

Dark and Bright Karma: a New Reading

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Introduction

It is true that Buddhist ethics values more mental actions than external bodily and verbal actions. It is also true that the root or dominant mental state is the central factor to determine the morality of actions. However, it is more doubtful to claim that mind is the only factor to determine the moral valence of actions, and consequently, that actions are right or wrong, good or evil, wholesome or unwholesome, depending on the purity or impurity of our root or dominant mental state. If mind were the only relevant factor, Buddhist ethics could be formulated as having a universal criterion of goodness. Actions displaying wholesome mental states or virtues would be good, and actions displaying unwholesome mental states or vices would be evil. This universal criterion of goodness would make Buddhist ethics a system with a black or white concept of action, a system useful to define Buddhists ethics in comparison to other philosophical systems of ethics. However, this universal criterion of goodness with its black or white concept of action is problematic because it does not do justice to all kinds of ethical behavior legitimized by Buddhist texts and living traditions.

In a former article, I argued that in the Pāli Nikāyas the goodness or morality of actions depends on several factors, not just on the purity of our root or dominant mental state. Besides the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of roots and other mental states (virtue ethics), one has to take into account the intrinsic wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of certain actions (moral realism) as well as their consequences for the happiness of oneself and others (utilitarianism). In other words, Buddhist ethics in the Pāli Nikāyas is not a system of virtue ethics with just a universal criterion of goodness. Yet, given the emphasis on the cultivation of virtue to attain nirvana, early Buddhist ethics may be considered a special kind of virtue ethics provided that its utilitarian and moral realist elements are not ignored (Vélez de Cea, 2004).

In this article, I explore the concept of action that corresponds to the Pāli Nikāyas and its possible relevance for contemporary discussions of Buddhist ethics. The underlying thesis is that given the variety of criteria to determine the goodness or morality of actions in the Pāli Nikāyas, a black or white concept of action does not do enough justice to early Buddhist ethics. In order to reconstruct a view of action faithful to the Pāli Nikāyas and consistent with Abhidharma traditions, I revise the concept of dark-and-bright action with dark-and-bright result. I begin by briefly discussing the history of the concept of dark-and-bright action, and by showing how an expansion of its field of application is compatible with Abhidharma interpretations. I examine the explicative power of the revised concept of dark-and-bright action, and conclude by comparing the moral particularism that Charles Hallisey attributes to Theravāda Buddhism and the particularism that the concept of dark-and-bright action entails.

1. A brief history of the concept of dark-and-bright actions

The Buddha of the Pāli Nikāyas distinguishes between four kinds of actions: dark (*ka.nha*) action with dark result, bright action (*sukka*) with bright result, dark-and-bright (*ka.nhasukka*) action with bright result, and neither-dark-nor-bright (*aka.nhasukka*) action with neither-dark-nor-bright result. (M.I.389; A.II.230).

Dark actions with dark results are mental, verbal or corporal actions performed with malevolence (*savyāpajjha*). They lead to rebirth in malevolent worlds where one experiences malevolent contacts and extremely painful feelings (*ekantadukkha*), a state compared to that of beings in hells (M.I.389-90). Bright actions with bright results are mental, verbal or corporal actions performed with benevolence (*avyāpajjha*). They lead to a benevolent rebirth, benevolent contacts and extremely happy feelings (*ekantasukha*), which are similar to the feelings experienced by the gods of refulgent glory (M.I.390).

Dark-and-bright actions with dark-and-bright results are mental, verbal or corporal actions performed with a combination of malevolence and benevolence (*savyāpajjha avyāpajjha*). They lead to rebirth in a world that is both benevolent and malevolent, where one experiences a mixture of both pleasant and painful feelings (*voki.n.nasukhadukkha*), a state compared to that of humans, some lower gods and beings in purgatories (M.I.390).

Actions neither-dark-nor-bright with neither-dark-nor-bright results are defined as the intention (*cetanā*) to abandon each of the previous three kinds of actions as well as their results (M.I.390-1). According to the commentaries of the Theravāda tradition, this fourth kind of action is characteristic of beings that are about to attain enlightenment, that is, beings who have experienced the four supramundane paths preceding the realization of nirvana (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995: 1258. n.608). In other words, neither-dark-nor-bright actions refer

to intentions or volitional mental states leading to the transcendence of actions conducive to more karmic effects.

Traditionally, the third kind of action, dark-and-bright action with dark-and-bright result, has been interpreted by the Theravāda school as a quick succession of dark and bright actions (*Kathāvatthu*. 344, *Nettipakara.na*.159), and by the Sarvāstivāda school as a series of dark actions followed by another series of bright actions. The reason behind this interpretation is that according to *Abhidharma* literature, a mental state must have a root or dominant mental factor. From the Abhidharma perspective, an action can be either dark or bright (unwholesome or wholesome), but never dark-and-bright at the same time or same mental moment.

For instance, Bhikkhu Bodhi, a contemporary representative of Theravāda thought, explains the dark-and-bright action in this way: “Strictly speaking, no volitional action can be simultaneously both wholesome and unwholesome, for the volition responsible for the action must be either one or the other. Thus here we should understand that the being engages in a medley of wholesome and unwholesome actions, none of which is particularly dominant.” (1995: 1258. n.607). Peter Harvey accepts the Theravāda orthodox view of the dark-and-bright action (2000: 44), and discusses it in a footnote of his chapter on the shared foundations of Buddhist ethics, giving the impression that this interpretation applies to all texts and living traditions of Buddhism.

