

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 18, 2011

Bile & Bodhisattvas: Śāntideva on Justified Anger

Nicolas Bommarito
Brown University

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: editor@buddhistethics.org

Bile & Bodhisattvas: Śāntideva on Justified Anger

Nicolas Bommarito¹

Abstract²

In his famous text the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the 8th century Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva argues that anger towards people who harm us is never justified. The usual reading of this argument rests on drawing similarities between harms caused by persons and those caused by non-persons. After laying out my own interpretation of Śāntideva's reasoning, I offer some objections to Śāntideva's claim about the similarity between animate and inanimate causes of harm inspired by contemporary philosophical literature in the West. Following this, I argue that by reading Śāntideva's argument as practical advice rather than as a philosophical claim about rational coherence, his argument can still have important insights even for those who reject his philosophical reasoning.

¹ Department of Philosophy, Brown University. Email: nicolas_bommarito@brown.edu.

² This paper was written under the support of a Fulbright-IEE grant in Nepal. It also benefited from the resources at the Lumbini International Research Institute and the help of Christoph Cüppers. I'm grateful to Constance Cassor and Kenrab for helpful discussion, to Daniel Cozort and two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments, and to my father for giving me the same good advice as Śāntideva. The errors, of course, are mine.

Background: Śāntideva and *Bodhicitta*

Śāntideva was a Buddhist monk in India in the 8th century and continues to be one of the most studied and quoted Buddhist philosophers in the world. His most famous work, a classic of *Mahāyāna* Buddhist literature, is the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Tibetan: *byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*). The title of this text has been variously translated as *Engaging in Bodhisattva Deeds*, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and *How to Lead an Awakened Life*. This text became very influential in Tibet and continues to be central to Tibetan Buddhist ethical thought.

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* instructs the reader how to develop certain character traits, affects, and ways of experiencing the world. This cultivation has been interpreted in various ways, e.g., as consequentialist in nature (Goodman) or as a virtue ethic (Keown). Others, such as Jay Garfield, argue that to try force Buddhist ethics to fit in Western categories like virtue ethics or consequentialism is a mistake and that what is essential to it is its phenomenological character (that is, to be a Bodhisattva is to experience the world in a particular way). Interpretive issues aside, there is agreement that the text involves instructions for developing certain mental and emotional states, and also intentional and behavioral tendencies in oneself.

Central to this development is the cultivation of what is known in Sanskrit as *bodhicitta*. Sometimes rendered in English as “enlightened mind” or “spirit of awakening,” the term has two elements: *bodhi* (“enlightenment”) and *citta* (“heart” or “mind”). Together they form a single concept referring to a complex psychological state that involves being motivated to end all suffering and unselfishly develop a deep understanding of the world. Jay Garfield explains it this way:

It is a standing motivational state with conative and affective dimensions ... [Which] demands the development of skills in moral perception, moral responsiveness, traits of character, insight into the nature of reality so deep that it transforms our way of seeing ourselves and others, and what we would call practical wisdom.

Garfield's explanation highlights some of the complexity and subtleties of the notion. As Francis Brassard notes, it often connotes “a specific spiritual approach and especially the fruits it produces” (150). There is much to be said about the notion, but for my purposes it will be enough to see that *bodhicitta* is a family of mental states that involves one experiencing the world in a certain way perceptually and emotionally, having certain intentions, and being able to carry them out.

The Argument: Persons & Bile

In the chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* on patience (Tibetan: *bzod pa*), Śāntideva offers arguments which attempt to show that anger towards persons who harm us is never warranted. The argument is also discussed by later figures in the tradition like Tsongkhapa, a very influential Tibetan lama from the 15th century in his seminal work *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Tibetan: *byang chub lam rim chen mo*).

I will examine a particular strand of this argumentation, occurring at verse twenty-two and following, that relies on drawing similarities between animate and inanimate causes. Śāntideva starts the argument with a challenge:

We are not angry at bile and other such
Sources of great suffering.

We are angry, however, at those with minds.
But they're all incited by conditions (VI.22)³

Śāntideva's challenge is this: both inanimate things like bile and living beings with minds can be sources of pain, and yet we assume that only living beings are the proper object of attitudes like resentment and anger. But Śāntideva points out that mind or not, both are the product of certain conditions. For example, both someone who hits us out of anger and a toothache are both simply the results of particular situational factors coming to fruition. If both are simply the product of conditions, Śāntideva argues, why treat them differently? Why think it makes sense to get angry at someone who slaps us and not at a toothache?

This verse suggests an argument with the startling conclusion that anger towards people who harm us is unwarranted in the same way that anger towards toothaches and hurricanes is unwarranted:

P1—Inanimate causes of harm like bile do not warrant attitudes like anger.

P2—Animate causes of harm are similar to inanimate causes.

