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Buddhism and Animal Ethics

Bronwyn Finnigan
School of Philosophy, RSSS
Australian National University
bronwyn.finnigan@anu.edu.au

This article provides a philosophical overview of some of the central Buddhist positions and argument regarding animal welfare. It introduces the Buddha's teaching of *ahiṃsā* or non-violence and rationally reconstructs five arguments from the context of early Indian Buddhism that aim to justify its extension to animals. These arguments appeal to the capacity and desire not to suffer, the virtue of compassion, as well as Buddhist views on the nature of self, karma, and reincarnation. This article also considers how versions of these arguments have been applied to address a practical issue in Buddhist ethics; whether Buddhists should be vegetarian.

Buddhism has a reputation for being a peaceful religion that emphasises kindness to animals and vegetarianism. But is this reputation warranted? Does it accurately represent the Buddhist position on animal welfare? This question can be understood in one of two ways. First, it can be understood as an empirical question about how Buddhists, in fact, treat animals. The answer to this question is varied because human nature is varied; some people treat animals well, others not. There are also many ways in which commitments and beliefs can decouple from motivations and actions. In the case of Buddhism, there are various degrees of commitment that are relevant; that of a nun, monk, lay practitioner, or occasional meditator. There are also differences in context. Buddhism is a global phenomenon that spans various cultures, countries, and historical periods. Practices that seem to define Buddhism in some contexts do not in others.

Second, it can be understood as a normative question about how a Buddhist *should* treat animals if their motivations and actions are consistent with Buddhist commitments and beliefs. The answer to *this* question is also complicated. Buddhists disagree about whether one should (e.g.) abstain from eating meat or ritually release animals. All Buddhists seek to

be consistent with the teachings of the Buddha, however. And most accept the textual authority of his earliest recorded teachings; the Nikāya (Agama) sūtras. This suggests a Buddhist standard for resolving these disagreements. There is much debate, however, about how these texts are to be interpreted, what they entail, and what additional texts should be accepted as authoritative. These debates are reflected in distinct Buddhist traditions (Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna), distinct philosophical schools (Abhidharma, Yogācāra, Madhyamaka), and differences amongst thinkers within these traditions and schools. These debates are also shaped by the different cultures and intellectual traditions prevalent in the countries into which Buddhism was transmitted. There is thus no easy answer to the question of what Buddhists believe and how they should act if they are to be consistent with those beliefs. Even when views about how one should act converge, the modes of moral reasoning that establish these conclusions often appeal to different justificatory grounds.

There is a growing body of scholarly literature that examines these issues in specific historical and cultural contexts. It would be helpful, however, to have a philosophical overview of some of the central Buddhist positions on the moral status of animals, some of the arguments offered to justify those positions, and an idea of how they are applied in a practical context. This article aims to provide such an overview. Its point of reference will be the early Buddhist teachings in classical India, which serve as the philosophical background to all Buddhist intellectual traditions. It will begin by briefly introducing the Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths as well as the Buddha's conception of *ahiṃsā*, or the precept not to kill or harm others. It will then rationally reconstruct five Buddhist arguments that aim to justify *ahiṃsā* in terms that include animals within the scope of moral concern. The article will then consider the implication of these arguments for one area of practical application; whether Buddhists should be vegetarian. This is a controversial issue in the Buddhist context. Without defending a position, this article will introduce the controversy as

it arose in the early Buddhist context and will survey some of the principle arguments that have been advanced to resolve it.

