Thus there is no cessation and no coming-to-be of anything. And therefore this whole universe has neither begun nor ceased. Rather, states of existence (*gati*) are like

¹⁷ Because he uses this style of argument, Tibetan commentators have described Śāntideva, like Candrakīrti, as a Prāsaṅgika. Saitō (261) urges caution on this matter, however, noting that his views show considerable affinities with non-Prāsaṅgika philosophers.

dreams; on reflection they are like the trunk of a plaintain tree.¹⁸ (IX.149–150)

So it turns out that chapter six’s thinking in terms of blameless causes is inadequate. And the same is true for the argument against lust. At IX.77 he recommends what he calls a “meditation on no-self”—and the self here is thought of in terms of the body. The verses that follow deconstruct the body, as in the earlier chapter—but both no-self and bodily deconstruction now look different.

Śāntideva begins this section saying the body is not really existent because we can break it down into parts and smaller parts: foot into toes, toes into joints, joints into their constituent parts. So far, the metaphysics is the same as in the argument against lust. But after that, he breaks down those constituent parts into their smallest possible parts, *aṇus*. *Aṇu* (or *paramaṇu*) is usually translated “atom”, and it means this in the Greek sense of *a-tomos*, indivisible; but the “atom” translation could be misleading in the light of modern chemistry and physics, where we now think of “atoms” as divisible into smaller units. From a modern physicist’s perspective, it could be preferable to think of *aṇus* as quarks rather than atoms.

From there Śāntideva takes a further step: “that *aṇu* too can be divided into directional parts (*digvibhāga*)” (IX.86). That is, even the smallest possible unit, an atom or quark, must still have *directions*, or sides—a side that faces north, a side facing south. And those directions are effectively parts, so whatever unit we presume indivisible turns out to be divisible after all. And then finally he adds: “The directional parts, because they have no component parts, are just empty space (*ākāśa*).

¹⁸The trunk of a plantain tree is hollow.

Therefore the *aṇu* does not exist” (IX.87). When we reduce things far enough, we are left only with their emptiness.

This further decomposition of the body works quite differently from the previous one. Before, the body was divided into its bodily parts, which aroused disgust rather than lust. Now we have taken it further to straight emptiness, where disgust is not an issue. (The first level of reduction would fit comfortably in the Pāli Abhidhamma, but not this one.)

So likewise for the deconstruction of the self. In chapter eight, the self had been replaced by free-floating suffering: one must prevent all suffering, not just what belongs to the self. But in chapter nine Śāntideva rejects the existence of even that suffering. He asks rhetorically at IX.88: “if suffering really exists, why does it not bother the cheerful?”

So, the emptiness in this chapter supersedes the other three metaphysical claims. This is superseding in a Hegelian sense (*Aufhebung*, sublation): that is, transcending but including. It is the highest of the four claims, both truer and more pragmatically effective than the others, but the others retain their value at a lower level.

Like the other claims, though, emptiness has clear and powerful ethical implications for Śāntideva. At the end of chapter nine, Śāntideva makes it clear that *because* things are empty, we should not be attached to them. Worldly goods are not worth the significance we usually give to them, the attachments we normally have. “When all things are empty in this way, what could be obtained or taken? Who could become honoured or humiliated, and by whom? From what could there be happiness or suffering? What could be liked or hated?” (IX.151-2). There is still no reason to feel anger or lust or self-interest, but these are now all subsumed as a part of feeling no attachment at all—which then passes

into concern for those who haven't figured this out yet, the concern of the tenth and final chapter.

So, this fourth and final argument from metaphysics to ethics supersedes the others, both metaphysically and ethically: everything (including agency, body, self and more) is empty, so don't get attached to any of it. In Śāntideva's view, emptiness is a *more powerful* reason to be non-attached than the more basic ones given before (that they are causally contingent, reducible and without enduring self). Each of those previous reasons gives some reason to be non-attached, but they will still create a danger of attachment because they leave objects before one's mind, and they are not the whole truth.

Conclusion

Metaphysics is too important a part of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* to be ignored. The demands of pedagogy may necessitate its exclusion from introductory treatments, where there is not time for everything. But for a serious understanding of Śāntideva's thought, metaphysical arguments are essential. They are key among the reasons he himself offers for his own ethics; without those reasons, an understanding of his ethics is superficial. We do not fully understand why patient endurance is important if we do not understand dependent origination; we do not understand his critiques of lust if we do not understand his atomism; we do not understand the value of altruism without seeing its foundation in non-self; and we do not understand non-attachment without emptiness.

Once we *do* understand how metaphysics underlies Śāntideva's ethics, his thought takes on a different cast—one which makes him look much more like the Western picture of a philosopher, constructing a system where theoretical and practical philosophy fit together into a

coherent picture. Now since Śāntideva is a Madhyamaka (and arguably a Prāsaṅgika), his system is something of an anti-system; a system of thought is in a sense something he aims to avoid. Yet there is something of a systemic quality to it in the connections he makes between metaphysics and ethics. Rather than articulating a metaphysical foundation, he is dismantling others' metaphysical claims—but his ethical claims are incomplete without that dismantling. After all, the ethical claims too are about a dismantling, of the inadequate ways in which normal people react to the world—inappropriate ethical reactions based on inappropriate metaphysical beliefs.

Śāntideva's metaphysics, then, provide us with a more complete view of his ethical claims and their justification. This view, in turn, allows us a deeper picture of how Śāntideva might respond to contemporary arguments against views like his, such as the views of Martha Nussbaum that I explored in my dissertation. Nussbaum argues that such emotions as anger and attachment are tied up with people's deepest values, in a way that puts the burden on their opponent to show why we should give them up (see Lele "Revaluation" 269–278). The claims discussed in this article illustrate how Śāntideva attempts to show us just this. If we truly understand the real nature of the goods we normally value, so he would claim, then we will come to see that that valuation is in error.

It is not only Śāntideva's work that may look different once we consider how metaphysics underlies his ethics. His work also helps us avoid the temptation to dismiss the significance of metaphysics in Buddhist thought generally (as we saw Thich Nhat Hanh and Taitetsu Unno doing in the introduction). We saw in the introduction how the Buddha's instructions in the *Shorter Mālun̄kya Sutta* do not rule out metaphysical questions in their entirety, but only those questions that do not help with the urgent task of liberation. In Śāntideva's work we get

a clearer picture than most of how such questions can and do help with that task.

It is a commonplace to point out that Buddhists, in Abhidharma texts and elsewhere, have engaged in a great deal of metaphysical argument. Śāntideva gives us an unusually clear picture of why that metaphysical argument matters. In his work, it turns out to be directly applicable to the immediate problems of living.

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