(P3—Similar causes of harm warrant similar attitudes.)⁴

C—Animate causes of harm do not warrant attitudes like anger.

One might deny P1 and claim that things like bile *do* warrant anger. This would allow one to accept the rest of Śāntideva's reasoning and simply accept that *both* animate and inanimate causes of suffering are proper objects of attitudes like anger. Some attitudes similar to anger do seem

³The translations of Śāntideva are my own and are from the Tibetan (sDe dge edition).

⁴I have included this premise in parentheses because it is not explicitly given by Śāntideva, although it is necessary for the argument to work (Vernezze refers to it as "like cases should be treated alike.") Although there are, no doubt, reasons to reject this premise, I will not object to this part of the argument.

to have this symmetry. One might abhor those who harm us the way we abhor soggy Corn Flakes: muggers and soggy breakfast are both just things that make the world a worse place.⁵ This suggests that the kind of anger Śāntideva has in mind is not bare-bones abhorrence that applies equally to persons and Corn Flakes.

This kind of response is counter-intuitive when applied to anger that includes aspects of blame. This sort of anger seems unjustified when applied to inanimate objects. It is one thing to notice that people *do* often get angry at their feet when they stub a toe or angry at their computers when their work is deleted; it is quite another to claim that these attitudes are warranted in the same way as is our anger at a mugger who has hit us and taken our wallet. Śāntideva rightly points out that when we discover that our window was broken not by malicious teenagers, but by a gust of wind, we do not feel justified in being angry at the wind in the same way we were angry at the teenage gang. It may make sense to feel upset when you hear thunder at your picnic, but it does not make sense to get angry in a way that *blames* the weather for ruining your day.

The more controversial premise is P2; people seem to be quite a different source of pain than bile or toothaches. Offering Śāntideva's argument to the average non-philosopher who is unfamiliar with Buddhism is likely to result in outright dismissal: the pain in your gut caused by bile and the pain caused by the fist of a mugger may feel the same, but we feel justified in getting angry at the mugger in a way that we do not feel when we get angry at bile. After all, the mugger should know better, shouldn't he? They might have a lot in common, but it certainly seems like there is an important difference between teenagers and gusts of wind, even though both may break our windows.

⁵ I take this example from Pereboom (35).

Śāntideva anticipates our reluctance to accept P2 and he devotes the next several verses to offering support for this premise. He points out many ways that animate causes of harm *are* similar to inanimate causes: their arising when unwanted and unplanned and their lack of total autonomy and independent existence. In what follows I will outline the support Śāntideva offers for P2 and suggest why such similarities are not enough to get Śāntideva the conclusion he wants.

Persons & Bile: Similarities and Differences

Śāntideva starts by pointing out that both anger and things like toothaches come to us despite being unwanted and unplanned. He writes:

For example, even though unwanted,
illness still arises.
Similarly, even though unwanted,
Afflictive emotions arise forcefully. (VI.23)

Even without thinking “I’ll get angry”
People naturally get angry.
Even without thinking “I’ll be produced”
Like that, anger is produced. (VI.24)

Like an illness, anger comes despite being unwanted and unplanned. Since it does not make sense to get angry at someone for getting sick (at least someone whose sickness is unwanted and unplanned), it does not make sense to get angry at someone who hurts us out of anger. But the claim that anger is always unwanted and unplanned does not seem to be entirely true. One can imagine going to meet an ex-friend who has betrayed you and thinking, “Once I get him alone after the party, I am going to let loose on him!” In a case like this, we seem to want to be an-

gry and to plan on it (or at least plan to *allow* it to come); we might even intentionally encourage it to come by mentally going through the various ways our ex-friend has wronged us.⁶

Cases of desired and planned anger aside, there seems to be a tension in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* regarding what attitudes are warranted regarding causes that do not come about intentionally. Consider again *bodhicitta*, the state of wanting to gain Enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Śāntideva writes:

Just as in a cloudy, dark night
 In an instant, a flash of lightning illuminates
 Similarly, rarely, by the power of the Buddha
 Worldly beings sometimes think of merit (I.5)

If *bodhicitta* arises, in an instant
 Weaklings in grasp of the prison of worldly existence,
 Are called children of the Buddha
 And become worthy of reverence in the world of gods and humans. (I.9)

Śāntideva devotes the entire first chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* to praising *bodhicitta* and those who have it. And yet, *bodhicitta* seems to share many of the same traits as anger and illness. It can come when unplanned, like a flash of lightning and can arise not autonomously, through its own power, but through the power of something external, the Buddha. Like anger, *bodhicitta* does not think “I’ll be produced” and

⁶ One might object that if, as Buddhists often claim, there are no enduring selves, then even if an intention to get angry at a later time exists, the later anger still did not intend to arise. To talk of anger *intending* anything seems to be a category mistake—intentions are not the sorts of things that emotions can have. However, even on a non-self, reductionist view, the later anger can be the result of an intention and so be *planned* and can also be the object of a desire and so also be *wanted* (even if there is no person they are planned or wanted by).

