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REGULAR PAPER

Wholesome Mind Ethics: A Buddhist Paradigm

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1 The Basic Paradigm

Buddhist ethics situates moral significance within the mental lives of living beings, and foregrounds mental actions as the key site for moral assessment. Mental actions may be deemed "wholesome" (Skt. *kuśala*) or "unwholesome" (*akuśala*)—that is, morally good or bad. Unwholesome mental actions are those that are characterized by mental defilements (*kleśa*), principally desire, aversion and delusion (*rāga*, *dveṣa*, and *moha*). Wholesome mental actions stand in opposition to unwholesome ones; they are characterized by non-desire, non-aversion and non-delusion (*arāga*, *adveṣa*, and *amoha*). In Buddhism's event-based mental ontology, a mental action is momentary; a flash of anger or a wish for revenge would count as an unwholesome mental action. But every mental moment is causally conditioned by those that precede it and every mental action conditions, in turn, those that succeed it. Mental series are thereby "perfumed" by recurring defilements, as when one repeatedly entertains an angry wish for revenge. A temporally-extended action series that we would normally count as *taking revenge* would have to consist in many, many individual unwholesome mental actions, as well as many unwholesome physical actions (caused by unwholesome mental actions, of course). There will also inevitably be neutral actions mixed in there (reaching into your pocket for the convenient exact change to pay for the gun, or whatever), and possibly some relatively wholesome ones ("Have a nice day!").

Morally significant mental actions have effects not only in the world, but crucially, in shaping the mind in which they took place. This is the view of *karma*: all morally significant mental actions condition the mind, whether positively or negatively. If a mental action positively conditions the mind, it creates "merit" (*puṇya*)—what we may euphemistically call "good karma." If it negatively conditions the mind, it creates "bad karma" (*pāpa*). The results of actions, bad or good, come in many forms, but one immediate karmic effect is the recursive generation of further defilements, or further non-defilements. Entertaining anger or acting on anger makes

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the mind more conducive to anger. Acting on a desire makes it more susceptible to that desire. Through cumulative karmic causality, mental actions build character.

Unwholesome mental states are experientially unpleasant, but that is not what makes them defilements; not all unpleasant experiences are unwholesome. Unwholesome qualities are distinguished by their damaging, distorting effect on the mind. The mind is like a complex machine, with countless interlocking parts. Defilements are dirt or grit that clogs up the works, causing the mind to decline in delicacy and precision. In fact, not only do defilements prevent the machinery from doing its work efficiently and accurately; they distort its operations and processes, causing it to let in ever more grit, in a vicious, self-destructive cycle. While the damage is caused by immoral actions, the process can be reversed by moral actions. Moral actions purify the mind.

To speak about how defilements affect the mind may make this sound a bit like consequentialism: The positive or negative results seem to be what makes the action good or bad. But it is not the karmic result that makes the mental state wholesome or unwholesome, but the *quality of mind itself*. Morality is in the *mode* of the mind in action: An undefiled mental action is good, a defiled mental action is bad. That's what morality is. Everything in ethics may be traced back to this distinction.

Defilements grow out of a mistaken view of the self. People continuously generate an interior narrative about their identity, their self, to which they are deeply attached. The construction and defense of this self-image is an ongoing activity of the basic drive the Buddha named "thirst" (*tṛṣṇā*). The defilements are enactments of this distorting, egoistic yearning. They delusively manifest the self-image as a stable, objectively valid reality, rather than as a temporary, conditioned mental construction. Once this is understood, there is no need for further evidence or argument to establish the intrinsically immoral nature of the defilements. They are mental qualities that it is just wrong to have. To say of them that they are defilements is to say that they are, by their nature, *to-be-abandoned*. This is somewhat occluded by taking the terms "desire," "aversion" and "delusion" at face value, when they are technical terms of a moral psychology. They are defensive projections of the imagined needs of the constructed self: They are self-gratifying cravings ("desire"), self-protecting fears ("aversion"), and self-deluding avoidance of harsh realities that might threaten the integrity of the self-image ("delusion").

Basic Buddhist psychology thus blends ethics into its description of the mind. The defilements are "thick concepts."[1] The degree to which the mind's intentions are imbued with the three defilements or their many subvarieties (*upakleśa*) determines the moral quality of mental karma, and thus all action. Of course, bodily and verbal actions are morally significant, but their moral quality is dependent upon the mental actions from which they follow, and whose qualities they reinforce in

[1] Buddhist Abhidharma philosophers deny the reality of any entities that are not ontologically simple. There is no need here to defend this view, but I will note that the present definition of defilements as "thick concepts" that describe morally valenced entities does not disqualify them from being ontologically simple. Entities can have multiple true descriptions—being blue and being six feet from me—without thereby multiplying their natures. Defilements are by their nature mental qualities that ought to be abandoned.

recursive cycles.[2] When a person's mind is overwhelmed by defilements, they are liable to perform powerfully negative actions like murder, theft, lying, and sexual misconduct. These actions are therefore considered evidence of moral violations in the mind. Restraint from such actions, and even more so, generally controlled, moral behavior, gives evidence of a mind that is *not* under the sway of the defilements.

This approach to morality explains why, for Buddhists, self-awareness stands at the center of moral cultivation and moral behavior. For, ordinary beings are severely deluded about their own minds, and therefore often fail to see how they ought to behave, both morally and for their own and others' benefit. An endemic refusal to accept things as they really are, because that reality is frightening or humbling to the constructed self, is ineluctably intertwined with all unscrupulous, unskillful, and unwholesome behavior. Yet Buddhists emphasize that it is possible (through Buddhist practice) to improve one's ability to *notice* the character of one's morally significant mental actions; and to notice the defilements is to see *that they are* defilements, that they are *to-be-abandoned*. This does not necessarily eliminate the defilements directly, but it fosters the moral motivation to do so. Further trainings help to disentangle the causal knots that promote selfishness and self-delusion, and to repair the mind's tendencies toward compassion and equanimity. This is what Jay Garfield calls Buddhist "moral phenomenology"[3]: Improvements in perspective enact moral improvements. In advanced meditative states, the defilements are eliminated entirely. The aspirational ideal, finally, is a Buddha, who is capable of seeing things as they are, without imposing any self-generated, selfish constructions at all—and being, as an ineluctable consequence of this awareness, a supreme moral exemplar.