Philosophical Background

The Buddha lived and taught somewhere between 6-4th centuries BCE. There is much scholarly disagreement about how his views are to be interpreted, what they entail, and which texts are authoritative. Nevertheless, all Buddhist thinkers agree that the Four Noble Truths, as articulated in the Nikāya sūtras, are central to Buddhist thought. The first 'truth' is the truth or fact of suffering. What is meant by suffering? In the early teachings, suffering (*duḥkha*) is discussed in terms that range from bodily physical pain to complex psychological states associated with attachment and loss (sorrow, lamentation, grief, not obtaining what one wants; MN 10)

The second truth provides a diagnosis of suffering in terms of two main causes. First, suffering is caused by desire or craving (*tṛṣṇā*); craving for pleasure, craving for continual existence (of oneself and those one loves), and craving for non-being (of that to which one is averse). Craving is thought to condition attachment and thereby suffering in the face of loss. Second, and more fundamentally, suffering is caused by ignorance (*avidyā*). Ignorance of what? Ignorance of the fact that all things depend on causes and conditions for their existence; nothing exists independently of all other things. From this it is thought to follow that all things are impermanent. This extends to oneself and others. The Buddha taught that there is no permanent and continuing self that persists through time; there is just the arising and ceasing of physical and psychological events in causal relation. Gaining a proper understanding of these facts is thought to help remove the grounds for craving and, with that, the roots of suffering.

The third truth is the assertion that suffering can end. *Nirvāṇa* is the term for the resulting state or way of life. The fourth truth outlines an Eightfold Path towards achieving

this state or way of life. It is standardly divided into three bundles: wisdom (*prajñā*), which consists of coming to a right understanding of the nature of reality, and adopting the right intention, attitude or orientation towards it; ethical conduct (*śīla*) which consists of right speech, right action, right livelihood; and, meditation (*samādhi*) which consists of right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Ahiṃsā and the moral status of animals

In his early teachings, the Buddha was called on to specify the nature of ethical conduct (*śīla*). He responded by providing a set of precepts for his disciples to follow in a monastic setting. The first five of these precepts (the *pañca-śīla*) are intended to be upheld by all Buddhists and the first precept is that of *ahiṃsā* or non-violence. *Ahiṃsā* was a common principle or virtue at the time of the Buddha. It was shared by the Brahmanical traditions and was the center-piece of Jain thought. In the Buddhist context, it is explicated as the prescription neither to kill nor harm others.

What is the scope of 'others' to whom this precept applies? Some claim that it extends to all living beings. Others, that it extends to only *sentient* beings. Both classifications give rise to debate about whether this extension includes plants and what this might imply. In the early Buddhist teachings, plants are not explicitly identified as sentient (Findly, 2002; Schmithausen, 1991). Non-human animals *were* explicitly regarded as sentient; they have a range of conscious experiences (along a spectrum), are motivated by a range of psychological states, and are susceptible to suffering (Getz, 2004). That the Buddha considered animals to have moral significance is evident in his condemnation of occupations that involve slaughtering animals (SN 19), instruction for monks to avoid wearing animal skins, and prohibition of behavior that intentionally causes animals harm (MN 41). The Buddha also encouraged his disciples to help animals where they could, which includes rescuing them and setting them free (DN 5).

Although animals are morally significant in Buddhism, their moral status in relation to humans is less clear. For instance, Buddhists have historically accepted a cosmology of rebirth that consists of six realms of existence; two deity realms, a realm of humans, a realm of animals, a realm of hungry ghosts and a hell realm. The realm of animals was regarded to be inferior to that of humans (MN 12, 57, 97); to be reborn as an animal was a mark of moral deficiency. Historical punishments for harming or killing animals were also less severe than for humans. A monk was expelled from the monastic community for killing a human but merely expiated, by public confession and ensuing shame, if they killed an animal (Harris, 2006). Punishments for killing animals were also of diminishing degree depending on the size of the animal (Stewart, 2014). Some take these historical inequalities to be evidence of speciesism (Waldau, 2002). If speciesism is the view that only members of the human species have moral significance, however, then it does not follow from the above considerations. Animals are included within the scope of the first precept and so have moral significance in Buddhism. The pertinent question, however, concerns how much significance they should have and what this practically entails.