one who has a flash of *bodhicitta* might not think, “Now I’ll have *bodhicitta*.” But unlike anger, Śāntideva counts *bodhicitta* itself as a good thing and takes a person who has *bodhicitta* to be worthy of praise: they’re called children of the Buddha and worthy of reverence from gods and humans. If someone with a good trait like *bodhicitta* can rightfully be praised despite the trait not arising from its own power and not being planned, it seems like those with a bad trait like intending to harm can be the rightful object of attitudes like anger. If it makes sense for good traits, it ought to make sense for bad ones too.

Śāntideva might simply reply, with Susan Wolf, that there is an asymmetry between praise and blame; blame presupposes self-power in a way that praise does not.⁷ Common sense often seems to support this: we feel it acceptable to praise people who are attractive or who learn quickly even though we know that these things are a result of external factors. On the other hand, we tend to find it unacceptable to blame people with physical deformities or learning disabilities because “it’s not their fault.” But, as Derk Pereboom points out, there is a difference between seeing a trait as praiseworthy and seeing someone as deserving praise for the trait.⁸ An attractive or clever person is praiseworthy in that they actually possess a valuable trait, but *they* do not really deserve the praise because it is entirely the result of external factors. This provides some wiggle room for Śāntideva; perhaps a *bodhisattva* has a trait that is praiseworthy, but she herself does not actually deserve any praise (a view which our *bodhisattva* might very well endorse).⁹

⁷ For a more detailed treatment of this, see Susan Wolf’s “Asymmetrical Freedom”.

⁸ This point can be found at Pereboom (35). Intuitions on this point, however, seem to be split; consider Susan Wolf (165), “Presumably, an agent who does the right thing for the right reasons deserves praise for his action whether it was determined or not.”

⁹ Daniel Cozort suggests that if we conceive of *bodhicitta* as simply the removal of negative traits, the idea that one in such a state does not deserve praise can seem easier to swallow.

Autonomy and Hard Determinism

The other, more troubling similarity between animate and inanimate causes that Śāntideva offers is that neither has autonomy nor independent existence. Just as the tooth that aches is a result of things like genetic factors, oral bacteria, and the structure of nerves, the person who slaps us is a result of conditions, including their anger. Śāntideva writes:

However, all faults and
 Various kinds of bad actions,
 All arise from the power of conditions.
 They do not have autonomy. (V.25)

But even those collections of conditions,
 Do not think, “I’ll be produced.”
 Even what is produced does not think,
 “I’ll be produced.” (V.26)

The first claim is that faults like anger and malicious intent are inextricably wrapped up in external factors and conditions; they lack autonomy and so are not rightfully objects of anger. The word translated here as “autonomy” is *rang-wang* (Tibetan: *rang dbang*) and is literally “self-power.” A hurricane does not intend to break your window, that being merely the effect of air pressure and meteorological conditions. Similarly, when someone mugs you, the mugging is also the effect of conditions such as a bad economy, an abusive upbringing, and a chance meeting. Śāntideva here has much in common with Western hard determinists in that both endorse two claims: first, they claim that our actions are entirely the result of external factors, and second, they claim that this fact undermines responsibility and attitudes that presuppose responsibility, like anger.

Śāntideva offers a metaphysical argument in verses VI.27-31 to show that there is no autonomy. The argument seems to go like this: Autonomy requires a self, there is no self, therefore there can be no autonomy. Without going into detail, there is reason to be wary of the claim that the non-existence of a static, unchanging self rules out autonomy. One might resist the first premise and take autonomy to be a property not of a singular self or particular mental state, as Śāntideva suggests, but of collections of mental and physical states. Perhaps it is not a soul that has autonomy, but a causal chain. On this picture, the more a collection produces effects in accordance with certain mental states contained in the chain, like desires, intentions, and so on, the more autonomy the collection has; a collection has autonomy to the degree that it produces the effects that the collection desires and intends to produce. This is similar to the conventional notion of autonomy as doing what you want to do; an unwilling drug addict has less autonomy because he does not do what he wants to do. Or to put it in a self-less way, the collection of physical and mental events conventionally known as the “unwilling drug addict” lacks autonomy because it does not produce the physical effects at which the desires aim. This is not to say that this is the only conception of autonomy (it is not by a long shot), but it does suggest that we *can* make sense of the notion of autonomy even if there are not enduring selves.