Concern about the moral status of mental actions lies behind all Buddhist thought about the mind's activities, qualities and contents. A key problematic that a Buddhist moral perspective draws into every consideration, then, is that of how a given set of ideas or actions operate in the mind, how the mind may be captured by them, and how it is changed by entertaining them. The question Buddhist ethics raises about any given view is not simply (and sometimes not at all) whether there is evidence of its truth or falsity, but how the view functions in relation to delusive self-constructions. A deep association with defilements (arising from them, enhancing them) is a morally significant reason to reject a view. It is also an epistemically significant reason to doubt a view; after all, the central defilement is delusion—i.e., self-deception.[4] Buddhist thought takes seriously the prevalence of subconscious biases in reasoning and conceptualization. An evident association with the defilements suggests

[2] Actions that *cause* the defilements are also those that are "*to-be-abandoned*," and those that eliminate them are *to-be-cultivated*. See *Majjhima Nikāya* 114, "*Sevitabbasevitabba Sutta*: To Be Cultivated and Not To Be Cultivated." In Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. 1995. *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 913–924. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

[3] Garfield, Jay L. 2010. "What Is It like to Be a Bodhisattva? Moral Phenomenology in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*. 33.1–2: 333–357.

[4] The term "delusion" (often "ignorance") is somewhat misleading as a translation here, because of course one can fail to know something for reasons that are not morally significant. But *avidyā* is a moral defilement.

that one is likely to be deceived (to deceive oneself) into thinking that the view in question is more plausible than it is. The Buddha spoke of the danger of attachment to views; the mind is liable to be caught in a "thicket of views" of its own making. For this reason, the moral psychology associated with the acceptance of any given view is always relevant. Views that are morally viable are those that are reliably associated with direct antidotes to selfish self-deception, such as universal compassion and non-violence. In addition, the fact that all ideas are suspect motivates a preference for concreate and local, for-all-intents-and-purposes reasoning—reasoning that can most safely be employed without identification, commitment or attachment, as a merely pragmatic device. Abstractions and essences need to prove their utility before a mind is justified to adopt them.

This approach to ethics is not widely discussed by philosophers today. From any of the more prevalent moral perspectives, Buddhism's emphasis on the mind as the locus of moral value might seem to be in danger of myopic solipsism, and the crucial Buddhist idea that the moral quality of mental events is in some sense self-evident—that, to see the mind clearly is to know and motivate right action—is likely to appear to be Buddhism's own form of self-deluding fantasy. Let us turn, then, to address these and other related objections. Buddhist ethics as stated here must meet these challenges if it is to appear plausible.

2 Objections and Replies

The following questions and answers are an attempt to articulate and respond to some of the most likely, immediate objections. They add some body to the framework presented above, but they warrant more detailed treatment. The purpose here is only to suggest the direction such conversations might go, and thereby to indicate the plausibility and promise of the Buddhist view.

Q1. Buddhism is a religious tradition thousands of years old, and its adherents' ostensible method for establishing their position—trusting in the introspective awareness of a sage—is unscientific, to say the least. The fact that later adepts are widely believed to have repeated this introspective success is hardly more convincing. Religious traditions shape people's expectations and interests, which leads to deception and self-deception. Trust in sagely introspection is not a reliable belief-forming mechanism.

A1. The epistemology of introspection deserves separate treatment, but for the purposes of this essay, we are not claiming anything on authority. Many Buddhists do accept the authority of the Buddha, his disciples and those who claim to speak for them. But the position here makes no appeals to authority. Any references to Buddhist sources are intended to clarify, not justify, the ideas. Of course, the fact that it is different from previous views is not a good reason to ignore it. But I accept that if it lacked a strong ground of corroborating evidence, the Buddhist view of the mind might be of cultural and historical interest, but it could not claim a right to our assent. This is, in fact, in line with Buddhist teachings, which suggest that followers should judge a view not according to authority or to lineage or even to clever arguments, but according to their moral perception. If people who follow the tradition

exhibit freedom from moral defilements, that is evidence of the excellence of the tradition.

Q2. This seems like a very simple, restricted view of morality. Given the complexity of moral life, isn't it rather obscure and arbitrary, and perhaps reductionistic, to say that greed, hatred and delusion—all selfish—account for all morality?

A2. Although there is simplicity to the notion that moral significance may always be assessed through close attention to occurrent mental qualities, in fact, Buddhist ethical considerations can be quite complex. Buddhist discussions of morality cover a wide range of perspectives and display traits of all three of the major modern theories of normative ethics: deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics.

Buddhist monastics take lifetime vows that govern their actions at every level, adopting hundreds of rules from not killing or having sex, to speaking only the truth, to precise norms of comportment and dress. Lay Buddhists also take vows in shorter lists, but extend their vows for short periods of time to gain merit on specific calendar days. Life as a Buddhist is governed by vows, and to break the rules is a violation of "morality" (*śīla*). This resembles deontology.

Buddhists understand the world to be governed by the karmic law of cause and effect. The moral significance of our actions impresses itself upon our minds, and we experience positive or negative results as a direct result of what we do. Traditional Buddhism teaches that after death we are reborn into a body commensurate with the moral significance of our actions—as an animal, as a rich or poor person, as a god or a hell being. Accumulating the right kinds of actions can also lead to liberation from suffering. Many of the right kinds of actions involve refraining from harming others, and working to liberate them from suffering. The value of actions is thus assessed according to their causal implications for the increase or reduction of suffering for oneself and others. This resembles consequentialism.