Arguments for the first precept, ahiṃsā, and its extension to animal welfare

What justifies the acceptance of *ahiṃsā* within a Buddhist context and its extension to the treatment of animals? The Buddha provides some suggestions but, in his early teachings, does not provide a justificatory argument. Several have been offered by later Buddhist thinkers, however. The most prominent appeal to the fact that killing or harming animals will cause them to suffer. That suffering is morally and practically significant is thought to be justified in relation to the Buddha's teaching of the first noble truth; the truth of suffering. There are subtly different accounts of this relation, however. I will rationally reconstruct five such arguments from historical and contemporary discussions of classical Indian Buddhism. I will also provide some suggestions about how some of these arguments might be related.

Intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument

The Buddha taught that the First Noble Truth is the truth or fact of suffering. If, by this, he simply meant that suffering sometimes (often, or even pervasively) occurs in sentient lives, this might be true without it being either moral significant (good or bad) or practically significant (to be promoted, prevented, avoided or eliminated). These further attributions seem to be implied, however, by the fact that the following three Truths concern the possibility, nature of, and pathway to, the cessation of suffering.

One way to represent the moral significance of suffering is to say that it has *intrinsic* or non-instrumental normative significance; it is intrinsically or non-instrumentally bad. One might further argue that moral significance implies practical significance; since suffering is intrinsically bad it should be prevented. The following argument can then be made:

> Since killing and harming animals causes suffering, and since suffering is intrinsically bad and should be prevented, it follows that one should not kill or harm animals.

The intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument is susceptible to objection, however. While most Buddhist thinkers assume that suffering is bad and to be prevented, and some infer from this that animals should not be killed or harmed, few go so far as say that suffering is *intrinsically* bad. There are reasons for a Buddhist to be uneasy about intrinsicality. The point of dispute between the Abhidharma and Madhyamaka Buddhist traditions concerns whether existent things have an intrinsic nature or essence (Tillemans, 2016). Most Tibetan schools of Buddhist philosophy judge Madhyamaka to represent the pinnacle of Buddhist thought (Arnold, 2017). If intrinsic *value* is equated with intrinsic nature, then the intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument might be unacceptable to a Mādhyamika (James, 2003, 2013).

Desire-based argument

A slightly different argument can be derived from certain remarks made by the Buddha in the Nikāyas. The Buddha taught:

> "Since I am one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die; I desire happiness and am averse to suffering, if someone were to take my life, that would not be pleasing or agreeable to me. Now if I were to take the life of another – of one who wishes to live, who does not want to die (etc.) – that would not be pleasing or agreeable to the other either." (SN 55.7)

These remarks appeal to an apparent equality between oneself and others in not *wanting* to suffer as reason why one should not take the life of another. While animals are not explicitly identified as the relevant 'other', these remarks lend support to the following argument:

> I do not desire to suffer. If I were killed that would cause me to suffer. Animals are like me in not desiring to suffer. Killing animals causes them to suffer. So, I should not kill animals.

The desire-based argument is also susceptible to objection. It appears, for instance, to attribute desire non-derivative moral and practical significance; suffering is bad and to be prevented because it is not desired. However, the Buddha identifies desire or craving as one of the root causes of suffering in his analysis of the Second Noble Truth. He recurrently argues for its "complete destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up and relinquishing" (MN1). How can this inconsistency be resolved? One possibility is to insist that not all forms of desire are the same. This is a popular solution to the 'Paradox of Desire', which some believe undermines Buddhist thought. The apparent paradox is: if one of the chief aims of Buddhism is to eliminate desire, how can this be practically achieved other than via actions

motivated by desire? Desire appears to be both the problem and the means to its own solution (Herman, 1979). Several recent scholars attempt to resolve this paradox by distinguishing at least two kinds of desire. The problematic kind, which is at the root of suffering, is lusting or craving (*tṛṣṇā*). This is a strong motivational state that conditions attachment (*upādāna*). Eliminating this form of desire is thought to be consistent with accepting other forms of desire (Keown, 1992; Webster, 2005).

If one considers the desire-based argument alongside the intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument, a Euthyphro-style question arises. Is suffering bad because not desired or not desired because bad? Which of these two arguments should we privilege? There are several options available.