This interpretation of dark-and-bright actions does not appear in the early Sūtras. In the Pāli Nikāyas greed, hatred and delusion appear as the three roots of the ten unwholesome actions, and non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion as the three roots of the ten wholesome actions (M.I.47). However, nowhere it is said that the morality or goodness

of actions depends on mental states motivated either by one dominant root of the wholesome or by one dominant root of the unwholesome. This is a later doctrinal development characteristic of *Abhidharma* literature.

While it seems obvious that the concept of dark actions refers to unwholesome actions motivated by unwholesome roots, and the concept of bright actions refers to wholesome actions motivated by wholesome roots, nothing suggests in the Pāli Nikāyas that dark-and-bright actions refer to either a succession of dark and bright actions or a series of dark actions followed by another series of bright actions.

This dark or bright concept of action derives from the *Abhidharma* interpretation of dark-and-bright actions; it was not formulated by the Buddha or by the disciples who compiled the early *Sūtras* after his death in the fifth century BC. Similarly, the Vinaya literature and later Mahāyāna *Sūtras* do not presuppose a dark or bright concept of action. It was during the early *Abhidharma* period, from the third century BC to the second century AD, that the dark or bright concept of action became prominent.

The early *Abhidharma* literature consists of seven canonical books, the *Abhidharmapi.taka*, and their commentaries. As a genre, *Abhidharma* texts are scholastic systematizations and summaries of concepts and categories of the other two younger sections of pre-Mahāyāna canons, the *Sūtrapi.taka* and the *Vinayapi.taka*. Only the *Abhidharmapi.taka* of the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda schools are extant today, the first one in Pāli, the second in Chinese and partially in Sanskrit. There is also a work of the extinct *Dharmaguptaka* school and a number of scholastic texts related to the *Yogācāra* school of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Although the *Abhidharma* texts were originally composed for mnemonic and contemplative purposes, they were also used to justify differing interpretations of the Buddha's teachings. These interpretations constituted the origins of systematic Buddhist thought as well as the beginning of Buddhist schools. From conflicting interpretations of the Buddha's teachings aroused several trends of thought and practice, and when the differences, especially in practice, became irreconcilable, the monastic community split.

The dark or bright concept of action was probably developed by monks with a strong philosophical bent interested in establishing a universal criterion of goodness equally applicable to all practitioners. This idealistic view of Buddhist ethics together with other doctrinal standpoints evolved into the orthodox position of different schools. The dark or bright concept of action became part of the Sthavira orthodoxy. This orthodoxy was inherited by sects derived from the Sthavira school, among them the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda. Accordingly, the dark or bright concept of action was followed by later great commentators of these schools such as Buddhaghosa (c. 370-450 AD) in Sri Lanka, Vasubandhu the younger (c. 400-480 AD) in India, and commentators building upon their respective works in Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Korea and Japan. The dark or bright concept of action is still prevalent in the Theravāda tradition and the schools that consider canonical the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan.

The dark or bright concept of action with its universal criterion of goodness is a very respectable interpretation of early Buddhist ethics. However, since the Buddha himself did not advocate the dogmatic acceptance of traditions (A.I.187), it seems

consistent with Buddhist spirituality to revisit former interpretations of the teachings attributed to the Buddha in order to make them more relevant for our times.

2. Revising the concept of dark-and-bright action

In this section, I revisit the concept of dark-and-bright action and propose a new interpretation of it consistent with both the *Abhidharma* traditions and the teachings of the Buddha of the Pāli Nikāyas. The new interpretation of dark-and-bright actions expands the traditional *Abhidharma* understanding of dark-and-bright actions of the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda schools.

While *Abhidharma* traditions see dark-and-bright actions at a microscopic psychological level as a series or succession of mental moments motivated by either wholesome or unwholesome roots, I propose to see dark-and-bright actions at a macroscopic ethical level as mental, bodily, or verbal actions whose overall morality is complex, that is, not purely good or evil. This impure goodness or evilness of actions is the result of the presence of both wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action. By wholesome I understand conducive to less suffering, and by unwholesome conducive to more suffering. By features, I refer not only to root motivation or dominant mental state, but also to non-dominant mental factors, consequences, content, and circumstances of mental, bodily and verbal actions. In other words, dark-and-bright actions refer to actions with both wholesome and unwholesome features.

The permutations of wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action are many. Here I would like to focus on just three possible kinds of dark-and-bright actions:

- 1) actions motivated by wholesome roots but whose content is intrinsically unwholesome

(killing someone to protect Buddhism or to prevent him or her from killing many others); 2) actions motivated by a combination of wholesome and unwholesome roots (for instance, donating alms to the monastic community out of generosity but with craving for prosperity or a heavenly rebirth); 3) intrinsically unwholesome actions motivated by a combination of wholesome and unwholesome roots (killing someone in pain out of compassion but also to avoid the suffering of seeing him or her in pain).

The first kind of dark-and-bright actions, that is, intrinsically unwholesome actions motivated by wholesome roots, seems to be ruled out from the standpoint of the Pāli Nīkāyas. At least liberated beings are said to be incapable of killing, stealing, lying, and so on (D.III.23). Accordingly, the Theravāda Abhidharma and its commentaries do not accept the possibility of even a compassionate killing (Gethin, 2004). Interestingly, later in Buddhist history, it was the immaculate nature of liberated beings (Arahats), what caused a schism between the Mahāsaṅghika and the Sthavira schools. Even though the Theravāda canon explicitly says that a liberated being cannot kill, in later paracanonical Theravāda texts, specifically in the *Mahāvamsa*, killing for a good purpose, or with a wholesome motivation such as protecting Buddhism, seems to be legitimized. In fact, this justification of killing to protect the Dharma has been recently advocated by a minority of monks in Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz, 2002) and Thailand (Keyes, 1993). Similarly, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the doctrines of skillful means and great compassion allow, under extreme circumstances, for the performance of intrinsically evil actions provided that the motivation and the consequences are wholesome. In fact, there are textual and historical instances of killing someone out of compassion for the happiness of the greatest number or for defending Buddhism. (Harvey 2000: 255-270).