At the center of Buddhist ethics stands an indisputable moral exemplar: The Buddha. He told stories of his many previous lifetimes as an *aspiring* Buddha, called a "bodhisattva," during which time he cultivated excellence in generosity, patience, fortitude, mental concentration, equanimity and other virtues. These practices culminated during his last lifetime, when he attained unexcelled, perfect awakening to become a Buddha, gathered students into a community, and detailed for them a "path" to replicate his awakening. Although ordinary people cannot reasonably hope to become a full Buddha in this lifetime, the qualities that lead to Buddhahood—the qualities of a bodhisattva—are recommended for everyone. To become a "Buddhist" one takes refuge in the Buddha, his teachings and his community, which means that one dedicates oneself to these "refuges," whose excellences are acknowledged as the best. This resembles virtue ethics.

Premodern Buddhists never tried to work any of these perspectives into a systematic account of Buddhist ethics. Rather, ethical theorizing in Buddhism is to be found in Buddhist psychology and path literature, which describes how to purify and transform the mind. This is because the above reflections of modern ethical systems can be readily explained under the paradigm here proposed, according to which ethics is grounded in an assessment of qualities present in mental actions.

Q3. If this mental structure is ostensibly self-evident once viewed with dispassion, why isn't the view more widely known? In short, what justifies this view, as

against any of the many other ways of understanding the mind, the world and the good?

A3. There is very strong corroboration for the Buddhist view under consideration from modern psychology, which has long understood that bad behavior grows from denial and avoidance—what Buddhism highlights as the key defilement of ignorance or self-deception. If even a significant portion of human moral failings could be attributed to avoidance, that would make room for the Buddhist at the table: We would have to acknowledge the insightful contributions of the Buddhist psychological perspective. In fact, there is reason to suspect that the vast majority (if not the full complement) of human behaviors considered antisocial and damaging to oneself and others—from murder, theft, abuse, manipulative lying and other harmful speech all the way down to subtler failings such as interpersonal insensitivity—stem directly or indirectly from this mental failing.

To put this in current psychological terminology, psychopathology results from "unprocessed" trauma. Maladaptive processes of emotion suppression, thought suppression, and avoidant coping—attempts to avoid and distract oneself from difficult realities—fail to purge anxieties, and instead establish misplaced "fight-or-flight" stress, which leads to emotional reactivity. Emotional reactivity is the quintessence of what Buddhists call "unskillful" action, action without proper thought and self-awareness. After bad behavior has been triggered, self-righteous self-justification narratives are constructed, which perpetuate the failure of self-awareness. Modern therapies emphasize the importance of facing up to difficult truths, experiencing difficult emotions, acknowledging and processing them, in order to develop self-understanding. Buddhist-inspired "mindfulness" practices have consequently become standard supplements to a wide range of psychotherapeutic treatments.

This convergence is empirical evidence of the truth of the Buddhist position that self-delusion (denial) is the key moral impediment, which is the complement to the view that to see the mind clearly is to know and motivate right action. Psychology does not ordinarily speak in the language of morality, as Buddhism does. But both psychology and Buddhism say that if you want to know why people engage in problematic actions, the answer is in the mind—and not just anywhere, but almost always in self-serving, delusive avoidance.

But of course, we must be cautious: Psychology may be a "religion" that happens to share its worldview with Buddhist modernism. The current replication crisis in psychology underlines this possibility, and calls into question the objectivity of the mental picture painted here. Yet the convergences between Buddhism and modern psychology would still be evidence against the claim that the picture is arbitrary, or that other modes of ethical thinking are more "natural."

Q4. Don't people often know exactly what they're doing, and choose to do something that harms others for their own benefit? That may be selfish, but it's not delusory.

A4. This may be the most difficult and counter-intuitive aspect of the Buddhist view. Moral failings are expressions of psychological illness. There are no exceptions.

From a Buddhist perspective, when a person knows that what they're doing is wrong but they do it anyway, they are acting on a cognitive and/or emotional

distortion. For instance, to the extent that they consider the basis for a selfish choice—their own person, their own interests—to be more important or more significant than the person or persons whose interests are negatively impacted by their action, they must deny their own awareness of the emotions of others. They may think, incorrectly, that their action will not have a negative effect on themselves. But by denying their own awareness that their experiences are parallel and morally equivalent to those of others (an equivalence that they perceive directly), they precipitate an unresolved cognitive dissonance—tension in the mind—which generates anxiety and depression. Furthermore, even minor moral actions have a recursive effect upon the mind that facilitates repetition. The self-assessment that an infraction is minor generally grounds itself on false confidence in its solitary, independent enactment. But all actions participate in the ongoing maintenance of dispositions and identities. The arbitrary isolation of an action's significance enacts an occlusion of self-awareness, which again precipitates cognitive dissonance.

Such processes occur at the minute scale of individual mental moments, and they are only recognized as pathological when their recurrence interferes with a person's life. Nonetheless, no ordinary person is free of biased cognitive distortions; people are all, to greater and lesser degrees but always significantly, unhealthy. This is a much broader diagnosis than modern psychology typically advocates. Today, "normal" selfishness is not considered a mental illness, nor are ordinary levels of anxiety and depression. But the difference is only over what is considered "healthy," not what is considered normal or what ordinarily occurs in the mind. Something is not liable to be called a psychological illness unless or until it makes an individual appear in a therapist's office as a problem to be addressed. This means that what is average is healthy, almost by definition. Buddhism's approach is to acknowledge that people have different capacities for moral and psychological development, but this does not mean that most people are declared to be fine just as they are. If this seems "overly demanding," notice that this is a pragmatic position, which makes it only as demanding as you want it to be. You don't have to be a moral saint, but if you don't want to be a moral saint you're not going to be told you're as good as any reasonable person should want to be.