Metaphysical arguments aside, there is also compelling empirical evidence for the claim that our actions are the result of external factors. Evidence suggests that external factors play a much larger role in our behavior than common-sense admits; these factors might be obvious and dramatic, like a traumatic upbringing, but can also be more subtle and mundane than expected. In his book *Lack of Character*, John Doris offers a good deal of empirical evidence that seemingly minor situational factors have a great effect on our behavior. In one example, unknowing participants make a phone call from a payphone, some of them finding money

in already the phone and others not. When leaving the phone booth, another person drops a stack of papers and starts to gather them up. The result: with disturbing regularity, if you got money, you helped gather the papers up; if you did not, you walked right by. These kinds of cases suggest that perhaps Śāntideva is right to say that we lack self-power and that the kinds of external conditions that bring about our behaviors include much more than we might think.

One can, however, resist the force of Śāntideva's determinist claim that we lack autonomy. It is true that neither hurricanes nor persons have *total* autonomy, *total* self-power. We are influenced by an incalculable number of situational forces. But power, control, and autonomy all come in degrees. One can admit that persons, hurricanes, and bile are each not *totally* free of situational influences, but also point out that a person seems to have *more* autonomy than bile. We often talk about some people having less control or autonomy than others: a drug-addict seems to have less autonomy, less self-power than someone who is free from addiction. This difference in self-power seems to correlate with how justified we are in being angry at the harms they cause. Someone who harms us because they are in the grip of heroin addiction or someone who steals because of a serious case of kleptomania, warrants less anger than the rest of us who are free from such factors and have *more* control over what we do. We both lack *total* control, but unlike the addict or the kleptomaniac, we are free from one particularly binding factor and consequently have *more* self-power. We might have less autonomy than we usually suppose, but that does not mean we lack it altogether.

There is also reason to resist the second claim, that a lack of total autonomy or self-power rules out any responsibility and makes any attitudes that assume it unjustified. In claiming that neither person nor inanimate causes warrant anger because neither has *total* self-power, Śāntideva seems to set the bar too high; perhaps it is not *total* autonomy

that is required to warrant anger, but merely *some* autonomy. Rather than see inanimate causes and animate causes as similar in that both lack total self-power, it is natural to see a difference: while inanimate objects lack *any* kind of self-power (they cannot decide, intend, aspire), they are different from animate causes who do have a limited degree of autonomy, even if it is far less than we may usually assume.

Even if one rejects that we have some degree of autonomy (or enough for responsibility), there are other differences between animate causes and inanimate causes that could warrant different attitudes. In the West, there is no shortage of compatibilists who do just that: some common suggestions are that an agent can be held responsible if she did what she wanted to do because she wanted to do it (Frankfurt) or if she was responding to the right reasons (Arpaly). An agent can be held responsible for giving a thirsty child water when there is a desire to relieve suffering and this desire is the cause of giving water. These factors can obtain even if we lack any kind of self-power; even a deterministic chain of events can occur because of the right reasons or because particular desires are present. Śāntideva offers little support for the claim that a lack of self-power must entail a lack of responsibility. However, compatibilist views can be seen as pointing out important ways that animate beings differ from inanimate objects that could justify the asymmetry in our attitudes towards animate and inanimate causes of pain.

Assumptions of *Bodhicitta*

Perhaps Śāntideva would deny both compatibilist accounts of what factors warrant anger and also that persons have more self-power than hurricanes or toothaches (and perhaps deny that it comes in degrees at all); “It is all just collections of conditions” we can imagine him replying. But the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* itself seems to presuppose some important dif-

ferences between animate and inanimate things that might make the former deserving praise and blame in ways that the latter are not. The intuitive response to the similarities Śāntideva draws between animate and inanimate causes of suffering is to point out that certain kinds of collections have special properties: they can form plans, intentions, and aspirations and then they can take steps to make it more likely that those plans, intentions, and aspirations are realized. We call those collections “persons” for short and because they have these special properties they can warrant certain attitudes like admiration, resentment, and sometimes, anger.

Recall the purpose of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*—it is a text that offers a method for people to cultivate a state of mind that is free from self-attachment and is compassionate towards all sentient beings; a way for us to encourage *bodhicitta* in ourselves. This method assumes some special features of those that undertake it; hurricanes, sticks, and bile cannot take this path. Why not? Because, unlike persons, they cannot form aspirations and attempt to fulfill such aspirations. Consider some verses from the first chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. First, Śāntideva describes who might benefit from reading the text:

I cultivate of virtue by the energy of faith,
By this it develops for a little while.
But if someone else similar to myself,
Should see this, it may be meaningful. (I.3)

The text will be meaningful to someone similar to Śāntideva. The similarities might be fairly particular, for example an interest in the spiritual life or a background in Indian philosophical thought. But there is another deeper similarity that seems necessary, one suggested by the above lines: the capacity to cultivate virtue. This cultivation assumes some level of self-power; one reads the text, finds it meaningful and can use what

Śāntideva teaches to intentionally increase virtue. A similar notion is echoed later in the text:

Like that, by reflecting just as it has been explained,
I will try to guard the teachings.
If one doesn't listen to the advice of a doctor,
How can one ever be cured? (IV.48)

Doctors do not give advice to bile and toothaches because they lack the capacity to understand, reflect, and apply advice. The ability to listen and reflect is an important distinction between the animate and the inanimate, between teeth and patients, and hurricanes and bullies.