First, one might argue for one over the other. One might deny, for instance, that desire has non-derivative moral significance. One might further advert to the above worries about basing moral significance in desire and argue that the intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument better accords with the Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths.

Second, one might argue that the desire-based argument is a version of the intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument rather than a competitor. In the above citation, the Buddha says that having one's life taken is bad because it 'would not be pleasing'. This might be taken to qualify the fact that being killed is not desired; it is not desired because it is a form of dis-pleasure, which is a form of suffering.

Third, one might maintain that the desire-based and intrinsic-disvalue of suffering arguments are properly distinct but insist that the latter is properly justificatory and the former merely motivational. The Buddhist canon contains great diversity and plurality in modes of moral reasoning (as this article will partially demonstrate). Some Buddhist thinkers explain this fact by insisting that it is evidence of the Buddha's skilful means (*upaya*) to motivate disciples with different characters (Pye, 1978; Schroeder, 2001; Federman, 2009).

Following this line of reasoning, one might argue that the (ultimate, justificatory) reason why one should not kill or harm animals is because it involves suffering, and suffering is bad, but that the Buddha offered the desire-based argument to motivate those who are unmoved by this fact.

One might accept this third response but nevertheless query whether the desire-based argument provides sufficient motivating reason to broaden the scope of moral concern to include animals. Just because an animal does not *want* to suffer may not yet give one reason to care or do anything about it.

No-self equality argument:

There are many reasons why a person might be unmotivated by the desire-based argument to refrain from killing or harming animals. They might be irrational and thus unresponsive to rational argument. They might be apathetic about satisfying their own desires and so unmoved by the fact that others have similar desires. They might also be egoistic and motivated to satisfy their own desires but do not believe they have good reason to broaden the scope of their concern to include others. The Buddha and later Buddhist thinkers provide reasons aimed to motivate this third type of person. One family of reasons appeal to the Buddha's teaching of no-self (*anātman*) that was offered as part of his elaboration on the Second Noble Truth; the causes of suffering. There is much debate about the precise details of this teaching. Most agree, however, that the Buddha denies that there is an essential self that persists through time and that underlies all our changing physical and psychological properties. This idea might lend support to the following argument:

> Egoistic self-interest presupposes that there is a self whose interests should be privileged over others with respect to moral consideration. This presupposition is mistaken; there is no self that could be privileged in this way. Psychological states exist but no selves who own those states. If suffering should be removed, given

> some interest, then all sufferings should be removed. Killing and harming animals causes them to suffer. Animals have an interest not to suffer. So, we should not kill or harm animals.

Versions of the no-self equality argument can be found throughout the Indian Buddhist philosophical tradition. A famous version appears in Chapter 8 of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Williams, 1998; Cowherds, 2015; Finnigan, 2017a). It is susceptible to objection, however. One might, for instance, challenge the premise that psychological states exist but no selves who own those states. Williams (1998) argues that it does not make sense to speak of free floating concerns, cares and sufferings without a subject undergoing those states. This is a subtle issue. The premise is making a metaphysical claim; there is no ontological entity, self, that stands in an ownership relation to psychological events. This is different to the phenomenal claim that psychological events, ordinarily and constitutively, involve the subjective experiencing of their own content. Both claims as well as their consistency are accepted by leading proponents of Yogācāra and Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Madhyamaka Buddhism. (Williams, 2000; MacKenzie, 2007, 2008; Kellner, 2010, 2011; Thompson 2011; Coseru, 2012).