The last two kinds of dark-and-bright actions, that is, wholesome or unwholesome actions motivated by a combination of wholesome and unwholesome roots, are probably the original referent of the concept of dark-and-bright actions, and the foundation of later Abhidharma interpretations of this concept. It is important to notice that the understanding of dark-and-bright actions that I propose does not necessarily contradict the traditional Abhidharma interpretation.

Claiming that there can be wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action is unproblematic. From the Abhidharma perspective, the root ignorance or delusion is always present until liberation. Even claiming that there can be two simultaneous unwholesome roots in the same action is uncontroversial. For instance, the root ignorance or delusion always underlies mental states rooted in greed or hate. As Bhikkhu Bodhi says “though delusion is always present as a root in cittas accompanied by greed and hate, its function there is subordinate (1993: 38). The only claim incompatible with Abhidharma thought would be to state that the roots greed and hatred can appear simultaneously in the same mental moment (Bodhi 1993: 33).

However, I only claim that wholesome and unwholesome features, which include roots, can appear in the same action. Since actions can last many mental moments, even stating that wholesome and unwholesome roots can appear in the same action does not contradict the Abhidharma interpretation. I leave open the question of how exactly wholesome and unwholesome roots appear together in the same action. It might be as a quick succession of mental moments with alternate wholesome and unwholesome roots, or perhaps as a series of mental moments with wholesome roots followed by another series of mental moments with unwholesome roots. I do not know who is right on this point, whether the

Theravāda or the Sarvāstivāda school. This doctrinal dispute does not affect my interpretation because I only speak of the presence of wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action, not in the same mental moment.

This new interpretation of dark-and-bright actions is also consistent with the Pāli Nikāyas. The definition of dark-and-bright actions that appears in (M.I.390) is as follows: “And what, Pu.n.na, is dark-and-bright action with dark-and-bright result? Here someone generates a bodily formation [action] that is both malevolent and benevolent (*savyāpajjhampi avyāpajjhampi*), a verbal formation that is both malevolent and benevolent, a mental formation that is both malevolent and benevolent.” The text does not say anything about a series of malevolent actions or formations followed by another series of benevolent ones, or about a quick alternate succession of malevolent and benevolent actions or formations. Similarly, the text does not speak of mental moments or actions that are malevolent and benevolent at the same mental moment. The Abhidharma interpretation is not self-evident. Furthermore, the Abhidharma interpretation projects into the Pāli Nikāyas a later scholastic view of time as mental moments. A less anachronistic reading of the text seems to be possible. In my view, the definition of dark-and-bright actions states simply that someone can perform bodily, verbal or mental actions that are both malevolent and benevolent, and in that sense, both wholesome and unwholesome. Since I do not circumscribe actions to mental moments, I do justice to the definition of dark-and-bright actions in the Pāli Nikāyas, and at the same time I avoid contradicting in any way the traditional Abhidharma interpretation.

It is extremely important to notice how Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi translate the terms *savyāpajjha avyāpajjha* in the definition of dark-and-bright actions just

quoted. They do not translate them as “malevolent” and “benevolent”, as I do slightly modifying his otherwise excellent translation. They translate *savyāpajjha avyāpajjha* as “afflictive” and “unafflictive.” According to the Pāli-English Dictionary of the Pāli Text Society, the word *avyāpajjha* means “kindness of heart, freedom from suffering, free from oppression or injury; not hurting, kind.” It is related to the words *avyāpada* and *avyāpanna* which mean “absence of desire to injure, freedom from malice, friendly, benevolent.” The word *savyāpajjha* is composed by the prefix “sa” which means ‘with’ and “*vyāpajjha*” which mean “to be troubled or troubling, doing harm, injuring.” It is true that they can refer to feelings of suffering or happiness, but it is also true that they refer to the intention to harm or benefit other beings. The primary meaning is not affective, that is, afflictive or unafflictive as Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation suggests, but rather volitional, that is, ill-will and good-will, malevolence and benevolence. In fact, in a note Bhikkhu Bodhi acknowledges that afflictive bodily, verbal, and mental formations may be understood as the *volition* responsible for unwholesome bodily, verbal, and mental actions (1995:1258).

The volitional nature of the terms *savyāpajjha avyāpajjha* can also be inferred from the definition of neither-dark-nor-bright actions. They are defined as the intention or volition (*cetanā*) to abandon dark, bright, and dark-and-bright actions (M.I.391). If the neither-dark-nor-bright action is unequivocally defined in volitional terms, why to define the former kinds of action in non-volitional terms such as afflictive and unafflictive? Behind Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation one can notice the influence of the *Abhidharma* interpretation of the Theravāda school. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi probably saw the possible conflict between the primary meaning of *savyāpajjha avyāpajjha* and the

traditional Theravāda interpretation of dark-and-bright actions. They tried to solve the problem by avoiding a translation conveying the presence of opposite roots in the same mental moment. However, the doctrine of mental moments is foreign to the Pāli Nikāyas and the terms *savyāpajjha avyāpajjha* connote primarily two opposing volitional tendencies rather than two opposing affective states. Certainly, the translation of Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi preserve the *Abhidharma* interpretation of dark-and-bright actions. However, the price to pay is a slight departure from the Pāli Nikāyas, which explicitly accept the existence of contradictory volitional tendencies in the same action, and consequently, they seem to admit the possibility of both wholesome and unwholesome roots in the same action.