The ability to listen and reflect does not entail a static self that exists through time. Suppose that one accepts the emptiness of persons; there are no enduring selves, only causal chains, collections of mental and physical events. Even if this is true, certain collections, let's call them "animate" for short, are the only ones that include things like beliefs, desires, motives, and intentions. These "animate" chains of events seem to be the only ones that include events like reflection and understanding, in particular, of teachings like those of Śāntideva, and seem to be the only casual collections with any degree of success carrying out these teachings. Containing such events seems not only to be an important difference between animate beings and inanimate objects, but seems to be part of the notion of *bodhicitta* itself. Consider a distinction Śāntideva draws between two types of *bodhicitta*:

Bodhicitta in summary,
There are two kinds to know:
Aspirational *bodhicitta* and
Engaged *bodhicitta*. (I.15)

One who wishes to travel and a traveler,

Just as one can distinguish between those,
 The wise will know these two,
 Gradually coming to distinguish them. (I.16)

The two types of *bodhicitta* are likened to one who wishes to travel and one who actually travels. Aspirational *bodhicitta* (Tibetan: *byang chub sems smon pa*) is when someone has the aspiration, wish, or intention to cultivate a state of mind free from certain negative states, while engaged *bodhicitta* (Tibetan: *byang chub sems 'jug pa*) is when someone actually starts the business of realizing that aspiration on the ground in everyday life.

This suggests something about the sorts of things that can have *bodhicitta*. They are the sorts of things that can have aspirations, wishes, and intentions. This rules out bile, sticks, and hurricanes. But more importantly, they are the sorts of things that have some capacity to put such aspirations into action; they can exert some force that pushes towards manifesting such aspirations. This force is not always sufficient. Sometimes we fail because of the external conditions are not right, but sometimes we fail because of internal factors, as in cases of *akrasia* or weakness of will.¹⁰ Though the force we exert to bring about our aspirations is often insufficient, its existence is what makes composing a text like the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* worthwhile at all. Its purpose is to light the fire in our minds of aspirational *bodhicitta*, but also to help us move to engaged *bodhicitta*, to actually bring about what we aspire to be. After all, Śāntideva's argument occurs in the chapter devoted to patience, to ridding oneself of anger.

One can accept this distinction while holding, as Śāntideva did, that all collections, animate or inanimate, lack any degree of autonomy.

¹⁰ Tom Tillemans draws parallels between Śāntideva's view of *akrasia* and views of Western thinkers such as Plato and Donald Davidson.

One can describe what makes it worthwhile to write a text like the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, in purely causal terms: Śāntideva, in composing his text, wishes to start a causal chain that will, in some cases, result in the elimination of suffering.¹¹ The sort of causal chain that will succeed in this aim will have to be animate—it must include mental events like understanding, intending, aspiring, and so on. For Śāntideva, the inclusion of these kinds of events is only a practical concern; it determines when the causal process is likely to be successful. However, one might agree with Śāntideva there are no enduring selves and no autonomy, but reject the idea that the inclusion of certain mental events in a causal chain is merely a pragmatic concern. Even if there is no autonomy, such mental events might warrant different attitudes towards the causal chains that contain them.¹²

For those who reject hard-determinism, who think that we do have some degree of autonomy, the capacity to encourage or discourage the actualization of intentions is a good candidate for what picks out the sort of thing that can have *bodhicitta*, the sort of thing that can benefit from reading a text like *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, and the sort of thing that can warrant attitudes like anger. It is also likely to be behind the intuition that, unlike a hurricane, the teenagers who break our windows “should know better”—they have capacities, which exert force on what happens, that a hurricane lacks.

¹¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

¹² The story about *why* these things warrant attitudes like anger can vary; there is a wealth of compatibilist explanations. Consider a Frankfurt-inspired view that one is responsible for an action just in case one did what one wanted to do because one wanted to do it. In this case, one is warranted in having an attitude like anger towards a causal chain that causes one harm if the chain contains a desire to harm and that desire causes the harming action (in the right way). On this kind of view, anger is not warranted towards causal chains that lack mental events like desires (for example, hurricanes), but it does not presuppose any autonomy in the causal chain either; the desire and resulting action may well be entirely determined by external conditions. This is a rough sketch of how one might accept a lack of autonomy and still think anger can be warranted towards animate causes of harm.