One might alternatively worry that the overall strategy of the no-self equality argument is too strong for what it seeks to achieve; it undermines egoism by denying the existence of an ego. At the same stroke, it might also undermine the prudential reasoning that underlies much ordinary conduct. When I refrain from drinking over the legal limit before driving I arguably presuppose that there is a future self (me) that might be injured or killed if I were to act otherwise and in whose interest I am acting. This might be rendered nonsensical if I were to abandon the notion of a self. Denying the existence of an ego or self might also eradicate the distinction between self and other, which may lead to various absurdities (Williams, 1998; Wetleson, 2002; Harris, 2015). Buddhist thinkers have a strategy to avoid these

problems; namely, a distinction between ultimate reality and conventional reality (Cowherds, 2010). Buddhist philosophical traditions understand this distinction in different ways. They nevertheless each affirm the ordinary, conventional status of agency and the distinction between persons. This creates a challenge for the no-self equality argument, however. It seeks to undermine selfishness by undermining the ontological status of the self. Can this be achieved without thereby undermining every other ordinary, conventional notion that depends on the notion of self? Is there a middle-way such that a sufficient notion of self can be retained which accommodates agency and the distinction between self-and-other while at the same time jettisoning the foundation of egoistic self-concern? (Finnigan, 2017a)

Virtue-based argument:

A different line of moral reasoning aims to justify *ahiṃsā* and its extension to animals by appeal to the virtue of compassion (*karuṇā*). The argument is simple:

> It is compassionate not to kill or harm animals. One should be compassionate. So, one should not kill or harm animals.

Versions of this argument can be found throughout the Indian Buddhist philosophical tradition (Harvey, 2000; James 2004; Cooper & James, 2005; Sahni, 2008; Barstow, 2013; Pu, 2014). What reason is there to accept its two premises?

The first depends on how one defines compassion. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is presented by the Buddha as an altruistic attitude that strives for the welfare of others (MN21,103,122; DN29) out of empathetic concern that they be delivered from suffering (n.MN7). It is a practical attitude, which strives to implement its object, and is treated as synonymous with 'non-cruelty' or 'harmlessness' (*avihimsā*). "When you develop meditation on compassion, any cruelty will be abandoned" (MN62). The Buddha's teachings sometimes suggest that the scope of compassion is restricted to "the welfare and happiness of *devas* [celestial beings] and humans" (DN14). However, it is much more frequently extended to "all living beings"

(MN27,41,107, DN2). Since compassion is a practical attitude of not harming any living being, it is compassionate not to harm animals.

Reason for accepting the second premise depends, in part, on how one defines its target; who is the relevant 'one' that should be compassionate? The Buddha taught that every follower of his teachings should be compassionate; from nun and monk to 'householder' (MN41). Since the Buddha's teachings are presented as truth, it follows that all human beings should follow these teachings and thus "abide compassionate to all living beings" (MN41). But what justifies this teaching? Why *should* (every)one be compassionate? There are several possible answers. One might argue that the practical expression of compassion in non-violent, non-cruel action is instrumental to the elimination of suffering, which has intrinsic disvalue. The virtue-based argument may thus be understood as an extension of the intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument. Alternatively, one might argue that compassion, itself, has intrinsic value and is justified as one of several mutually reinforcing constituents of the awakened way of living circumscribed by the Eightfold Path. When sufficiently cultivated, compassion is robustly dispositional in the sense of reliably manifesting in non-violent, ethical conduct (*śīla*) which, in turn, reinforces meditative practices (*samādhi*) which facilitate the cultivation of wisdom (*prajñā*) and which, in turn, serves to hone and enrich compassion's intentional content (Finnigan, 2017b).

Some Buddhist thinkers seem to advance a modified version of the virtue-based argument:

> Not killing or harming animals is a way to cultivate compassion. One should be compassionate. So, one should not kill or harm animals.

The modified virtue-based argument is susceptible to objection. Some argue that its first premise is fundamentally grounded in self-interest rather than a genuine concern for animals (Harris, 2000, 2006; Kieschnick, 2005; Cohen, 2013). How should we understand this

modified virtue-based argument in relation to the original? One possibility is to appeal to the justificatory/motivational distinction introduced earlier and argue that the original argument is properly justificatory and the modification offered simply to motivate the self-interested person. The truly compassionate person does not kill or harm animals out of a genuine concern for their welfare whereas the selfish person does so because they think it would bring some benefit to themselves; such as helping themselves to attain a good rebirth (AN 4.125, 126).