Normal selfishness, by the way, is linked to normal anxiety and depression. It is well established that the ordinary "resting state" of the mind—the so-called "default mode," in which no task is undertaken beyond mind-wandering, daydreaming or rumination—is at least mildly unpleasant. Too much rumination about the past is depression; too much rumination about the future is anxiety. Rumination is intrinsically unpleasant because we are unable to fully protect ourselves from cognitive dissonance, from noticing that reality fails to meet up with our idealized self-construction. We are displeased by our own mental state, and we continually throw up false constructions to account for, and in the hopes of alleviating, this dissatisfaction. Modern psychology generally assumes that human sanity, to say nothing of happiness, requires that we do something to distract ourselves from rumination. Ideally, we should find ourselves in tasks that produce a state of "flow," in which the mind is fully engaged. Buddhist psychology observes that this works as far as it goes, but generally a flow state is only attainable in a limited number of pursuits. Without inner mental regulation that is capable of holding the self-construction's

yearnings in abeyance, one's happiness—and, more importantly, one's moral behavior—changes in dependence upon changing circumstances and activities.

Q5. If the normal operation of the mind, and just entertaining ideas, can be morally wrong, won't that mean we aren't in control of our own morally significant actions?

A5. Everyone who has tried Buddhist concentration meditation knows we do not have direct manual control over our mental actions. The mind follows preconditioned pathways, no matter how much you try to control it. (If you'd like to see this for yourself, just try to hold your attention as best you can, for five minutes, on the sensations the breath makes going in and out of your nose.) But meditation would be useless if we had no control whatsoever. We do seem to have some choices, and over time patterns can be reshaped. We may be said to be responsible for how our minds act in general, because of how we have allowed them to be shaped, and in specific instances when we choose particular pathways. But we are indeed, for the most part, working within quite limited parameters. This recognition motivates compassion, and often counters justifications for punitive approaches.

Q6. Is there really no one who's plain evil? Aren't some people just impervious to appeals to conscience and connection?

A6. There are people who are beyond the reach of Buddhist or Buddhist-like methods of moral reform. Sociopathy is real. It is a genuine scourge. But it is an illness. It is possible to imagine a cure. Societies need to reveal and disempower sociopaths, but this is not accomplished by convincing sociopaths to act morally; they cannot. Lacking the ability to perceive the emotions of others and to assess the moral nature of their own mental actions, a sociopath is amoral. Furthermore, it is not sensible to shape your theory of morality around those who are incapable of learning from it. Far better to focus on what can be done for those who can, but don't, choose the moral path.

Q7. The Buddhist approach to ideas makes their value independent of their truth. Aren't true ideas better than false ones?

A7. Buddhists have adopted a range of metaphysical positions, but a consistent theme across traditions is the pragmatic preference for ideas that serve the moral project of helping living beings advance on the path. From a practical perspective, true ideas are not always better than false ones. If you know correctly that the Earth is round, but you also have a false belief that the Earth is 300 miles around, you might leave home and expect to return in a month by walking straight. You'd do better thinking the earth is flat.

At the same time, knowledge and its pursuit are recommended for their pragmatic utility and praised if they are able to yield wholesome states of mind. Knowledge of the relations between causes and results—especially knowledge of how the defilements cause negative results for oneself and others—yields wholesome moral motivation. The awareness that sees the reality of the mind, called *prajñā*, usually translated as "wisdom," is a very special kind of knowledge-event that leads causally to the complete elimination of the defilements. That's as wholesome as you can get.

Everything else is relative to our needs and goals. The knowledge that people tend to succumb to selfishly defensive aversion in response to trauma can be used to generate empathy and motivate the provision of care, replacing unproductive,

combative posturing. But that knowledge can also be used to aggravate, manipulate and channel other people's anger towards one's own selfish ends.

Q8. How do you translate this idea that morality is in the mind into the ordinary moral decision-making we engage in on a regular basis? What do I do, for instance, about the fat man on the bridge?

A8. Buddhist ethics acknowledges that there are important junctures where we need to act in order to bring about better and worse consequences. But no morally significant event is normatively independent of the mental states of the actors engaging in those events. On the contrary, the way to know whether it is right to push the fat man off the bridge is to observe your mind as you do it. There are stories in Buddhist literature of advanced bodhisattvas engaging in murder to save large groups. (More often, bodhisattvas find a way to sacrifice their own lives for others.) But the appealed-to method of action-determination in these instances is not a rational consequentialist calculus; rather, the advanced bodhisattva always acts on a distinct kind of mental state, a distinctive kind of intention called *bodhicitta*, which is the intention to bring about the complete and perfect enlightenment of all beings.

Buddhist moral cultivations place great emphasis on learning to introspect and hold off from questionable actions wherever possible—as Śāntideva recommends, "remain like a block of wood"—in the hopes of preventing actions that grow from the defilements.[5] That's not a license for cowardice (see: bodhisattvas sacrificing themselves), but it does insist upon a morally viable motivation before acting. If you can't kill without hatred, don't do it. If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

Where situations do require action, especially quick action, what you do will of necessity depend upon the mental dispositions you have cultivated for yourself up to that point—or what you have allowed to fester, as the case may be. Buddhism is sensitive to the fact that moral decisions are not, for that reason, really decided for the most part in the immediate, consequential circumstances. When the moment hits, the intention is rarely under direct manual control. Moral agency must be intentionally conditioned during contemplative review of past actions and imaginative projection of future-oriented aspirations and vows.

