

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

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

Volume 20, 2013

## The Dalai Lama and the Nature of Buddhist Ethics

Abraham Vélez de Cea  
Eastern Kentucky University

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: [cozort@dickinson.edu](mailto:cozort@dickinson.edu).

# The Dalai Lama and the Nature of Buddhist Ethics

Abraham Vélez de Cea<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article clarifies the nature of Buddhist ethics from a comparative perspective. It contends that the Dalai Lama's ethics is best understood as a pluralistic approach to virtue ethics. The article has two parts. The first part challenges Charles Goodman's interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics as an instance of consequentialism. This is done indirectly, that is, not by questioning Goodman's reading of Śāntideva and Asaṅga, but rather by applying to the Dalai Lama's ethics the same test that Goodman uses to justify his reading of Mahāyāna ethics as a whole. The second part examines the Dalai Lama's ethics in comparison to Christine Swanton, a representative of a pluralistic approach to virtue ethics in contemporary analytic philosophy. By comparing the ethics of the Dalai Lama and Swanton, the article does not wish to suggest that her pluralistic approach to virtue ethics is the closest western analogue to Buddhist virtue ethics. I use comparison, not to understand the Dalai Lama's ethical ideas from the perspective of Swanton's ethics, but rather to highlight what

---

<sup>1</sup> Eastern Kentucky University. E-mail: [abraham.velez@eku.edu](mailto:abraham.velez@eku.edu).

is unique about the Dalai Lama's approach to virtue ethics, which is pluralistic in a characteristically Buddhist way.

Although His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama matters for a number of political, religious, and cultural reasons (Thurman), his ethical ideas remain unappreciated by most professional philosophers. Although the Dalai Lama does not write as an expert in philosophical ethics, this should not be used as an excuse for ignoring his ethical thought.

The purpose of this article is to clarify the nature of the Dalai Lama's ethics and determine the moral theory most helpful for appreciating its depth and complexity. The underlying thesis of the article is that the Dalai Lama's ethics is best understood as a pluralistic form of virtue ethics.

The article has two parts. The first part challenges Charles Goodman's interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics as an instance of universalist perfectionist consequentialism. I do this indirectly, that is, not by questioning his reading of Śāntideva and Asaṅga, but rather by applying to the Dalai Lama's ethics the same test Goodman uses to justify his reading of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The application of Goodman's test demonstrates that the Dalai Lama's ethical theory is closer to virtue ethics than consequentialism. Thus, if it is the case that the Dalai Lama's ethics belongs in the Mahāyāna tradition, then Goodman's consequentialist interpretation of such a tradition cannot be correct, or at the very least it does not apply to Mahāyāna ethics in general.

The second part examines the Dalai Lama's ethics in comparison to Christine Swanton, a representative of a *sui generis* approach to virtue ethics in contemporary analytic philosophy. By comparing the ethics of the Dalai Lama and Swanton, I do not wish to suggest that her pluralistic approach to virtue ethics is the closest western analogue to Buddhist vir-

tue ethics as a whole. My main concern is to provide a consistent interpretation of the Dalai Lama's ethics and facilitate understanding of another *sui generis* approach to virtue ethics. In other words, I use comparison, not to understand the Dalai Lama's ethical ideas from the perspective of Swanton's ethics, but rather to highlight what is unique about the Dalai Lama's approach to virtue ethics.

Some people may object that comparisons of Buddhist and Western ethical traditions are not the best way to understand Buddhist ethics on its own terms. I find this objection questionable. First, whether we like it or not, the truth is that most moral philosophers are unable to read Buddhist texts in their original languages and cultural contexts. Unless Buddhist scholars facilitate understanding through comparative studies of Buddhist and non-Buddhist ethical traditions, Buddhist approaches to virtue ethics, which I characterize as pluralistic and gradualist, will continue to be misunderstood and virtually ignored. Second, it is not the case that comparisons of Buddhist ethics and other ethical traditions are hermeneutically unhelpful. Quite the contrary, comparative studies not only refine our interpretations but also generate new insights and new perspectives that otherwise would not arise. Third, it is a bit naïve to think that particular studies and monographs on Buddhist ethics in English or in other western languages do not involve comparisons at least with terminology that originates in western ethical traditions. The point is not that particular studies and monographs are equally bad to understand Buddhist ethics on its own terms. I am simply suggesting that comparative studies of Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions can also be a respectable way of learning about Buddhist ethics, a way that supplements what we can learn through particular studies and monographs. We need both, not one or the other.