Karmic retribution arguments

Considerations of karma and reincarnation have historically played a central role in Buddhist ethical thought. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha assumed a cosmology of rebirth that is regulated by cosmic laws of karma which are driven, in turn, by moral action. To violate the Buddhist precepts is to act wrongly and thus be subject to karmic retribution in this life or some future life. The precise mechanism of karma is opaque and said to be known only to a Buddha. The Buddha suggests, however, that those who are cruel or violent will suffer similar treatment in a following life. Specifically, he taught that butchers and abattoir workers will, themselves, be slaughtered in their next life in the very same way that they slaughtered animals in this life (SN19).

Reference to karmic retribution serves a motivational rather than justificatory function in Buddhist thought. An action is wrong not because it produces negative karmic consequences. Rather:

> If one desires to avoid karmic retribution one should avoid wrong-doing. Since harming and killing animals are forms of wrong-doing, one should avoid harming and killing animals.

Interestingly, in the early Buddhist texts, karma is understood to be driven by the intentions that underlie, motivate or are expressed in action (Gethin, 1998; Gombrich, 2009). This

implies a potentially different justificatory ground to that assumed by the intrinsic-disvalue of suffering argument but potentially consistent with the virtue-based argument. One might argue that the morality of action is not grounded in the (intrinsically bad) suffering caused by killing or harming animals but, rather, in the intent expressed by that action.

Practical Application: Vegetarianism

In the previous section I rationally reconstructed five Buddhist arguments which aim to justify *ahiṃsā* in terms that include animals within the scope of moral concern. But what are their practical implications? Should one, for instance, refrain from eating meat? Can one keep pets? Ride horses? Should one refrain from medical experimentation on animals? And, what if those experiments produce results which bring great benefits to humans?

In this final section I will briefly consider one of these issues; vegetarianism. This is a controversial issue in the Buddhist context. Many Buddhists are not vegetarian. There is doctrinal disagreement about whether the Buddha, in fact, prohibited eating meat. There is philosophical disagreement about whether vegetarianism is entailed by the Buddha's teachings. And there are various intellectual, cultural and political influences on the transmission of Buddhism that impact on local practices. For example, the Chinese Buddhist tradition is almost definitively vegetarian and its intellectual history contains substantial reflection on the practice (Pu, 2014; Eichmann, 2016). I will limit myself to introducing the historical controversy as it arose in the classical Indian context and will survey some of the philosophical arguments that have been presented to address it.

Historical Background

The Buddha not only prohibited killing or harming animals, he also prohibited engaging in occupations that 'trade in meat' (AN5.176). In the Nikāyas, however, he did not prohibit eating meat or prescribe vegetarianism. There is even evidence that he may, himself, have eaten meat (AN8.187, MN 55). Indeed, a locus of scholarly dispute concerns whether his last

meal consisted of pork or mushroom (the Sanskrit term for his meal is *sūkara-maddava*, which translates as 'pig's delight', DN 16; see Wasson & O'Flaherty, 1982; Page, 1999; Phelps 2004). The Buddha was historically criticized for this apparent inconsistency by Jain philosophers, who argued that it was hypocritical for the Buddha to prohibit killing animals and occupations that involve killing animals but not prohibit the very practices that fuel those occupations and require that animals be killed. For the Jains, the principle of *ahiṃsā entails* vegetarianism (AN 4.187, Dundas, 1992; Flügel, 2006; Ulrich, 2007; Pu, 2014).

Several historical reasons have been given for why the Buddha did not prescribe vegetarianism in the Nikāyas. First, the Buddha's disciples were dependent on alms for their living. Some derive practical reasons from this fact; his disciples were unable to choose what they ate and so to deny them meat would create undue hardship (Walshe, 1995). Others present virtue-based reasons; for a disciple to reject meat placed in their begging bowls would evince ingratitude and a pious attachment to their diet (Harvey, 2000; Kaza, 2005). Yet others provide reasons of karmic retribution; for a disciple to reject meat placed in their begging bowls would deny the one who gave the meat the appropriate karmic merit (Horner, 1967; Stewart, 2010).

