



ISSN 1076-9005  
Volume 4 1997:98-111  
Publication date: 19 March 1997

The General and the Particular in Theravāda Ethics:  
A Response to Charles Hallisey

Kevin Schilbrack

*Department of Religious Studies*  
*Wesleyan College*  
*4760 Forsyth Road*  
*Macon, GA 31210-4462*

email: [kevin\\_schilbrack@post.wesleyan-college.edu](mailto:kevin_schilbrack@post.wesleyan-college.edu)

© 1997 Kevin Schilbrack

*Copyright Notice*

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to [jbe-ed@psu.edu](mailto:jbe-ed@psu.edu).

## ABSTRACT

In the most recent issue of JBE (vol.3 1996:32-43), Charles Hallisey calls into question what he sees as a pernicious assumption at work in the study of Theravāda ethics. The problem, according to Hallisey, is that many scholars who study Theravāda ethics assume that the Theravāda tradition has only a single moral theory, and they therefore try to reduce the plurality of the tradition to fit their single-theory view. Hallisey recommends that scholars see the Theravāda ethical tradition as an instance of ethical particularism, a position he describes both as pluralistically including many theories and as having no theory at all. For this reason, Hallisey recommends that scholars abandon the abstract search for the nature of Buddhist ethics in general. After clarifying Hallisey's recommendation, I argue that it is wrong. Although the Theravāda tradition, like any religious tradition, includes more than one ethical theory, there is no good reason not to inquire into its general or formal features. With Russell Sizemore, I recommend an inclusive understanding of comparative religious ethics that sees a place for both for the historical study of the particular and the philosophical study of the general.

In “Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism,” Charles Hallisey calls into question what he sees as a pernicious assumption at work in the study of Theravāda ethics.<sup>1</sup> The problem, according to Hallisey, is the assumption that Theravāda ethics has only a single moral theory. Instead, he says, “I think we should ask whether it is possible that Buddhists approached their ethical concerns without any theory at all, but instead adopted a kind of ethical particularism.”<sup>2</sup> I find this proposal ambiguous, for it can be interpreted as saying that Buddhism has no ethical theory, or that it has one, namely ethical particularism. Moreover, Hallisey wants to argue from this observation of particularism or pluralism to the recommendation that scholars of Buddhist ethics should abandon the quest for the nature of Buddhist ethics in general. This recommendation seems to me wrong-headed, and a step backward from better understandings of the task of comparative religious ethics.

Hallisey makes two moves which seem to me extremely promising for the future study of Theravāda ethics. First, he rejects the claim that Theravāda tradition is monolithic. “As a historical phenomenon, the Theravāda Buddhist tradition ... has been internally diverse... its practitioners and intellectuals have resorted to more than one kind of moral theory.”<sup>3</sup> This call for the recognition of the pluralism of a religious tradition is certainly sound. The insistence that a religious tradition that spans more than a dozen countries and languages over 2500 years of history is pluralist is so commonsensical, in fact, that it is difficult to imagine that scholars of Buddhism have denied it. As Hallisey says, “It is very easy to provide numerous examples from different times and places which demonstrate that Theravāda Buddhists did not have only one moral theory.”<sup>4</sup> Hallisey’s bigger game is the quest for some unity behind the pluralism. That is, he wants to argue that the pluralism of the Theravāda tradition rules out the quest for “a moral theory underlying or structuring Buddhist ethics, one which, once identified, would provide a global justification for the specific parts of Buddhist ethics.”<sup>5</sup> As an example of this mistake, he quotes Damien Keown’s *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*: “We see the same expectation in methodological calls for

us to move beyond simple descriptions of Buddhist morality to “such matters as the logic or mode of moral reasoning found in particular sources and the overall pattern of justification exhibited by movements, schools, sects, or even collections of texts, which may be designated as ethical systems or subsystems’.”<sup>6</sup> I will argue that although Hallisey is right to recognize the plurality, it does not follow that one should abandon the inquiry into the overall pattern of justification in a tradition.