To return specifically to the fat man on the bridge, the moral distinction between pulling the lever and pushing the fat man reflects a legitimate difference in perceived karmic significance, that is, a difference in perception of the act's likely consequences for the future of your mind. When you notice that you're going to suffer psychological damage as a result of a given action, that's very likely moral perception. You might reasonably conclude that deciding to throw the switch could lead to some degree of guilt about killing a person who would otherwise not die, but pushing someone off a bridge to his death would predictably lead to flashbacks and nightmares. But why might that be likely to happen? Possibly because in order to generate the physical act of pushing the fat man to his death, you'd need to call up powerful negative emotions: anger and hatred, coupled with denial of the self-evident reality

[5] See verses 50–53 of chapter 5, "The Guarding of Awareness." In Crosby, Kate & Andrew Skilton. 1998. *Śāntideva: The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 38. New York: Oxford University Press.

that the fat man didn't deserve it. If you could do it coolly, it might be right; but since you probably can't, it's probably not.

Q9. Isn't *not* doing something just as morally significant as *doing* something? Why should moral preference be given to restraint?

A9. Of course in the abstract, there is no normative force to *not* doing something. I could call killing, "restraining from not killing." But in the operation of the mind, the qualities of restraint and heedfulness are recommended with respect to actions that would otherwise be instantaneous or habitual. Restraint is the process by which we move what Kahneman calls "fast brain" processes onto the slow tracks, which allows us to consider a wider context and notice the various intentions to be served before deciding to act.

Q10: If we are morally bound to keep all views at a distance, especially those with which we are likely to identify, does this mean that you think philosophical ethics is itself delusory, perhaps dangerously so?

A10: It depends what you are planning to do with your philosophical ethics. Many philosophers will admit that, although there are certainly identifiable positions on how to live and act, philosophy itself does not tell you what to do in any given situation. There are too many rational considerations. Still, philosophical ethics might help you learn to identify and reject the worst mistakes of distorted egoistic thinking, which are the very things that a Buddhist ethical perspective takes to be the most salient, and perhaps the only, useful targets for ethical training. That's I think, again, a surprising convergence. The best moral argument for ethical inquiry might be that in spite of appearing but actually failing to resolve issues and cases, in fact philosophical ethics *is* capable of helping us learn to suspend extreme attachment to any one position, by learning to recognize and articulate multiple sides to any complex issue.

This does not mean that we should discourage philosophers from the usual practice of articulating how particular positions seem to them. On the contrary, we can learn about our own thinking by attending carefully to how it unfolds. And, our thinking can be edified by a community of inquiry dedicated to clarifying ideas and highlighting distortions and biases. It may be useful to distinguish between the responsibility of an individual with respect to any given view's activities in their own mind on the one hand (which would include the responsibility to hold it in abeyance), and the epistemic responsibilities of membership in a community of inquiry on the other (which may be to go as deeply into a given topic as time allows). An individual who is part of a community of inquiry has responsibilities incumbent upon all such members to apply the norms of the community's approach to knowledge. (It might be a form of lying not to do so.) At the same time, we are capable, as individuals, of engaging with ideas at a distance. Indeed, the ability to maintain mental detachment from any given view might well improve one's ability to deploy logical arguments, as contemporary philosophical training sometimes emphasizes. It is not irrelevant to the analysis of ideas, though, to notice the tendency of specific mental defilements to arise in association with a given set of ideas or arguments. Such introspective awareness might be fruitfully added to the norms and expectations of communities of philosophical inquiry.

A Buddhist approach would emphasize, then, the contingent nature of philosophical inquiry, to keep it from simply fueling self-delusion. After all, even attentive thinkers are mistaken to imagine they and their community of inquiry can achieve a purely scientific approach to their own views. Concepts and views, for Buddhists, are not the kind of thing you can adopt without any bias at all. And the sad truth is, the better the researcher, the more subtle and agile their self-justifying, self-deluding reasons. Philosophers looking into the depths for "that whiteness" of truth (as Robert Frost puts it in "For Once Then, Something") must be careful not to be fooled by their own reflection in the "shining, surface picture." That white whale can be a devastating obsession.

Q11. Can we really know that our mental actions are good? Does no one go to hell for good intentions? What about cultures where people practice mass slaughter or slavery without compunction?

A11. This is a complex problem and here I can only touch the surface. Buddhists and psychologists agree that people often do not know the truth of their own minds. People clearly convince themselves that they are well-intentioned. This is why it's called "delusion."

The relevant questions are first, whether cultures are capable of what I'll call "total capture" of the mind (with apologies to Erving Goffman), such that there is no cognitive dissonance, and second, whether there is enough evidence of total capture to undermine the Buddhist claim that evident moral failures such as killing without compunction depend upon self-delusion. Let me unpack that.

Recall that I've claimed that perceived reality poses a constant challenge to our ignorance-based self-constructions, and this produces cognitive dissonance that typically arises in ordinary resting states of the mind, leading to anxiety and depression. The Buddhist's proposed solution to this is to "process" emotions and conceptual constructs through introspective self-awareness, which illuminates defilements and allows the self-construction to be held in abeyance and modified. The anxiety and depression that ordinarily result from an awareness of the threat to the projected self is replaced with (comparatively) equanimious acceptance. There may, however, be an alternative, "cultural" solution, whereby doubts about the self-construction are sufficiently suppressed or countered to preclude the experience of cognitive dissonance. I'll call it a "total capture" of the mind by a culture or subculture if it persistently prevents even semi-conscious self-doubt. If that is possible over the long term, then a person so captured could engage in immoral actions without ill *intent*, or, to describe the same situation differently, could act on defilements without experiencing them as wrong, as mental qualities necessarily *to-be-abandoned*. That would suggest that Buddhist ethics as I have described it is incomplete, because it fails to explain why some immoral actions are immoral. If such "total capture" is widespread, that might call into question the claim that the defilements, when seen, are seen to be defilements, along with the complementary claim that immoral intent is self-evident.