That according to the Buddha of the Pāli Nikāyas there can be wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action is also inferable from other texts. For instance, the definition of mundane right view is as follows: “And what, bhikkhus, is right view that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment? ‘There is what is given, what is offered and what is sacrificed; there is fruit and result of good and bad actions; there is this world and the other world; there is mother and father; there are beings who are reborn spontaneously; there are in the world good and virtuous recluses and Brahmins who have realized for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.’ This is right view affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment.” (M.III.72, Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995: 934-5).

The text explicitly acknowledges that moral actions can be performed presupposing views associated with taints (*āsava*). For the Theravāda tradition, there are

four taints: sensual desire (*kāmāsava*), desire of *samsaric* existence (*bhavāsava*), extreme views (*di.t.th[̐sava*), and ignorance (*avijjāsava*). The first two taints are clearly related to the unwholesome root greed (*dosa*) or passion (*rāga*), and the last two to the unwholesome root delusion (*moha*). Since the definition of mundane right view admits the possibility of performing good actions associated with taints, and taints are related to unwholesome roots, it seems plausible to conclude that according to the Pāli Nikāyas there can be wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action.

Similarly, when the Pāli Nikāyas discuss sets of moral actions and their consequences without mentioning motivation and wholesome mental states, it seems safe to conclude that these actions might be performed with a combination of wholesome and unwholesome roots. It is precisely because some texts of the Pāli Nikāyas do not mention the need for an absolutely pure motivation or pure wholesome mental state to perform good actions that accordingly, many Buddhists observe moral precepts with mixed dark-and-bright motivations, that is, with motivations associated with both wholesome and unwholesome roots. Likewise, when the Pāli Nikāyas describe the suffering of hells and the happiness of heavens to motivate ethical conduct, they indirectly prove that a pure motivation or a wholesome root is not expected from all practitioners at all times. In my view, it is unrealistic to think that the Buddha and the disciples who compiled the Pāli Nikāyas were expecting that practitioners listening or reading vivid descriptions of hell and their sufferings were going to act morally in all cases with pure motivations such as fearlessness, non-greed, selflessness, equanimity and detachment.

If the dark or bright concept of action were really characteristic of the the Pāli Nikāyas and pure motivations or wholesome roots were strictly necessary to perform

good actions and acquire merit, the Pāli Nikāyas would never discuss hell or heaven without discussing at the same time the need for a pure wholesome motivation or mental state. Similarly, they would not discuss moral actions and their consequences without mentioning motivation, and they would not define the mundane right view as believing in moral actions in association with taints. But then, no one would be practicing Buddhism, not even those who deceive themselves thinking that by aspiring to nirvana instead of to other mundane proximate goals, they are motivated by pure wholesome roots, and not by more subtle and intellectually sophisticated forms of spiritual greed.

3. The explicative power of the concept of dark-and-bright action

Given the diverse criteria to determine the goodness or morality of actions found in the Pāli Nikāyas, one would expect a more prominent usage of the concept of dark-and-bright action throughout the history of Buddhist ethics. However, probably due to the influence of Abhidharma interpretations, the concept of dark-and-bright action has been virtually forgotten. The revised concept of dark-and-bright action formulated above is an attempt to bring this neglected concept to the forefront of contemporary discussions of Buddhist ethics. The concept of dark-and-bright action understood as the presence of wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action has an enormous potential to explain the ethical behavior of many Buddhists. In this sense, the concept of dark-and-bright action bridges the gap between theory and practice in Buddhist ethics, that is, between the elitist and idealistic view of Buddhist ethics characteristic of Abhidharma literature, and the more common ethical practice of ordinary Buddhists.

Psychologically, the concept of dark-and-bright action can help to explain the experience of many practitioners. For instance, feeling craving for victory or success together with some degree of hatred, aversion or irritation for the enemy or competitor in the same action is a very common experience. It is not possible to determine what mental factor is the dominant one. In other words, between purely bright actions with a clear wholesome motivation, and absolute dark actions with an exclusively unwholesome motivation, there are many grey actions with partially dark and bright motivations. That is, in many occasions there is not a clear domination of dark mental qualities over bright ones or vice versa.

Sometimes, while performing an action, there is a quick succession and even a subtle mixture of dark and bright mental factors that does not allow for a straightforward assessment of that action as purely wholesome or unwholesome. This is the insight behind the traditional Abhidharma interpretations of the concept of dark-and-bright action. Since I do not claim that the presence of wholesome and unwholesome roots takes place at the same time or in the same mental moment, the revised concept of dark-and-bright action does not contradict traditional Abhidharma interpretations. The revised concept of dark-and-bright action is just an expansion of the field of application of traditional Abhidharma interpretations. Instead of circumscribing the concept of dark-and-bright action to mental moments and mental actions, I apply the concept to all possible kinds of actions including those that are a conglomerate of mental, verbal and bodily actions. For instance, telling a lie out of compassion while faking a smiling face constitutes a dark-and-bright action with mental, verbal and bodily aspects.