Even if it turns out that the force someone exerts is not enough to change the outcome, the direction of even limited autonomy seems to change our attitudes of blame and judgments of responsibility. Imagine two kleptomaniacs, both of whom have just stolen and who both suffer an intense and inescapable compulsion to do so. One loves the thrill of it and often jokes about what he has done. He boasts about the expensive things he has taken and one gets the feeling that he would steal even if he were not compelled by his disease. The other feels great shame and regret, often taking the merchandise back to the store days later. He attends therapy sessions but is often overwhelmed by the intense pull to steal.¹³ To put it in Śāntideva's terms, both steal as a result of conditions and not of their own power. But the first seems to warrant anger in a way that the second does not (or at least anger is *more* warranted in the first case). The first is not using the self-power that he has to struggle against doing harm whereas the second does. It is not their success that seems to matter as much as how they use what autonomy they have, what they throw their weight behind and what they struggle against.

Śāntideva is right to point out that there is a good deal of support for P2; there are many similarities between animate and inanimate causes of suffering. But there also seem to be important differences, differences that seem implicit in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* itself. And it is these differences that cast doubt upon the soundness of P2 and the success of the argument Śāntideva offers.

Argument as Advice: A Practical Reading

What is a compatibilist to do when faced with Śāntideva's argument? Someone sympathetic to one or more of the problems raised earlier can still read the argument in another, more charitable way. One way to

¹³ This is a simplified version of detailed cases discussed by Arpaly.

avoid the issues I have raised so far is to reconsider what sense of “justification” or “warrant” is in play. Suppose a crazed gunman were to burst into my office and, pointing a gun at my head, explain that I can either give him praise or lose my life. When I praise him there is a sense in which my praise is not justified since, after all, he is a malicious gunman and not deserving of praise. But there is another, more practical sense in which my praise is justified; given that I want to stay alive, it makes sense for me to praise him.¹⁴

A common way to read Śāntideva’s argument, the way that I have assumed so far, is that it is about whether or not anger is justified in the first sense: the gunman lacks certain properties that warrant praise and animate causes of suffering lack certain properties that warrant anger. Prajnākarmati, in an Indian commentary on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, says of harms caused by living beings that “The suffering they inflict on others is preconditioned. Hence, they deserve sympathy and not anger” (193). Gyel-Tsap’s commentary uses phrases like “It logically follows that anger towards persons is not reasonable”¹⁵ (rGyal tshab 187). These phrases suggest that the argument is intended in a strongly philosophical sense; it is a rational failure to be angry with a person because to be warranted, the object of anger must have certain properties that living beings simply lack.

But whether or not anger towards animate causes of harm is warranted in this sense, it can be unwarranted in the practical sense in which I am warranted in praising the gunman in my office. Think of the purpose of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*: it is a manual to help the reader get started on the path to engaged *bodhicitta*, on the path to having a stable and peaceful mental life free from negative influences like anger. Just as I am justified in praising the gunman *given that I have the goal of staying*

¹⁴ This distinction appears in Arpaly (9-13) as “warranted” and “desirable.”

¹⁵ This is my translation; the Tibetan reads “*gang zag la yang khro bar mi rigs par thal.*”

alive, getting angry at causes of harm, animate or inanimate, is not justified given that one has the goal of having a stable and peaceful mental life. One can accept this without accepting that the gunman actually deserves praise or that animate causes of harm never actually deserve anger or reproach in the earlier sense.

There are hints at this reading in later discussions of Śāntideva's arguments. In the presentation in his *Lamrim Chenmo*, Tsongkhapa writes that the arguments are "a very powerful remedy for anger" (161) and concludes his presentation of the arguments by saying,

Develop the fortitude of patience, thinking, "It is wrong for even *śrāvakas*, who act for their own purposes alone, to be impatient and get angry. So of course it is wrong for me. I committed myself to achieving the benefit and happiness of all living beings when I generated the spirit of enlightenment [*bodhicitta*]" (165-6)

Tsongkhapa concludes by saying that it is wrong for me to get angry at those who harm me. Why? He does not emphasize that it is a rational mistake, but instead says it is because I have committed myself to cultivating a certain mental trait, *bodhicitta*, and getting angry at those who harm me hinders me in achieving it. Daniel Cozort makes a similar point in discussing Tsongkhapa; he writes,

Note that focus is on what happens to a person who gets angry, not on the immediate consequences to the recipient of the anger. In other words, Tsongkhapa does not argue that anger ought to be avoided because it leads to violence against others or because it tends to provoke the recipient of one's anger into an equally angry state. These would be legitimate arguments, but Tsongkhapa's concern is for the mental state of the person who gets angry. He

wishes to convince us that *anger is simply irrational and that forbearance is beneficial*, not that anger is wrong because it leads to physical or verbal acts (as he might argue if, for instance, he were addressing the faults of intoxication).
(94, emphasis added)