## Is The Dalai Lama's Ethics A Form Of Perfectionist Consequentialism?

In his article “Consequentialism, Agent-Neutrality, and Mahāyāna Ethics,” Charles Goodman contends that Mahāyāna Ethics “involves some kind of universalist consequentialism” (18). Goodman points out several differences between Aristotelian virtue ethics and universalist perfectionist consequentialism, and uses them as a test to determine the sort of ethical theory that best corresponds to the ethical teachings of diverse Sanskrit *sūtras* and two classical Indian Buddhist thinkers, Śāntideva and Asaṅga.

According to Goodman, virtue ethics

. . . does not represent a very valuable interpretative strategy when it comes to Indian Mahāyāna ethical thought. There seem to be at least some texts from this tradition that could more fruitfully be interpreted in terms of universalist perfectionist consequentialism. (31)

More specifically, Goodman claims that Asaṅga “seems to hold a kind of rule-consequentialism” and that there is “considerable, though perhaps not conclusive, evidence for regarding Śāntideva as an act-consequentialist” (31). Goodman expands his consequentialist reading of Buddhist ethics in his book *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (2009), and even interprets Theravāda Buddhism as having a tendency to advocate a form of rule-consequentialism.

Given that the Dalai Lama's ethics can be said to represent a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and since he has written several commentaries on Śāntideva's works,<sup>2</sup> it may seem plausible to consider perfectionist

---

<sup>2</sup> Dalai Lama, *A Flash of Lightning in the Dark: A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, (Boston & London: Shambala, 1994). *Transcendent Wisdom: A Commentary on the Ninth Chapter of Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publica-

consequentialism also as the best way to interpret the Dalai Lama's ethical thought. This however, is not the case. In order to demonstrate that the Dalai Lama's ethical theory is better understood as an instance of virtue ethics, I will use the same procedure as Goodman. That is, I will apply to the Dalai Lama's ethics the differences that Goodman establishes between Aristotelian virtue ethics and universalist perfectionist consequentialism. As Goodman himself acknowledges, these differences can be used as a test to determine which kind of ethical theory can most appropriately be attributed to Buddhists, ("Consequences" 21) in this case the Dalai Lama.

The first difference that Goodman mentions is that unlike universalist perfectionist consequentialism, Aristotelian virtue ethics is eudaimonist. The standard eudaimonist thesis is that an action or trait is morally praiseworthy if it constitutes or contributes to the agent's eudaimonia. On the contrary, for perfectionist consequentialists an action may be harmful for the agent's eudaimonia and be right at the same time as long as the consequences of such action are sufficiently beneficial to others ("Consequences" 19).

Before applying this first difference to the Dalai Lama's ethics, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by eudaimonia. The Greek term eudaimonia can be translated as "happiness," "flourishing" and even "well-being." However, none of these translations fully capture this value-laden concept, which for Aristotle refers to the highest good of human existence, "the highest of all goods achievable in action" (Aristotle 1095a16). As Rosalind Hursthouse explains, all these translations have their advantages and disadvantages. Happiness is problematic because it connotes a subjective state whereas eudaimonia is objective. However, as Hursthouse herself states, "despite the undoubted fact that 'happiness'

---

tions, 1988). *Healing Anger: The Power of Patience from a Buddhist Perspective*, (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1997).

can have this subjective connotation, it does seem that we also have a more objective notion much closer to that of eudaimonia, a notion of ‘true (or real) happiness’” (10).

That is, unless we qualify the translations of eudaimonia with an adjective such as “true,” “real,” “genuine,” “supreme,” or “ultimate,” we do not fully convey the meaning of the Greek term. The Dalai Lama does not use the terms eudaimonia and flourishing but he does make a distinction between “ephemeral” and “genuine happiness” or between “lasting happiness” and “a transient state of well-being” (*New* 52, 59). In what follows, I use the Dalai Lama’s concepts of lasting and genuine happiness as functionally equivalent, though not necessarily identical, to the Aristotelian’s concept of eudaimonia. Both eudaimonia and lasting or genuine happiness function as the highest good in their respective ethical systems.

For the Dalai Lama, the principal characteristic of lasting and genuine happiness is inner peace, which “is rooted in concern for others and involves a high degree of sensitivity and feeling” (*New* 55). External factors such as good health, friends, freedom, and a degree of prosperity are valuable and helpful in establishing a sense of individual well-being, but they cannot make us completely happy (*New* 56-57). As the Dalai Lama puts it “there is no hope of attaining lasting happiness if we lack inner peace...no external factor can create it” (*New* 57). The Dalai Lama also discusses the “joys of family life,” material things, sensory experiences, possessions, work, career, and aesthetic experiences derived from music and the arts as sources of different degrees of happiness, though all of them are transient and ephemeral (*New* 50-52).