A second promising move in Hallisey’s proposal is to turn attention to writings outside the Pali canon, and especially to stories.<sup>7</sup> He points out that the ethical message of the stories is often overdetermined. In these narratives, the modes of moral reasoning are not only plural and divergent, they conflict with each other and therefore cannot be taken in a single way. Hallisey gives as an example the story of Siri Sanga Bo, a story which can be interpreted as based on consequentialist, deontological, or virtue ethics reasoning.<sup>8</sup> As with the observation of pluralism, he wants to argue that this overdetermined character of stories, “a mirror of what we find in the tradition as a whole,”<sup>9</sup> rules out the reasonability of general statements about the nature of Buddhist ethics. Hallisey’s point is that the multivalence of the narratives implies the inappropriateness of the quest for the nature of Buddhist ethics in general. Instead, “[s]tories like that of Siri Sanga Bo are discursive sites where Buddhists debated the scope and validity of the different ethical theories which they knew, and when we see these stories as such, we realize that there can be no answer to a question that asks us to discover which family of ethical theory underlies Buddhist ethics in general simply because Buddhists availed themselves of and argued over a variety of moral theories.”<sup>10</sup>

I applaud this turn away from monolithicity and the canon, but what is the best way to understand this pluralism and indeterminateness of meaning? Hallisey says that we need a way to theorize about Theravāda ethics in such a way that takes this pluralism seriously, “a way ... which allows us to see the ethical diversity in the Theravāda as more than a historical accident.”<sup>11</sup> Hence his recommendation: “I think we should ask whether it is possible that Buddhists approached their

ethical concerns without any theory at all, but instead adopted a kind of ethical particularism.”<sup>12</sup>

Does Hallisey mean that Theravāda Buddhism includes no theory or that it includes just one? Consider the two options. The claim that Buddhists have no theory at all is surely false. This is a claim that is contradicted both by the observation that the tradition is pluralist and by Hallisey’s claim that it includes ethical particularism. There may be some truth to the idea that Buddhists “approached their ethical concerns” with no theory, in the psychological sense that people typically do not act with an explicit ethical theory in mind, but this does not rule out philosophical reflection on theory implicit in conduct. So I think that the most plausible way to understand Hallisey’s claim that the Theravāda have no theory is as saying that they have no one theory.

Now consider the claim that Theravāda Buddhists adopted a kind of ethical particularism. By ethical particularism, Hallisey means that the Buddhist ethical tradition recognized that there are a variety of moral goods, that these may be inconsistent with each other, and that they cannot be derived from some method. He wants to say that Buddhist ethics, like W. D. Ross, rejects the idea that “some moral principles are more important than others; it also eschews any attempt to discover any consistency in the things which we take to matter morally.”<sup>13</sup> Buddhist ethics is not interested in questions about the nature of the good in general.

Hallisey supports this claim by pointing to Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the *Maṅgalasutta*.<sup>14</sup> In this commentary, Buddhaghosa tells a story in order to answer the question: what is auspiciousness? The first person to answer, “one of those ... not content to say that auspicious things are those which are conducive to well-being,”<sup>15</sup> says that auspicious things are those myriad things that are pleasing to the eye: dressed up children, a chariot drawn by a thoroughbred horse, a pregnant woman, etc. But this is not convincing to those who say that auspicious things are identified through the other senses, and they begin to argue. The argument eventually reaches the gods who decline to give an opinion,

saying “Why should we try to weigh something by hand when scales are right here?” and go to ask the Buddha. The Buddha gives this answer: “Something is called auspicious when it is a cause for welfare in this world or the next,” and then gives a list of thirty-eight examples.<sup>16</sup> Hallisey reads this story as the rejection of methodism and the endorsement of particularism, for he says that the person who says that auspicious things are those that are visible tries but fails to provide a criterion of auspiciousness, while the Buddha simply gives a list of thirty-eight auspicious things.