The concept of dark-and-bright action can help to explain not only actions with a combination of wholesome and unwholesome roots and mental factors, but also actions

with both wholesome and unwholesome features. For instance, performing intrinsic wholesome actions such as observing the five precepts out of fear of negative karmic consequences or craving for positive ones is a dark-and-bright action with wholesome and unwholesome features. At the lowest stages of moral development and even at the higher ones, fear of negative karmic consequences or craving for positive ones may effectively foster the cultivation of Buddhist virtues such as generosity. Someone at a lower stage of moral development is far from higher stages where actions are usually motivated by wholesome roots. However, even at higher stages, the practitioner may act morally in some instances out of subtle forms of spiritual greed and therefore, with a combination of wholesome and unwholesome features in his or her actions. Obviously, at the lowest stages of moral development the degree of greed in a practitioner who aspires to proximate goals such as prosperity and a good rebirth is stronger than the subtle greed in someone at a higher stage just aspiring to nirvana. I do not deny that moral actions associated with unwholesome roots such as greed are in the long term an obstacle to attaining nirvana, and that the greed motivating those actions will have to be overcome eventually. What I deny is that the presence of greed or any other unwholesome root in the motivation of someone places his or her actions outside the moral domain of the right and the good as a restrictive dark or bright concept of action would entail.

Acting with a combination of wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action, be they two opposing mental roots, or an intrinsic wholesome action done with an unwholesome motivation, does not mean that one is doing something wrong and evil, as the *Abhidharma* dark or bright concept of action with its universal criterion of goodness would imply. It just means that the degree of goodness is not perfect or ideal. Acting with

a mixed motivation or with wholesome and unwholesome features in the same action can be honorable and morally acceptable, though not perfectly good or the ideal course of action. This is at least what many Buddhists have traditionally believed and what many Buddhist texts seem to legitimize.

Similarly, the concept of dark-and-bright action can help to explain tolerant attitudes toward certain immoral actions in Buddhist countries such as abortion in Japan and prostitution in Thailand. If Buddhism advocated just a dark or bright concept of action, the degree of social intolerance toward immoral actions would be much greater. Buddhist texts condone neither abortion nor prostitution and yet women who choose abortion, or those who become prostitutes are not aggressively persecuted by Buddhists.

It is very interesting to notice that Buddhists tends to avoid the polarized debates prevalent in western discussions of abortion and prostitution. For instance, in the case of abortion, William R. LaFleur has shown in his excellent work *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*, that the Buddhist position defies dilemmas such as pro-choice or pro-life, absolute sanctity of the fetus or the fetus as virtually inert matter, inviolable life or unwanted pregnancy. The Buddhist response to abortion provides a less belligerent third position that “gives the appearance of looking like either a combination of the other two or a position that sits on a fence between them” (LaFleur, 1992: 194).

The Buddhist position recognizes the intrinsic immorality of abortion, which is unambiguously seen as taking the life of an innocent child. However, Buddhists understand that for a mother abortion is never the best course of action. On the contrary, abortion is a very painful decision where both parents and the child suffer. That is why Buddhism tolerates without condoning abortion, emphasizing compassion for the parent’s

hard choice as well as for the unwanted fetus. In fact, Buddhism in Japan provides rituals to benefit both parents and the aborted child. Specifically, the mizuko ritual secures a better afterlife for the child and helps the parents to express caring feelings as well as a sense of duty toward the child. In this way, the rituals relieve the guilt of the parents without neglecting the affective bond with the deceased child. The rituals also protect other members of the family, especially siblings, from the possible resentment and wrath of the spirit of the aborted fetus. It seems quite difficult to explain the mixed motivations underlying mizuko rituals and the Buddhist attitude toward abortion in Japan if Buddhist ethics advocated just a dark or bright view of action. The concept of dark-and-bright action with dark and bright result can help to explain sociological facts such as mizuko rituals and the psychologically complex pro-life and pro-choice Buddhist attitude toward abortion.

The concept of dark-and-bright action can also help to understand the permissive and yet not condoning Buddhist response to prostitution in Thailand. Like in the case of abortion in Japan, the Buddhist attitude toward prostitution in Thailand provides a less belligerent third position between abolitionists and liberationists. That is, between those who want to criminalize as much as possible prostitutes and their customers, and those who want to legalize prostitution making prostitutes sex workers with the same rights and social benefits than any other professionals.

Buddhists recognize the intrinsic unwholesomeness of prostitution, which evidently promotes lust and excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures, one of the extremes that the Buddhist middle path rejects. In this sense, as Prof. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, now Bhikkhuni Dhammananda states “Buddhism does not promote or encourage prostitution” (1991: 71). However, Buddhists understand that life hardships

can lead a person to prostitution, considered a type of existence characterized by suffering and the result of bad karma. That is why Buddhists tend to feel compassion for prostitutes instead of anger and the need to morally demonizing them. This is consistent with the early Buddhist response to prostitution. As Bhikkhuni Dhammananda says “the early Buddhist texts did not reflect any negative attitude towards prostitutes. The Buddha welcomed these women and gave them the opportunity to walk the path of enlightenment in equality with all people, regardless of gender, caste, or creed” (1991:69). It goes without saying that Buddhists ought to do something more than just permitting without condoning prostitution. However, our concern here is not to discuss what Buddhists should do to solve the problem of prostitution but rather to understand what they usually do before prostitution.