Cozort rightly points out that the focus is on the person who gets angry; being angry is a bad state to be in *for the person who is angry*. But notice that in this passage “irrational” is contrasted with “beneficial”—anger is irrational because it is not beneficial for actualizing the mental life we aspire to have. It is irrational not in a logical or epistemic sense, but in a practical sense. If you want peace of mind, it does not make sense—it is irrational—to get angry at those who harm you. Imagine being in a long line and having someone cut in front of you. This person knowingly and willingly violated one of your rights. There is a sense in which if you get angry, it is warranted; it is not like a selfish person who, always believing that he deserves special treatment, is angry over having to wait in line at all. Your anger at the person who cut in front of you in line is not unwarranted because the person lacks complete control over his will, but because it is not beneficial for you to be angry. Śāntideva himself suggests something similar a few verses after presenting the argument when he writes,

So whether friend or foe,
If you see someone do wrong,
Think, “This is because of conditions”
And you'll become happy. (VI.33)

Here Śāntideva seems unlike a philosopher claiming that a certain attitude “does not make sense” in a rational way, pointing out the logical incoherence of wanting to be both married and single for the rest of one’s life or wishing that one had never been born. Instead, the tone is of

a friend telling you that it “doesn't make sense” to keep dwelling on a past failure. The friend in this case does not mean that you did not really fail or that it is incoherent to regret a certain event. What she means is that dwelling on the failure is making you miserable and it is not beneficial for you to continue dwelling on it. The curmudgeonly person who stewes in his anger over being cut in front of in line or being unfairly passed over for a promotion makes a mistake, but his mistake is not that anger is not an appropriate attitude towards what has happened. His mistake is that stewing in his anger is an unhappy way to live, even though his complaints may be legitimate.

We can see in a similar light the support Śāntideva offers for P2 above, the ways in which harms caused by persons are similar to harms caused by non-persons. Given that we want to have peace of mind and to be free from anger, it makes sense to attend to and emphasize the ways in which persons *are* similar to toothaches and hurricanes. This does not mean there is no difference between the two, but it does mean that if one wishes to cultivate *bodhicitta*, one can be justified in overlooking them.

The idea that Śāntideva's arguments might have a dual purpose has not escaped Western interpreters. Charles Goodman (156-8) suggests that the argument might also be used as an object of meditation. He writes,

Śāntideva makes exactly the same argument as Western hard determinists. Unlike them, however, he advises his readers to strive to eliminate anger and resentment from their psyche by repeated, even continual, reflection on the philosophical reasons for rejecting these emotions. Meanwhile, he compares the proper attitude toward other people with the one most people are inclined to take toward such non-sentient things as bile, fire, sticks. Even if

they cause harm, people do not become angry because no one ascribes agency to them. Anyone who ceased to ascribe true agency or self-determination to people would no longer get angry at them; and Śāntideva urges his readers to make this change in themselves. (157)

As Goodman later notes (162), Western determinists do sometimes recommend eliminating anger via reflection on arguments for determinism. The advice offered by “al dente” determinist, Derk Pereboom often highlights the role of reflecting on determinism in reducing anger:

Modification of anger and resentment, aided by a determinist conviction, could well be a good thing for relationships (supposing that no unhealthy repression is induced). (40)

Pereboom seems to suggest here that it would be good for us to eliminate anger by reflection on determinist convictions (and presumably on the arguments that support them).

Like Pereboom, Goodman's advice on the practical use of the argument seems to require that we accept Śāntideva's argument in the philosophical sense. When he advises us to bring about a change in attitude by reflecting on the “proper” attitude to take towards those who harm us, “proper” seems to be meant in the philosophical sense; he tells us that anger towards inanimate objects is *improper* because they lack agency. Goodman's suggestion seems to be that continual reflection on philosophical readings of Śāntideva's argument is how we can eliminate anger. The practical value of the argument rests on its philosophical success.

This may be a good method for hard (or “al dente”) determinists, who accept Śāntideva's argument in the philosophical sense, but seems to be of little use to those with compatibilist leanings. After all, continual

reflection on an argument one takes to be flawed is unlikely to have much effect on one's negative emotions. But rather than reflecting on Śāntideva's *argument*, as Goodman suggests, the compatibilist can reflect on the support he offers for P2: the many ways in which animate causes of harm *are* similar to inanimate causes.

I am not arguing here that anger is, in fact, justified in the philosophical sense, nor am I claiming that Śāntideva himself did not intend his arguments to be read in this sense (he probably did). What I *am* claiming is this: even if one rejects Śāntideva's philosophical arguments concerning autonomy, the similarity between animate and inanimate causes, and anger, one can still read Śāntideva in a practical way *regardless* of one's views on this question. Śāntideva makes both a philosophical and a practical argument and philosophers who reject the former need not also reject the latter.