Another reading—and to my eyes, a more natural one—is the opposite. The first person to answer, the one who identifies auspiciousness with what is pleasing to the eye, has a false criterion of auspiciousness, one which makes clear only his own “bungling desires.”<sup>17</sup> The Buddha, by contrast, has the true criterion, “worldly and transcendent benefits.” Thus those who base their understanding of auspiciousness on the senses end up with a mere list of things, but the Buddha provides a single criterion (though one which will necessarily be applied in different ways for monks and laity).

It is worthwhile to see here that Hallisey’s particularist, anti-theoretical approach informs and shapes his reading of the text no less than a generalist, theoretical approach does for other scholars. No matter where one stands, one must make decisions about one’s interpretive categories and their implications. It would be interesting to see which interpretation of this text, the particularist or the “methodist,” is more in accord with the perspective of the *Maṅgalasutta* or with other commentaries on it. The proper interpretation of this commentary, however, is not crucial. The question is not whether this particular text endorses an anti-theoretical account of moral goods; it may. The question is whether particularism is the best approach to Buddhist ethics in general, and this is problematic.

Certainly, if Buddhist ethics are really particularist, then Hallisey is right that there will be no theory that makes sense of various Buddhist goods. The problem is that to say that Buddhist ethics are particularist

sounds like a monolithic statement about Buddhist ethics. One would disprove this claim in exactly the same way Hallisey disproves any argument about the nature of Buddhist ethics, viz., by counter-examples, and as he pointed out “[i]t is very easy to provide numerous examples from different times and places which demonstrate that Theravāda Buddhists did not have only one moral theory.”<sup>18</sup> It is because the claim that Buddhist ethics are really particularist is so vulnerable to Hallisey’s own criticisms that I suspect that he is confused. It is not the case that Theravāda ethics have no theory nor that they have only one, ethical particularism. Rather, it seems most plausible to stick with the commonsense observation that Theravāda ethics involves several theories—that Theravāda ethics are pluralist.

As I understand it, then, the strongest support for Hallisey’s recommendation that scholars should abandon the quest for statements about the nature of Buddhist ethics in general amounts to the following: Theravāda Buddhism, like other religious traditions, uses many different modes of ethical reasoning (deontological, consequentialist, virtue-based, particularist, and others). The tradition is in fact so pluralist or varied that attention to the particular will lead one to abandon the general, or more precisely, the only general statement one can make is that the tradition is pluralist. Some texts are particularist, recognizing no way to generalize about diverse goods, and this is analogous to the character of the tradition as a whole.

I now want to argue that this recommendation is wrong, and to defend the legitimacy of general statements about the nature of Theravāda ethics.

The first thing to note is that general statements about the nature of Buddhist ethics are hypotheses. They are not absolute or unchanging. A model of this kind of interpretation goes like this: person A says Buddhists in general are X; person B says, you overlook this particular text or aspect of a text which isn’t X; person A then modifies the hypothesis to account for the new data, and the back and forth goes on. “Philosophy is the critique of abstractions,” as Whitehead says.<sup>19</sup> A

hypothesis about the nature of Buddhist ethics is a conversation-starter, in Richard Rorty's words. This is, in fact, what goes on in Keown's book as he tries to move beyond not only descriptive work, but also beyond the first round of generalizations. Keown criticizes those interpretations of Theravāda ethics based on what he calls "the transcendence thesis" which tend to characterize Theravāda ethics as utilitarian reasoning about the benefits of karma, and in its place recommends his own interpretation in which Buddhist ethics are eudaimonistic in the sense that they aim at human flourishing. He is perfectly explicit that his position is a hypothesis, open to further debate.

The second thing to note is that general statements are not essentialist. General statements about the nature of a religious tradition can grant that there are other possible readings of an individual text, but nevertheless argue that some interpretations are more central or determinative for the tradition being studied than others. In fact, it seems that this process of looking for general or dominant themes of an ethical tradition is more sensitive to the particularities of the tradition than one which homogenizes every reading under the label of pluralism. Without denying the pluralism or the multivalence, one could argue that the best understanding of a given text is, say, consequentialist. And contra Hallisey, it seems that there is no reason one cannot repeat this process with schools, movements, or with the tradition as a whole.