Both prostitutes and Thai customers are aware of the unwholesomeness of their actions and their negative karmic effects. Accordingly, prostitutes and Thai customers try to counterbalance these acts either with subsequent wholesome actions such as making offerings to temples, or with a wholesome motivation. In the case of prostitutes, the wholesome motivations might be sustaining a large family, paying a debt, taking care of old parents, providing for the education of a daughter to prevent her from becoming a prostitute. In the case of costumers, the wholesome motivation might be treating the prostitute with care and helping her to make more money. The majority of prostitutes come from large agricultural families who have no financial guarantee of their annual product (1991:73-4). However, poverty is not the only cause of prostitution and not all prostitutes and customers perform dark-and-bright actions, that is, intrinsically unwholesome acts with wholesome motivations. There are studies indicating that some

girls become prostitutes due to unwholesome mental states such as craving for quick and easy money to buy a new appliance or just expensive clothes. These dark or unwholesome motivations and the exercise of prostitution for consumerist purposes cannot be said to be a dark-and-bright action. Only when there is a combination of wholesome and unwholesome elements in the same action, one can speak of dark-and-bright actions with dark-and-bright result. The concept of dark-and-bright action does not explain all the reasons and social factors behind the problem of prostitution, it just help to better understand sociological facts such as the less belligerent, neither abolitionist nor liberationist, Buddhist attitude towards prostitution in Thailand.

In sum, mixed motivations and actions with both wholesome and unwholesome features seem to be part of everyday experiences. The concept of dark-and-bright action with dark and bright result can help to explain not only the psychological complexity underlying the performance of many grey actions but also sociological facts such as non-belligerent Buddhist attitudes toward abortion and prostitution.

4. Moral particularism and the concept of dark-and-bright action

Charles Hallisey has been the first Buddhist scholar to claim that Theravāda Buddhist ethics is a form of moral particularism. The work of Hallisey has contributed to a better appreciation of extra-canonical material and the ethical role of narratives in Theravāda Buddhism. He has also shown how stories about the moral life of others are helpful to develop moral judgment and sensitivity to particular cases and the context of moral decisions. However, his understanding of moral particularism is quite different from the particularism that the concept of dark-and-bright action entails.

As a corrective for the tendency to reduce Buddhist ethics to a general moral theory, Charles Hallisey proposes moral particularism as an alternative way to understand Theravāda Ethics. According to Hallisey, asking about the moral theory of Theravāda Buddhism ‘has distorted our perceptions of Theravādin ethics’ (1996:34). For Hallisey Theravāda ethics is a pluralist tradition that contains several moral theories and different modes of ethical reasoning. In this sense Theravāda Buddhism does not differ from other religious ethical traditions. ‘As a historical phenomenon, the Theravāda Buddhist tradition (not to speak of Buddhism more generally) has been internally diverse, just as Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism have been; and just as it is certainly inappropriate to speak of all of Christianity as teleological or deontological, so it is with the Buddhist traditions’ (1996:35). Given this pluralism, for Hallisey ‘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 Buddhist availed themselves of and argued over a variety of moral theories’ (1996:37). Consequently, he takes the question in another direction, a direction that ‘allows us to see the ethical diversity in the Theravāda as more than a historical accident’ (1996:37). That new direction is nothing other than moral particularism. In Hallisey’s words ‘I think we should ask whether it is possible that Buddhists approached their ethical concerns without any ethical theory at all, but instead adopted a kind of ethical particularism’ (1996:37).

It is important to notice that for Hallisey the ethical diversity of Theravāda Buddhism is not a historical accident, but rather the consequence of the moral particularism of Buddhists, which for him seems to mean having a variety of ethical theories (first quote) and approaching ethical concerns without any ethical theory at all

(second quote). In contrast to Hallisey's view, I contend that the Pāli Nikāyas and Theravāda Buddhism contain a consistent ethical theory with several criteria to determine the goodness or morality of actions. In these different criteria of goodness it is possible to appreciate elements of virtue ethics, moral realism and utilitarianism. Given the emphasis on the cultivation of virtues to attain nirvana, early Buddhist ethics and Theravāda Buddhism can be considered a kind of virtue ethics provided one does not ignore its moral realist and utilitarian elements. The presence of virtue ethics, moral realist and utilitarian elements in the Pāli Nikāyas and Theravāda Buddhism does not make them pluralistic in the sense of having a plurality of ethical theories, or in the sense of approaching moral matters without any ethical theory at all. The same might be said of other traditions of Buddhist ethics, but to prove this point is beyond my academic competence.

The Pāli Nikāyas and Theravāda Buddhism have also particularist elements, but not because of the ethical pluralism of their texts and living traditions. My hypothesis is that particularism in the Pāli Nikāyas and Theravāda Buddhism is the consequence of having several criteria of goodness and a concept of action irreducible to just dark or bright actions. It is precisely because there are several criteria of goodness and not just a universal criterion with a black or white concept of action that early Buddhist ethics and Theravāda Buddhism can be said to have particularist elements. In other words, it is because there are dark-and-bright actions and not just dark or bright actions, that one has to pay attention to the particulars of each and every action with the help of several criteria of goodness.

Hallisey further explains ethical particularism as ‘something analogous to a very old problem in western philosophy, the “problem of the criterion” as it is now called in contemporary epistemology’ (1996:37). Drawing on Roderick Chisholm, Hallisey describes the epistemological problem of the criterion as the dilemma between methodism and particularism. He defines epistemological methodism as ‘the expectation that in order to recognize individual instances of knowledge, we must first know the criteria for knowledge’ (1996:41). In other words, methodism gives priority to the criteria of knowledge over the knowledge of particulars instances. Hallisey claims that most studies of Buddhist ethics presupposed some sort of epistemological methodism. That is, they have assumed that ‘only by theoretically knowing the criteria for ethical knowledge can we recognize any particular instance of morality as such.’ In other words, most studies of Buddhist ethics have tried to know first the criterion or method to determine the goodness of something, and only after they have applied that method to particular cases. Hallisey challenges this methodism and suggests that before choosing any criterion in Buddhist ethics, that is, before answering the question ‘what is the moral family to which Buddhism belongs?’, we must study first particular Buddhist texts and communities.