Second, some argue that the Buddha constrained rather than prohibited eating meat as a means of avoiding a schism amongst his disciplines. The Buddha's rival, Devadatta, explicitly asked the Buddha to prescribe vegetarianism. It is widely believed that his motivation was to split the Buddha's monastic community (Stewart, 2010; Pu, 2014). The Buddha responded by restricting his disciples to only eating meat that is clean in 'three respects'; i.e. "when it is not seen, heard or suspected [that the living being has been slaughtered for the bhikkhu]" (MN55). A monastic cannot eat the flesh of an animal that they in any way have reason to believe was intentionally killed for them. This is less onerous than

prohibiting eating meat entirely and arguably embodies a middle-way approach between abstention and profligacy.

It also implies a third reason for why the Buddha may not have prescribed vegetarianism; namely, it might reflect the view that the morality of actions is grounded in the intention rather than the outcome of what is done. Recall the karmic retribution argument and the observation that karma is driven by intentions. If a disciple's act of eating meat does not follow from an act of killing or harming an animal for the specific purpose of being eaten by that disciple, it might seem that the disciple does not accrue karmic retribution for eating that meat. And, since karmic retribution is tied to wrong-doing, it might then follow that they have done nothing wrong.

Doctrinal and Philosophical Arguments

There is doctrinal dispute about whether the Buddha's teachings in the Nikāyas reflects his final position on vegetarianism. Later Mahāyāna Buddhist thinkers argue that it does not. Mahāyāna is a Buddhist tradition that emerged in the early centuries CE. While it accepts the textual authority of the Nikāyas, it distinctively recognises additional texts or sūtras. The Laṅkāvatārasūtra (LV) presents the Buddha as explicitly arguing that Buddhists should be vegetarian. How is this apparent inconsistency in the Buddha's teachings reconciled? LV interprets the early permission to eat meat as merely a provisional step towards complete prohibition (Schmithausen, 2002; Kieschnick, 2005).

In addition to historical and doctrinal issues, there is contemporary philosophical disagreement about whether the Buddha's philosophical teachings entail that a Buddhist should be a vegetarian. The most direct philosophical arguments for this conclusion draw on the intrinsic-disvalue of suffering and desire-based arguments. Eating meat, in a modern society, indirectly contributes to the suffering of animals by sustaining an industry that causes them enormous suffering. Animals are like us in not wanting to suffer and would not choose

to suffer in this way if they were capable of choice. Whether we treat their interests as non-derivatively morally significant or defer to the intrinsic disvalue of suffering, either way it follows that we should not eat meat (Kaza, 2005; Gaziano & Lewis, 2013). One might also argue that, in a modern, industrial society, it would be rare for meat to be 'clean in three respects', given that almost any adult person educated in such a society will know, hear or have reason to suspect that the animal whose flesh is being eaten was intentionally killed to be eaten, was likely killed in an abattoir in a process of mass butchering and thus likely to have suffered in the process. One might object that there is no reason to think it was intentionally killed to be consumed *by any particular subject* and thus the meat could be clean *for them*. However, it remains the case that it was intentionally killed for *some* anonymous consumer to eat and so, insofar as the subject *is* some anonymous consumer, one might argue that they are co-responsible for its death. LV rejects this objection as erroneous philosophical reasoning that is, at bottom, motivated by a desire to eat meat.

Several virtue-based arguments are also advanced in favour of vegetarianism. Some argue that it is not compassionate to eat meat. In LV, it is reasoned that animals feel fear when threatened by a hunter with death and so, out of compassion for this kind of suffering, one should refrain from eating meat. LV also presents a version of the modified virtue-based argument, claiming that eating meat poses an obstacle to the development of loving-kindness (*maitri*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) (see also the Mahaparinirvāṇasūtra; Kapleau, 1981).