Inner peace is dependent on our basic attitude or the way we relate to external circumstances as well as on the actions we undertake (*New* 58-59). Our actions can have a positive, negative, or neutral impact on our expectations or experience of lasting happiness. Actions condu-

cive to a transient sense of well-being have no positive value in themselves; they simply seek enjoyment or the satisfaction of needs and cravings without much concern for the long-term consequences. The Dalai Lama makes clear that this is part of our nature and that there is nothing wrong with this type of action seeking a transient state of well-being (*New* 59). However, actions conducive to lasting happiness involve more discernment, weighting different factors including both the short-term benefit for us and the long-term effects on others' happiness. Only this kind of action generates "happiness which is characterized by peace and genuine satisfaction" (*New* 60-61).

The Dalai Lama differentiates between two kinds of actions conducive to lasting and genuine happiness: ethical acts or actions where we refrain from causing harm to others' experience or expectation of happiness; and spiritual acts, which are actions motivated by spiritual qualities such as love, compassion, patience, forgiveness, humility, tolerance, and so on. What is common to spiritual actions is that they all presume some level of concern for others' well-being.

The Dalai Lama makes an explicit connection between genuine happiness and spiritual actions. In his words, "genuine happiness consists in those spiritual qualities of love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humility, and so on. It is these which provide happiness both for ourselves and for others" (*New* 62). Furthermore, the Dalai Lama also connects spiritual actions or spiritual qualities with the meaning of life; "they make our lives meaningful" (*New* 61).

Only spiritual actions bring about happiness and lessen our experience of suffering. This does not mean that spiritual qualities make us immune to the sufferings of sickness, old age, and unfortunate accidents due to bad luck. However, ". . . the sufferings which undermine our internal peace—*anxiety, frustration, disappointment*—are definitely less" (*New* 62).



Given that the Dalai Lama's ethics establishes a necessary connection between genuine happiness and spiritual qualities, and since spiritual actions both constitute and contribute to the agent's genuine happiness, the Dalai Lama's ethical theory seems to be closer to eudemonistic virtue ethics than to universalist perfectionist consequentialism.

The second difference Goodman discusses relates to the ways actions are ultimately justified. While in Aristotelian virtue ethics, the justification of acts ultimately depends on the agent's eudaimonia, in universalist perfectionist consequentialism, it depends on the consequences of actions for all sentient beings.

The Dalai Lama speaks about a variety of factors that need to be considered in order to justify actions (*New* 28-29, 148-149). Besides the effects of actions on others' experience or expectations of happiness, one has to take into account the intent or end of the act, the nature of the act itself, its time, circumstances, the extent to which the act is free or voluntary, and whether it is an isolated act or the expression of a pattern. However, the Dalai Lama makes abundantly clear that the overall state of heart and mind "is the most significant element in determining the ethical character of our acts" (*New* 148). This emphasis on the mental states behind our actions seems to indicate that the ultimate justification of acts for the Dalai Lama is the agent's genuine happiness, which consists precisely in spiritual qualities or mental states such as peace, love, compassion, and so on.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that for the Dalai Lama the agent's genuine happiness is always the ultimate justification of actions. The problem is the meaning of the expression "ultimate justification." If by "ultimate justification" one has in mind Peter Railton's idea of "standing commitments," (153) then we can say that the Dalai Lama's ethics is ultimately justified by the spiritual qualities that constitute the

agent's genuine happiness, not by the consequences of actions for all sentient beings.

If by "ultimate justification" it is meant that spiritual qualities always justify actions, then we cannot say that acts in the Dalai Lama's ethical theory are ultimately justified by the spiritual qualities or the agent's genuine happiness. On some occasions, the ultimate justification of an act depends on the consequences for "the interests of the totality of all others in the future as well as now" (New 153). For instance, when facing the dilemma between telling a lie in order to save the life of a human being, or telling the truth knowing that as a consequence someone is going to be killed, the Dalai Lama says that we have "to take into account the overall situation and weigh the benefits of telling a lie or telling the truth and do what we judge to be least harmful overall" (New 153). Thus, when facing dilemmas, the Dalai Lama's advice is not that anything goes provided that our motivation is compassionate, but, rather, that we have to do what is least harmful overall.

Does this mean that the Dalai Lama's ethical theory is contradictory, sometimes using a justification of action characteristic of virtue ethics and other times justifying actions in a consequentialist way? No, because even when the Dalai Lama justifies actions on consequentialist grounds, such justification is constraint by the application of practical wisdom. In other words, consequentialist considerations do not function as a decision procedure applicable to all cases. As the Dalai Lama puts it:

There are bound to be situations when any course of action would appear to involve breaking a precept. Under such circumstances, we must use our intelligence to judge which course of action will be least harmful in the long run. (New 152)

Besides practical wisdom, consequentialist considerations are also constrained by our motivation, and the principle of non-harming or non-violence. For instance, in situations when we are compelled to stop evildoers, the Dalai Lama says that it is appropriate to do so provided that our motives are “pure and our methods are non-harming. Again, the key principles are compassion and insight” (*New* 154). These two principles are nothing but two virtues. Compassion and insight, or non-harming and discernment, non-violence and practical wisdom, apply to all ethical dilemmas supplementing, and if necessary, overriding consequentialist considerations.