One should also note how many disagree with Hallisey here. Opposing his position are not only those who argue that it makes sense to ask what single family of theories best interprets Theravāda ethics, but also those who agree that Buddhist ethics includes more than one theory, but are not so pluralist that one cannot make general descriptions of their reasoning. This latter group includes those who argue that Theravāda ethics fall into two forms of reasoning, a kammic and a nibbannic,<sup>20</sup> three,<sup>21</sup> or four.<sup>22</sup> All of these people agree with Keown that it is fruitful to try to make general statements about the logic or mode of moral reasoning found in particular sources and the overall pattern of justification exhibited by movements, schools, sects, or even collections of texts,

which may be designated as ethical systems or subsystems.

In short, the inquiry into the general nature of Buddhist ethics is hypothetical, nonessentialist, and multiform. In rejecting this kind of investigation, Hallisey seems to be returning to and strengthening a divide between historians and ethicists in comparative religious ethics that has been widely bemoaned.

This divide, I believe, has been overcome for practical purposes by Russell Sizemore.<sup>23</sup> Sizemore observes that comparative religious ethics as a field is divided into “historians,” typically specialists in some non-Western religious tradition, and “ethicists,” typically trained in Western philosophical ethics. Sizemore argues that this split reflects two different understandings of the purpose of comparative religious ethics. For historians, the goal is “to illuminate how a given tradition has shaped its adherents’ conduct, in aspiration and historical embodiment,” or in other words to uncover the relationship between faith and culture.<sup>24</sup> For ethicists, the goal is “to compare the forms of practical reasoning employed by religious traditions,” or in other words to illuminate the relationship between faith and reason.<sup>25</sup> Sizemore further argues that these different understandings of comparative religious ethics reflect different epistemological orientations. Historians tend to be empiricists, and they typically see the very idea of moral reasoning as a cultural construct. Ethicists tend to be formalists, and they typically see moral reasoning as distinguishable from religious reasoning. Sizemore says that we can hardly expect scholars of religious ethics to solve an epistemological problem, and so he recommends that we take an inclusive understanding of the discipline to allow for both orientations. In this way, “scholars can disagree over which approach within the field is the most profitable without suggesting that those who take the opposing view have failed to meet minimal standards of the discipline. In the final analysis each group will be judged on its ability to illuminate the tradition under study and to show its bearings on matters of general importance.”<sup>26</sup>

I think that this “synthetic” and “democratic” proposal is right,

but I suspect that it is also true. That is, I believe that one can argue that it is not only useful in the sense that it is good for the time being, until the epistemological dispute is solved, but that it is also necessary. The necessity comes from the mutual implication of the two basic orientations. The comparative study of religious ethics as a field will never not be both historical and philosophical.

My argument is this. The teaching of proper conduct (ethics in the historians' sense) will inevitably imply some form of moral reasoning, some justification, since, as Geertz says, "mere convention satisfies few people in any culture."<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the forms of moral reasoning (ethics in the ethicists' sense) will inevitably be reasoning about something specific and historically given, since, as Kant says, "it is certainly undeniable that every volition must have an object and therefore a material."<sup>28</sup> The two sides cannot do without each other. The particular content and the general form of ethical judgments may be distinguishable, but they are not separable.

If this is right, that philosophical inquiry depends on historical inquiry and vice versa, then one may want to qualify Sizemore's description of comparative religious ethics as including two different epistemological orientations. If by "different" Sizemore means that history and philosophy are merely different, and that one can simply choose either orientation and avoid the other, then I am giving reasons to amend this view. On this view, any philosophical inquiry in comparative religious ethics will necessarily involve (at least implicitly) decisions about the historical context of what is studied, and any historical inquiry will necessarily involve (at least implicitly) decisions about philosophical matters. The radical separation of the philosophical and the historical, or of the general and the particular, strikes me as a remnant of positivism that is no longer tenable.<sup>29</sup>