An interesting family of historical Buddhist arguments for vegetarianism appeal to considerations of rebirth. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha assumed a cosmology of rebirth according to which humans can be reborn as animals and animals as humans. Buddhists also typically assume that this cycle is infinitely long. From this, it is reasoned that at some point in the past all sentient beings must have been one's relative. Thus, to eat meat is to eat the present flesh of one's past mother, or father, or brother, or sister, or son, or daughter. Just as

one would not currently eat the flesh of one's mother, so one should not eat the flesh of our past mothers. To do so would be a form of cannibalism (Schmithausen, 2002). Some go further and infer that it is wrong to eat animals because they, like oneself and all future Buddhas, share the same nature or are elements of the same flesh. Eating meat is thus taken to be a form of autosarcophagy. (Angulimālasūtra; Ruegg, 1980; Gaziano & Lewis, 2013). LV also offers reasons of inconsistency with (a certain understanding of) the Buddhist doctrine of no-self: since you desire to approach all living beings as if they were yourself, you should not eat the flesh of a living being that has the same nature as yourself.

A related argument appeals to the idea of Buddha-nature. This notion is characterised in several different ways throughout the Buddhist tradition. According to the Tathāgatagarbha sūtra, Buddha-nature is the capacity to attain enlightenment and become a Buddha. This capacity is thought to exists in an embryonic state within all sentient beings (Harris, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002; Habito, 2016). Some argue from this that it is wrong to eat meat because it destroys the bodily receptacle of this precious capacity and thus dishonours the potential for awakening (Ruegg, 1980; Kapleau, 1981; Schmithausen, 2002; Kaza, 2005; Sevilla, 2010; Pu, 2014).

Finally, but not exhaustively, there is a small but growing family of contemporary arguments that appeal to the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), ignorance of which was identified by the Buddha as a cause of suffering. There is much historical scholarly debate about what this amounts to; Buddhist philosophers analyze this notion in substantially different ways. Nevertheless, versions of this idea are increasingly invoked to support new theories of Buddhist ecology and environmentalism. It is argued, for instance, that some version of Buddhist dependent origination might be understood as a precursor to contemporary analyses of ecological relations (Devall, 1990; James, 2007, 2013; Callicot, 2008). In these discussions, dependent

origination tends to be understood in one of two ways; either that (a) entities exist in causal relations, or (b) entities exist relationally or interdependently. The latter interpretation tends to be associated with Japanese and Chinese Buddhist traditions and the former with classical Indian schools of thought (Abhidharma, in particular), although the actual divide is not so neat. The latter interpretation is also more radical than the former. Causal relations hold between separate and distinct entities but to say that an entity exists relationally or interdependently denies their distinction and may even imply holism (James, 2003). It has been suggested that some version of this idea can support Buddhist arguments for vegetarianism (Kaza, 2005). While the details have yet to be worked out in the literature, there are several ways in which it could proceed. One might argue, for instance, that since everything exists as relational constituents of an ecological biosphere, if anything has intrinsic value, the entire system does. The modern, industrialized meat-eating industry causes significant ecological damage. Eating meat sustains such practices. So, one should not eat meat. One might also include a reference to the intrinsic badness of suffering and additionally argue that the ecological damage caused by such practices is bad because it directly and indirectly results in suffering to the biological entities that are relationally constituted by this system. Determining whether these arguments are plausible, however, would require further inquiry.

Conclusion

This article aimed to provide a philosophical overview of some of the central Buddhist positions on, and arguments regarding, the moral status of animals. Taking the early Indian Buddhist teachings as its point of reference, it rationally reconstructed five Buddhist arguments that aimed to justify the Buddhist notion of *ahiṃsā*, the precept not to kill or harm, in terms that include animals within the scope of moral concern. It also considered how versions of these arguments have been applied to address the issue of whether Buddhists

should be vegetarian. Debates regarding these issues are extensive in historical and contemporary Buddhist literature and are of increasing interdisciplinary interest. While it was beyond the scope of this article to provide a complete study of all the relevant issues, it hopefully provided an accessible philosophical introduction.

Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya
LV	Laṅkāvatārasūtra

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