The question to ask, then, is whether there are cultures of killing or enslavement that are capable of total capture of their members' minds, over the long term. This is, I think, an undecided empirical question.

Clearly there are people who kill or enslave and never admit to doubt about these activities. This is not in dispute. We are asking about the psychological health of these individuals. If the question is to be decided in the affirmative, we need evidence of people who are not psychologically damaged by trauma, and not persistently handicapped by drugs, hunger or sleep deprivation, who hold fast to a totalizing cultural system that promotes widespread murder and/or enslavement about which it successfully prevents self-doubt.

Warrior cultures are likely prospects. The matter-of-fact acceptance of the need for killing evident in the *Iliad* (and the magnificence in its depiction of each gory death) is often taken as evidence of the unselfconscious appreciation of heroic killing in ancient Greece. I think this is a very bad reading of the *Iliad*, but even if you take it that way, the *Odyssey* tells the opposite story, of the warrior's unending alienation. The *Mahābhārata*, certainly, depicts a warrior culture just a hair different from Homer's, where the warrior's tragedy is explicitly located in the necessity of killing. Modern soldiers who return home from combat *without* psychological trauma are the exception, suspicious for what moral deficiencies might have made them so impervious. In any event, it remains an open question whether murderous cultures exist that don't either damage their members or simply manipulate damage that's already there.

The most pressing and powerful remaining objection, then, is probably North Atlantic slavery, a deeply immoral practice in which countless people willingly participated for centuries. Could a psychologically healthy person be a morally unselfconscious chattel slaver? The Buddhist would have to argue that no, such a person would experience their choices as evil. That wouldn't prevent them from enacting them, but it would not pose a challenge to the Buddhist thesis that introspection is capable of perceiving the moral nature of actions. So, did North Atlantic slavers sleep soundly?

If they did, it is because they were under the influence of persistent forms of abstract theorizing that Buddhists would reject as self-deluding deformations: Prominent examples are Biblical defenses of slavery and racist eugenics. Yet who would deny today that both of these arguments gained ascendancy specifically for their ability to salve the mental anguish of slavers' self-delusions? Such arguments "protest too much," and give evidence of moral damage. Biblical and scientific defenses of racism share in providing slavers with a ritualistic, if rationalized, performative off-loading of responsibility. But significant cultural machinery was necessary to keep these ideologies afloat, and they fought hard against numerous challengers. (As soon as there was chattel slavery, there was abolitionism.) Both arguments are also quite abstract, quite removed from the practical, from the evidence of the senses. Major civilizational movements designed to satisfy self-serving delusions must shield their members from encounters with reality. This may have temporary benefits, but it gains them only by facilitating distrust of the empirical. The continuing American movements that deny the fruits of empirical methodologies—from revisionist history ("The Lost Cause") to anti-evolution, to skepticism about mask-wearing—are a "karmic" social result of slavers' need (and their progeny's need) to distract themselves from their self-evident moral failures. If any North Atlantic slavers slept soundly, they did so at great expense (the white whale, again).

Q12. Wait, if you're judging moral actions relativistically based on individuals' mental states, how do you justify using mass murder or slavery as a test of moral failure?

A12. This is my morally pragmatic starting-point. Even if we may have different views about what makes something right or wrong, we should all agree that slavery and genocide are wrong. If you're not willing to anti-up this much, I won't play with you. As I say above, it's a waste of time to argue ethics with sociopaths. I am prepared to have my norms challenged, but it's not worth considering an ethical system that has room for genocide or slavery. At that point, you're no longer doing ethics.

Q13. Isn't enlightenment, or the Buddhist teachings, just another form of "total capture" of the mind?

A13. The Buddhist approach encourages suspension of attachment to all views, including Buddhist ones. The Buddha analogized his teachings to a raft that can be used to cross a river. After you've crossed the river, you don't carry the raft with you as you continue on your journey. I hypothesize that no system of ideas that succeeds in anything close to "total capture" can do so while it is acknowledged to be a merely practical tool that is useful for all intents and purposes, but ultimately needs to be tossed aside. This kind of pragmatism prevents the mind from fooling itself into adopting genocide or slavery.

Q14. But does Buddhist meditation really work as a moral cultivation? There are prominent examples of people who engage in extensive Buddhist practices, become widely known for their ability to discern the character of their mind and teach others to do so as well, and then turn out still to be engaging in corrupt, selfish behaviors. There are Buddhist nationalists who engage in genocidal ethnic cleansings.

A14. Just because a practice is promoted by a Buddhist tradition does not mean it is a moral silver bullet. And even generally beneficial practices can lead to abuses and overdoses. The purpose of this essay is to articulate the ethical framework, so here is not the place to assess the evidence and plausibility of moral benefits accruing from specific Buddhist practices. Still, if strong empirical evidence emerges to show that moral improvement—understood as the diminution of damaging intentions rooted in selfish self-delusion—is not possible, that would be a significant challenge to Buddhist moral claims. Yet for moral training understood as methodical practice that leads to greater social integration, improvement in interpersonal relations, trustworthiness, productivity, refraining from committing crimes, etc.—the conclusion of the current psychological community is that yes, Buddhist meditation can be extremely useful. We may distinguish, then, between Buddhist practices directed toward moral improvement that have an empirical basis, and those that claim Buddhist pedigree but are not readily falsifiable. The fact that some *are* empirically verified adds some prior probability to claims around those that are not, but the general picture here does not require that we run ahead of the evidence.

In any event, Buddhist practices work differently for different people, and for some they surely facilitate deception or self-deception. Furthermore, moral training is not necessarily the appropriate prescription for everyone. Moral failings are expressions of mental ailments, but not all mental ailments are moral.

Q15: The idea that all we have to do is free our minds of "defilements" means that we are basically good! That seems to go against a lot of evidence.