For the Buddhist, the idea that attitudes like anger might be warranted in the philosophical sense can seem difficult to swallow. It is plausible to assume that Buddhas do not get angry because they see reality as it is; so if reality warrants certain attitudes, which Buddhas fail to have, could this mean that Buddhas are emotionally defective? I think the answer is no. Though Buddhists might have other grounds for accepting that anger is never warranted in the philosophical sense, the fact that a certain attitude is warranted in the philosophical sense does not mean that someone, Buddha or not, is defective if she fails to have it.

Suppose you are going to a nice dinner at a fancy restaurant with a friend. Your friend has waited until the last minute to put on his only suit, which he has not worn in several years. When he shows up, you see that the suit is comically and ridiculously small on him. The absurdity of the image *warrants* an attitude of amusement and ridicule (even if you do not actually express it). But someone who fails to have such an attitude, perhaps out of friendship or sympathy, does not seem to be *defective*. One

would be warranted in being amused; it is an attitude that fits the world as it is, but one is not necessarily defective for lacking such an attitude. Many attitudes seem to work this way. One might be *warranted* in feeling nervous before an important presentation, but someone who fails to feel nervous is not defective. A friend who has been through a rough year might be *warranted* in feeling depressed; the attitude would be fitting given that misfortunes occurred in her life, but that does not mean she is somehow emotionally defective if she is not depressed. Being warranted often means that if it *were* to arise, it *would* make sense given the state of the world. This does not always entail that when it fails to arise, one is somehow defective. The same might be true of Buddhas and anger; even if we suppose anger to be a fitting attitude in certain situations, we need not think that a Buddha *should* feel anger or that a Buddha must be emotionally defecting for not getting angry.

The benefits of reflecting on the support Śāntideva offers for the similarity between animate and inanimate causes of harm is based not on our philosophical views about responsibility and determinism, but on general human tendencies when we get angry at someone who harms us. Philippa Foot suggests that virtues exist to counter our human tendencies. Courage is a virtue because humans tend to run from danger; modesty is a virtue because humans tend to see their own good qualities and ignore their flaws. Similarly, regardless of our philosophical views, we tend to focus on the ways in which those who harm us are different from inanimate causes of harm. This focus tends to be especially strong when we feel angry at them and this selective focus often has the effect of intensifying our anger at the expense of our own peace of mind. Focusing in this way can lead to over-estimating just how justified we are in being angry and to becoming angry more frequently. Given that we have these human tendencies, it makes sense for us to direct our attention towards the similarities between animate and inanimate causes of harm that Śāntideva points out. Doing so is a virtue in Foot's sense and does not

require accepting the philosophical arguments of Śāntideva or other hard determinists. We simply have to acknowledge that teenagers, bosses, and *bodhisattvas* have much in common with hurricanes, bile, and toothaches and that we tend to overlook or downplay such similarities. We can understand Śāntideva's advice to be simply that reflection on these similarities can help us to get better at avoiding bad mental states. This sounds like pretty good advice, regardless of your philosophical views.

References

- Arpaly, Nomy. *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Brassard, Francis. *The Concept of Bodhicitta in Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra*. New York: SUNY Press, 2000.
- Cozort, Daniel. "Cutting the Roots of Virtue: Tsongkhapa on the Results of Anger," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* vol. 2 (1995), 83-104.
- Doris, John. *Lack of Character*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Foot, Philippa. "Virtues and Vices" In *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.
- Frankfurt, Harry. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" In *Free Will*, edited by Gary Watson, 81-95. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Garfield, Jay. "What is it Like to be a Bodhisattva? Moral Phenomenology in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*," forthcoming in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (2011). T.S.

Goodman, Charles. "Consequentialism, Agent-Neutrality and Mahayana Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* vol. 58:1 (2008), 17-35.

-----, *Consequences of Compassion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

rGyaltshab darma rinchen. *sPyod 'jug dar Tik shan sbyar*

Keown, Damien. "Origins of Buddhist Ethics" In *Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, edited by William Schweiker, 286-96. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Pereboom, Derk. "Determinism al Dente," *Noûs* vol. 29:1 (1995) 21-45.

Śāntideva. *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. (Tibetan translation).

Śāntideva and Prajñākarmati. Parmanda Sharma trans. *Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra*. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan Press, 2001.

Tillemans, Tom. (2008). "Reason, Irrationality and Akrasia (Weakness of the Will) in Buddhism: Reflections upon Śāntideva's Arguments with Himself" *Argumentation* Vol. 22 (2008), 149-163.

Tsongkhapa. Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee trans. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment Volume Two*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2004.

Vernezze, Peter. "Moderation or the Middle Way: Two Approaches to Anger" *Philosophy East and West* vol.58:1 (2008), 2-16.

Wolf, Susan. "Asymmetrical Freedom" *Journal of Philosophy* vol.77:3 (1980), 151-166.