I certainly share Hallisey’s emphasis on the need to study more particular texts and communities in order to improve our conclusions about the nature of Buddhist ethics. However, I believe we already have enough evidence to define early Buddhist ethics and Theravāda Buddhism as a kind of virtue ethics with moral realist, utilitarian and particularist elements. On the contrary, I do not see enough evidence to conclude that

Theravāda Buddhism is a form of moral particularism with a variety of inconsistent ethical theories or without a general ethical theory at all.

My research on the concept of dark-and-bright action and other aspects of Theravāda Buddhist ethics is based on the study of particular Buddhist texts, namely, the Pāli Nikāyas, and particular Theravāda communities in the highlands of Sri Lanka. After analyzing the data I can conclude without having to commit myself to epistemological methodism or particularism that early Buddhist ethics and living Theravāda ethics are not instances of epistemological particularism. In both early Buddhist texts and Theravāda communities I have observed that even though Buddhist ethics is taught through the study of particular cases in traditional narratives, there are always already existing criteria of goodness underlying the teaching process of Buddhist ethics. In the Pāli Nikāyas the already existing criteria of goodness are taught together with particular cases and in order to apply the criteria to more particular cases. Similarly, Theravāda communities teach already existing criteria of goodness through the study of particular cases in order to train the practitioner to apply the criteria to new particular cases.

The normative priority corresponds to the criteria, not to the particular cases. In this sense, Buddhist ethics is not particularist. This, however, does not mean that the particulars of each and every action are unimportant in Buddhist ethics, or that the application of several criteria of goodness is incompatible with paying attention to the particulars of actions. On the contrary, the existence of several criteria of goodness and the lack of a simplistic dark or bright concept of action seems to suggest that none of the criteria is universal and that not all the possible particulars of actions are exhausted by a single criterion with a dark or bright concept of action. That is why it is necessary to

apply the different criteria with discernment and always attending to the particulars of each action.

Both Hallisey and myself would agree in that Buddhist ethics is particularistic in the sense that it requires discernment and consideration of the particulars of actions. We also would agree in seeing Buddhist ethics as particularistic because the moral norms derived from the different criteria of goodness are not universally applicable in all instances. However, the reasons and the view of Buddhist ethics behind these particularistic claims are substantially different.

While I see early Buddhist ethics and Buddhist ethics in general as having a consistent ethical theory with elements of particularism, virtue ethics, moral realism and utilitarianism, Hallisey sees Theravāda Buddhist ethics as a form moral particularism with a plurality of inconsistent ethical theories or without a general ethical theory at all. While Hallisey seems to derive Buddhist ethical particularism from an epistemological standpoint in keeping with contemporary moral particularism (Dancy 1993), I derived Buddhist ethical particularism from a flexible concept of action and the existence of several criteria of goodness. I see the epistemological question whether or not the particulars of a moral action are known before the criteria of goodness as foreign to Buddhist ethics. The epistemological dilemma particularism or methodism does not appear in the Pāli Nikāyas and to my knowledge it does not play any role during the process of learning ethics in Theravāda communities.

Whether or not Buddhist epistemology is closer to methodism or particularism is a different matter, and in my view unrelated to Buddhist ethics. The ethical fact remains that the criteria of goodness has normative priority over particular cases in both Buddhist

texts and Theravāda communities. Even in Vinaya texts where rules are derived from particular instances, there are always already existing criteria of goodness that help to determine the morality of these particular instances. In sum, I do not see grounds to claim that Buddhist ethics is particularist due to epistemological reasons. As I have already said, the particularist elements of early Buddhist ethics and Buddhist ethics in general are the consequence of a concept of action irreducible to just dark or bright actions as well as to the existence of several criteria of goodness. Since none of the criteria generates moral principles universally applicable in all instances, and since not all actions are either dark or bright, discernment and attention to the particulars of actions are always indispensable.

However, Hallisey does not limit himself to advocate epistemological particularism as a better approach to study Buddhist ethics. He goes a step further and argues that some traditions of Theravāda ethics are particularistic. In order to illustrate what he means by ethical particularism, Hallisey discusses the ethics of W.D. Ross, a British philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century famous for his translations of Aristotle and his ethical theory of *prima facie* duties. Drawing on Jonathan Dancy, a representative of contemporary moral particularism, Hallisey states that:

‘from Ross, we have learned to expect that “in ethics everything is pretty messy, and there is not much room for the sort of moral theory” that would meet the standards of those who look to theory to provide a list of basic moral principles, a justification of what is on the list, and an account of how to derive more specific attributes or actions from the basic principles. Ross account of *prima facie* duties does not suggest 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’ (1996: 38-39).

In order to further illustrate this view of Theravāda ethics as a form of particularism, Hallisey discusses stories of the commentarial tradition of the Maṅgalasutta. After explaining the important ethical role of stories in Theravāda Buddhism, Hallisey claims that thanks to stories we begin to feel comfortable with the

possibility that ‘features which might count in favor of a given action in one context may count against in another.’