A15: Buddhism says that people are beginninglessly deluded, so empirical evidence of widespread selfishness is not a challenge. Buddhists believe optimistically that the problem can be solved, not that we have reason to expect that everyone is likely to be cured. Saying that people are basically good is really just saying that people are not essentially bad. There is an attainable state of non-distorted equilibrium, equivalent to health in the body.

Still, this is a falsifiable, empirical claim. Traditional Buddhism holds that nirvana is literally *unconditioned*, which seems like a claim of some kind of transcendent state. But one common sense way to explain this is as an absence: Nirvana is the absence of defilements, and the claim is that this absence persists, without need of conditioning, after enlightenment. From a more naturalistic perspective, we could say nirvana is ostensibly a quality of the mind/brain system—a system that is dependent upon ongoing physiological supports, but whose new equilibrium will never again generate defilements. Still, from an empirical perspective it may turn out that no one attains a state of complete and total liberation. Even the Buddha seems to have continued meditating regularly after his liberation. Maybe nirvana requires maintenance.

Q16: Buddhists claim that the self is a delusion, but Buddhist psychological morality is solipsistically focused on the betterment of the self. It is a personal journey, rather than an outward-facing shared moral project. Yet what's truly important, truly meaningful, must be something greater than oneself. How can Buddhism evaluate social and political actions?

A16: Buddhist moral thinking is focused where it can be put into practice by an individual—namely, in the mind. The relation between individual moral actions and larger collective ones is concrete: Every defiled intention is morally significant, and many individual intentions are responsible when a collective project moves forward; but institutions, systems and groups themselves do not have minds that are capable of acting with intent. They are machines.

Traditional Buddhism provides clear guidance for the ethics of personal actions, and strategies for facilitating communal harmony in small groups. For larger groups, the Buddha considered both disunity (he considered negotiations between clans) and monarchy (specifically, kings). A king is an individual with a mind, which means he can introspect to assess the quality of his intentions. Buddhist kings are advised to act justly, without anger, and to have compassion for their subjects, to consider their welfare above their own. In addition, though, as governor, the king has a responsibility to consider his subjects at a second level of intervention, which is their moral welfare. It is beneficial, for instance, for a king to establish fair weights and measures, so that his subjects will be encouraged toward honesty, as well as fair punishments for crimes, in order to "show the results of karma."[6] Perhaps surprisingly, the Buddha commends the moral edification that arises for the viewer of a criminal's

[6] This is a quotation from the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sūtra* cited in Embree, Ainslie T. ed. 1988. *Sources of Indian Tradition*. Vol. 1, 184. New York: Columbia University Press.

deserved punishment by torture.[7] Conversely, government policies and actions that lead to people's bad behavior are judged unskillful. Such advice targets the individual mind of the king as the singular locus of judgement for policies that affect large numbers of subjects, but it also envisions a system of government that is better or worse according to how much it helps each individual attain moral self-awareness.

What the Buddha perhaps did not envision was a world in which many people share the responsibility to intend, speak and act *on behalf of* the large collective: a democracy. In a democracy, the government purports to enact a *collective* will, which is a kind of intention that is not traceable to any given mind. But under Buddhist ethics as described above, collective actions are not properly moral, because collectives do not have minds. To be clear, each individual can in principle determine the degree to which they are acting morally when *advocating* a given view. Institutions and governments cannot intend to help or harm beings, or condition their minds (they can't intend anything), but they *can* enact observably harmful results; and people with a stake in those institutions often internalize and thereby enact the intentional stances of their institutions. But in a democracy (or a partnership or large corporation), different people have, and are expected to have, different understandings of policies. This is an area where I believe traditional Buddhist ethics is indeed lacking, and can benefit from creative construction.

Elsewhere, I attempt to clarify and develop an approach to this issue by applying Buddhist karmic thinking at the level of societies. I argue that all social products, like language itself (their primogenitor), work to shape intentions within the minds of human beings. They do this largely by "karmically" preserving prior intentions, whose imprints are recast in the minds of their participants and advocates. This karmic understanding of society urges the recognition of how present identities and social formations continually re-enliven past biases and distortions, and how present intentions shape the structures that will condition future minds.

Q17: Separating the institution from the intention allows for some precision about moral responsibility, but if a cultural form that is the result of moral wrongs isn't wrong in itself, does that mean you can enjoy a Gaugin painting (for instance) without being culpable for his exoticization and sexual exploitation of underage girls?

A17: The answer, I would submit, is that what you're really wondering is whether your mind inherits the negative actions of the artist when you experience the painting. This is not an abstract question; it is a matter of empirical, observable fact whether your mind participates in exploitive craving as you appreciate the work. That's what it means to suggest that you are morally culpable in enjoying the art. The answer is in your mind and in our analysis of what the art does in your mind, as a conditioning factor for your intentions. The question becomes: Is it possible, or likely, that someone who appreciates Gaugin's work does so without replicating, in their minds, his exploitative exoticization (or whatever)? The answer will not be cut and dried. Karma is inconceivably complex, and we may have ten thousand thoughts about a Gaugin painting. How many of them are worse than the thoughts we'd have

[7] *Majjhima Nikāya* 130, "*Devadūta Sutta*: The Divine Messengers." In Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, *Middle-Length Discourses*, 1029–37.

without it? It may be impossible to know, but at least we can say what we're talking about when we speak of the moral consequences of the artwork.

Notice, however, that what I'm calling the modern viewer's "replication" of Gaugin's misdeeds is not exact repetition or literal culpability. It is just a new bad intention. And personal experience and contextual framing make a great difference in what a given stimulus causes to arise in the mind. These particulars are in play when we wish to speak of separating the art from the artist. We should, furthermore, distinguish the mental conditioning arising from the experience of the art itself from the broader social results of seeking it out, purchasing it, or otherwise promoting the art of a given artist. One may have strong reasons to reject the work, whether by virtue of how the art itself affects public conversations, by virtue of what the artist symbolizes, or any number of other considerations.