I hope it is clear, therefore, that by insisting on the legitimacy of inquiry into the general or formal aspects of moral reasoning, I am not claiming that one can understand Theravāda ethics solely by appeal to formal thinking. The object or the material pursued must be made intel-

ligible in the terms of the culture under study. Inquiries into the formal aspects of comparative religious ethics are therefore dependent upon and wait upon the deliverances of those hermeneutic inquiries that identify what the claim and practices mean. Nevertheless, no matter how particularistic, contingent, or idiosyncratic its subject matter, moral reasoning always takes some form or another. For this reason, the study of Theravāda ethics properly includes attention to these forms.

Jeffrey Stout uses the term “stereoscopic” to describe social criticism that pays attention both to the goods internal to a practice—the goods that can be realized only in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence that define that practice—and goods external to a practice, goods it may share with many others.<sup>30</sup> Analogously, one might speak of stereoscopic comparative religious ethics that aims for moral accounts that pay attention both to the particular goods pursued in a specific moral text or practice, and to the general forms that the justifications for the pursuits take. A stereoscopic account of Theravāda moral texts and practices would not emphasize particular contents over general forms, or the vice versa. This would be a comparative religious ethics with both one’s historical and philosophical eyes open.

From this perspective, Hallisey’s rejection of generalizing about patterns of justification and his statement that “the study of Theravāda Buddhism is best pursued historically”<sup>31</sup> sound suspiciously like one-sided preSizemore arguments. That is, it is not merely that he personally is more interested in the particular than the general, but that he feels that the quest for a meta-theory of Theravāda ethics distorts it and ought not be pursued. In this sense, he regards the historical approach as obligatory.

Hallisey wants to argue for pluralism, the central role of narrative, and a broadening of the literature attended to. This paper does not criticize what he affirms, but what he wants to reject. In my opinion, one can accept these proposals concerning Theravāda ethics in particular without rejecting the quest for the nature of Theravāda ethics in general.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Charles Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996), pp. 32-43.

<sup>2</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 34-5. The reference is to Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Hallisey's turn to narratives, and especially his philosophically sophisticated approach to reading and narrativity, are more radical in their implications for comparative religious ethics than his insistence on pluralism. See Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Subethics, and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, 2 (Fall 1996): 305-327. He argues persuasively against the assumption that stories are merely illustrations of Buddhist doctrine, precepts put into narrative form to popularize them. At least some stories provide the loci of ethical discussion that make ethical reflection possible.

<sup>8</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 35-7.

<sup>9</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism," p. 38-9.

<sup>14</sup> "Auspicious Things," translated by Charles Hallisey, in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 412-26.

<sup>15</sup> "Auspicious Things," p. 415.

<sup>16</sup>“Auspicious Things,” p. 418.

<sup>17</sup>“Auspicious Things,” p. 416.

<sup>18</sup> Hallisey, “Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism,” p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), pp. 48-9.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Winston L. King, *In Hope of Nibbana: An Essay on Theravāda Buddhist Ethics* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1964).

<sup>21</sup> For example, David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), ch. 8.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Frank E. Reynolds, “Multiple Cosmogonies and Ethics: The Case of Theravāda Buddhism,” in Robin Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds, eds., *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> Russell F. Sizemore, “Comparative Religious Ethics as a Field: Faith, Culture, and Reason in Ethics,” in Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer, eds., *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 87-99.

<sup>24</sup> Sizemore, “Comparative Religious Ethics as a Field,” p. 91.

<sup>25</sup> Sizemore, “Comparative Religious Ethics as a Field,” p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Sizemore, “Comparative Religious Ethics as a Field,” p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to Franklin Gamwell for helping me to clarify my position at this point.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), pp. 279-81.

<sup>31</sup> Hallisey, “Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism,” p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> This paper was first written and discussed during an NEH summer

seminar in Comparative Religious Ethics at Brown University. I would like to thank the NEH and in particular, the leaders of that seminar, Professors John Reeder and Donald Swearer, for their support.