If something can be inferred from the quote about Ross, is that for Hallisey particularism implies a ‘pretty messy’ ethics, that is, an ethics without consistency, a list of basic moral principles, a justification of what is on that list, an account to derive specific actions from basic moral principles, and without criteria to determine why some moral principles are more important than others. Similarly, from Hallisey’s analysis of stories in Theravāda Buddhism it can be inferred that for him the moral valence of features of actions is contextually dependent, that is, a feature might be morally good in a particular context and evil in a different one.

My main interest here is to differentiate the particularist model of Hallisey from the particularist elements associated with to the concept of dark-and-bright action. The question of whether or not particularism is the best model to study Buddhist ethics has already been addressed by Kevin Schilbrack, who has pointed out that the evidence provided by Hallisey is insufficient and that his exegesis of the commentaries of the *Maṅgalasutta* is questionable (1997). Since I only claim that there are particularist elements in Buddhist ethics, Schilbrack rejection of Hallisey’s particularism as a general model to understand Buddhist ethics does not apply to me. In fact, I fully agree with Schilbrack’s criticism of Hallisey.

The comparison between the ethics of Ross and that of the Theravāda tradition in order to illustrate the particularism characteristic of Buddhist ethics is misleading. For instance, Jonathan Dancy, the contemporary ethicist mostly associated with moral particularism devotes great part of his work *Moral Reasons* to prove that David Ross’

ethics is not a particularist. Similarly, Brad Hooker speaks of Rossian generalism and contrast Ross' pluralist generalism to the particularism of Dancy (Hooker 2000). Since Hallisey's ideas about particularism resemble more the views of Dancy than those of Ross, it would have been more helpful to compare Dancy to Theravāda instead of Ross. Dancy's emphasis on epistemological particularism as a foundation of ethical particularism, and his view of the moral valence of features of actions as contextually dependent are strikingly similar to the particularism Hallisey attributes to Theravāda Buddhism. Ross's ethical system, however, as well as other kinds of virtue ethics rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, contain particularist elements that do not necessarily make them instances of moral particularism as defined by Dancy (T.H. Irwin 2000). Similarly, the Pāli Nikāyas and Theravāda Buddhism possess particularist elements but that does not make them forms of moral particularism as defined by Hallisey.

I have already rejected epistemological particularism as the foundation of ethical particularism in the Pāli Nikāyas and Theravāda communities. Regarding the contextual variation of the moral valence of features of actions, I do not see evidence in the Pāli Nikāyas nor in the living Theravāda communities of Sri Lanka where I have lived. The moral valence of features of actions does not change from context to context. Killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and taking intoxicants, greed, hatred and delusion, harsh, malicious, false and frivolous speech, maintain their moral valence across different contexts. What contexts may modify is not the unwholesomeness or negative valence of moral features, but rather the overall degree of unwholesomeness of actions. For instance, the action stealing with a wholesome motivation and wholesome consequences does not make the feature stealing something morally good. However, the overall

unwholesomeness of the action decreases due to the presence of a wholesome motivation and unwholesome consequences.

The only evidence I see in Theravāda Buddhism that might justify the contextual variation of the valence of moral features is killing. The justification of killing non-Buddhists in the Mahāvamsa in order to protect Buddhism is a well known episode of Theravāda ethics. However, this transformation of killing into a wholesome act is extremely exceptional and occurs in an extra-canonical work devoted to the history of Sri Lanka. It is important to notice that neither the Pāli Nikāyas, nor the Vinaya literature, nor the Abhidharma tradition of Theravāda Buddhism allows for such transformation of the valence of the moral feature killing. Even in the *Upāyakaṣālya Sūtra*, a Mahāyāna text famous for justifying the compassionate killing of a man in order to prevent him from killing 500 others, the valence of the moral feature killing does not change and therefore, the negative karmic consequences of killing are to be experienced by the killer in the future.

In sum, the Pāli Nikāyas and Theravāda Buddhism are not particularist in the sense of advocating the contextual variation of the valence of moral features. Nevertheless, the particularist elements associated with the concept of dark-and-bright action do imply the variation of the overall wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of actions. An unwholesome or evil feature is always evil, and a wholesome or good feature is always good. However, an action with a combination of good and evil features can be more or less morally acceptable, though never the ideal course of action. That is, dark-and-bright actions can be more or less morally acceptable depending on the different permutations of moral features.

Finally, the particularism associated to the concept of dark-and-bright actions does not imply an inconsistent and ‘pretty messy’ Buddhist ethics as Hallisey seems to suggest. The Pāli Nikāyas and the Theravāda tradition contain a variety of lists with moral principles, different justifications of the lists, and several criteria to derive specific actions and to determine the importance of moral principles. The same can be said of Buddhist ethics in general: it is overall consistent as it can be inferred from the emphasis on the cultivation of certain virtues and values across Buddhist traditions (Harvey, 2000). This relative and non-essentialist ethical unity of early Buddhism, the Theravāda tradition and Buddhism in general is perfectly compatible with variations, exceptions and inconsistencies in particular texts and communities. These variations, exceptions and inconsistencies such as the justification of killing in the name of Buddhism are not the consequence of moral particularism as defined by Hallisey, but rather the result of historical accidents, accidents that occur in all religious traditions with a long history.

ABBREVIATIONS

All references to the Pāli texts are to the edition of the Pāli Text Society. References to the *A.nguttara*, *Dīgha*, *Majjhima Nikāyas* are to the volume and page number.

- A. *A.nguttara Nikāya*
- D. *Dīgha Nikāya*
- M. *Majjhima Nikāya*

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