Although the details would take us far afield, a similar analysis may be made, mutatis mutandis, of the moral significance of inheriting social and economic benefits from past and ongoing structural inequities.

Q18: What's truly important must be ultimately true, not a delusion or a removal of a delusion.

A18: Buddhists think we have too much confidence in our ability to discern complex moral truths, and we pay too little attention to the surface reality of moral goods. Buddhism sometimes seems childishly simplistic in its moral affirmations, but given our tendencies to self-delusion, we have reason to be suspicious of complexity in ethics. It's better not to be hostile, both because it's obviously unpleasant and because hostility distorts our thinking. That's enough!

Q19: Still, it's altogether too simple. Are you going to say that the whole of morality is encompassed by what ordinary people or even exceptional people have in their minds? What does it matter what's in your mind?

A19: What else? Moral decisions are human decisions. Moral actions are human actions. I'm saying "human" here, but of course most Buddhists also attribute moral significance to actions performed by ghosts, animals and gods. Personally, I suspect you need a neocortex. In any case, everything of moral significance must be attributed to a mind, acting with purpose. Plenty of things in the world are beneficial, beautiful, auspicious, or otherwise terrific, but not morally good. When we speak of morality, we're speaking of how people act.

Q20: What about pure evil?

A20: Supernatural evil? That's scary, but it's not our moral problem.

Q21: Does this mean morality is a mental construct?

A21: Yes, but don't fall into Vacchagotta's folly. Vacchagotta went to the Buddha and asked a variety of questions, which the Buddha refused to answer—including whether there is an eternal soul. Once he'd left, the Buddha's disciple Ānanda asked the Buddha to explain why he didn't say that there was no soul, since clearly that's the Buddha's view. The Buddha answered that, if he'd told Vacchagotta that there was no soul, he'd think, "It seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now".[8]

[8] *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 44.10, "Ānanda (Is There a Self?)" In Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. 2003. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 1393–95. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Now, that's a very odd thing to think in response to an explanation that there could never be a soul. But it turns out to be a very precise model of what we tend to do when a concept we hold dear is shown to be misguided: Instead of suspending our attachment to the concept and its associated conceptual roles, we simply replace the concept with its opposite, granting the non-concept the role previously supplied by the concept. The so-called "Death of God" plays the role of God; meaninglessness sits where meaning used to be. So don't be like Vacchagotta. Yes, it's true that what you thought was divine morality, or instrumental morality, or something, is a quality of mental actions. So morality is entirely dependent upon human minds. But don't let this make you deduce false conclusions, such as that morality is arbitrary, or that we can "make it up" for ourselves. It's mental, but it's real; in fact, it's something we can (and often do) directly perceive.

Q22: How do you know that Buddhism itself isn't a distorting bias?

A22: This is a good point, to a degree. We do need to take all ideas, including Buddhist ones, with a grain of salt, so as to prevent attachment to them. But in a sense the question as posed already accepts the impetus of the Buddhist project, which is to remove distorting biases. The issue, then, isn't whether Buddhism *itself* is deluded (I've just defined away that possibility), it's whether any given person is deluded. Buddhism is highlighting the obvious truth that many people are. I agree that leaders of Buddhist communities are often placed in dangerously influential positions, and there is reason to doubt that positions of authority are in any way correlated with mastery of morally-beneficial practice. At the same time, when Buddhist institutions are able to rein in their representatives' tendencies to exploitation and domination, Buddhist teachers should be like psychotherapists, who have their own problems but are relied upon to deploy a system that is generally recognized as useful.

Q23: If moral actions are all about removing delusions and other defilements, Buddhists seem not to have any room for values that are grounded in emotions, in yearning. What about awe? What about love? What about passionate indignation at injustice?

A23: This has several different answers. First, as modern people, we are in danger of romanticizing romantic love. The notion that there is an essential expression of humanity in passionate action—which the genius or the individual artist or the lover enacts—is also a (quintessentially 19th century) Romantic view. Buddhism suggests that honest self-awareness displays how what seems to be our unique soul is in fact an ever-changing product of multiple causes and conditions, all of which have sources outside this body-mind complex. We have every reason to respect the precious rarity of our circumstances, but at the same time we need to get over the egotism implicit in the "unique soul." We exist as interconnected with others. Our identities are borrowed and shared. So there may be a real difference between a Romantic worldview and a Buddhist one that we need to acknowledge.

Second, Buddhism is practical and humans are human, so even though it may be morally ideal to pursue equanimity, it is possible to argue that certain kinds of mental actions are, for all intents and purposes, recommended even when undertaken passionately. It may be difficult to motivate the traditional duties of parenthood (for instance) if one feels equanimious compassion toward all children (say), instead of

feeling a focused attachment to one's own. Similarly, there may be passions on the path to equanimity. (Passionate frustration with oneself, for instance…?) Śāntideva writes of the need to cultivate enmity toward the defilements themselves.[9]

Third, Buddhist traditions do recommend cultivating a handful of beneficial, positive emotions in addition to, or on the way to, the ideal state of a fully enlightened being. Early Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy in the successes of others, as emotions that, when properly calibrated, transcend the damaging influences of egotism. In the Mahāyāna, universalized compassion takes center stage. Buddhist tantra, finally, does re-integrate the fullness of human emotion into a morally self-aware existence. Once you have grounded yourself in universal compassion for all beings, as Lama Yeshe explains, you can be helping all beings even as you experience bliss in a milkshake.[10]

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[9] See verses 43–44 of chapter 4, "Vigilance Regarding the Awakening Mind." In Crosby & Skilton, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 29.

[10] Yeshe, Lama. 1987. *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire*, 140. Revised Edition. Edited by Jonathan Landaw. Boston: Wisdom Publications.