These virtue ethical constraints of consequentialist calculus show yet another feature of the Dalai Lama’s ethics: the rejection of what Hursthouse calls the “strong codifiability thesis.” That is, the rejection of a universally applicable decision procedure for determining the right action in any particular case (Hursthouse 39-40). The Dalai Lama would concur with Hursthouse when she says that virtue ethics “does not even aim to produce an ‘algorithm for life’ independent of judgment” (54). For the Dalai Lama, ethics cannot be reduced to the application of rules or decision procedures valid for all cases. Rules or laws do not “provide us with the answer to every ethical dilemma” (*New* 27). We need discernment or practical wisdom to assess the particulars of hard cases. In the Dalai Lama’s words “there can be no general rule in respect to this [ethical dilemmas]. Rather, there is likely to be a multiplicity of competing considerations, which we must assess in the light of reason and compassion” (*New* 154).

Given that the Dalai Lama does not use a consequentialist justification of actions in all cases, and given that compassion and discernment always constrain consequentialist considerations, it can be concluded that the ultimate justification of acts in the Dalai Lama’s ethics is closer to virtue ethics than to universalist perfectionist consequentialism.

The third difference discussed by Goodman relates to the agent's central ethical goal. While a practitioner of virtue ethics "takes her own virtue as her central ethical goal," the goal of a universalist perfectionist consequentialist is "to bring about as much virtue as possible among all sentient beings" ("Consequences" 19).

We have seen that the Dalai Lama recommends consequentialist calculus when facing difficult ethical dilemmas, though constrained by virtue ethical concerns: compassion (non-harming or non-violence) and wisdom (discernment, insight). However, the goal of such consequentialist calculus is never to maximize the overall amount of virtue for all living beings. Rather, the goal in those ethical dilemmas is to minimize harm for those involved now and in the future. Thus, unlike in universalist perfectionist consequentialism, the consequential considerations found in the Dalai Lama's ethics are intended to minimize harm instead of maximizing virtue, and they do not apply to all sentient beings but exclusively to those affected now and in the future.

Given that the Dalai Lama's ethics never endorses the principle of maximizing virtue, given that the application of the principle to minimize harm is not universally applied to all beings, and since such a principle is constrained by virtue ethical principles, it seems safe to conclude that his ethical theory is closer to virtue ethics than to universalist perfectionist consequentialist.

Failing to endorse the principle of maximizing virtue, however, does not commit the Dalai Lama to the thesis that Goodman attributes to Aristotelian ethical theory: that the central ethical goal is the agent's own virtue. The thesis seems to suggest that those who advocate Aristotelian virtue ethics ultimately possess an egoistic or self-centered motivation. The assumption seems to be that a truly altruistic motivation can only take place within universalist perfectionist consequentialism.

Contemporary virtue ethicists, such as Swanton, do not think that virtue ethics, not even Aristotelian virtue ethics, is necessarily based on an egoistic or self-centered motivation (79). However, let us assume for the sake of argument that virtue ethics is based on an ultimately self-regarding motivation and that perfectionist consequentialism is based on a truly altruistic motivation. The question is whether the dilemma between egoistic and altruistic motivations, between seeking one's own virtue and the virtue of all, can be properly applied to the Dalai Lama's ethical theory.

The dilemma between egoistic and altruistic motivations does not apply to the Dalai Lama's ethics for at least two reasons. First, the ethics of the Dalai Lama allows for different types of practitioners with diverse motivations. Some practitioners may be motivated by what the Dalai Lama calls "being wisely selfish" (Way 80-84), while others, the more ideal practitioners, may be motivated by wise compassion. That is, some practitioners may be concerned with others' happiness out of narrow self-interest, and others may do so out of compassion rooted in insight into the interdependent nature of reality. In other words, the Dalai Lama and Buddhist ethics in general permit different levels of commitment. Following Peter Harvey (51), I call "gradualist" this characteristic approach of Buddhist ethics.

The second reason is that given the interdependence of self and others, and given the inseparability between our interests and the interests of others, it is a false dilemma to speak about either seeking the agent's genuine happiness or seeking that of others. Having the agent's genuine happiness as the central goal necessarily implies the cultivation of virtues that are other-regarding, that is, virtues that presuppose at least some degree of concern for others' happiness. No agent can pursue her own virtue without developing simultaneously concern for others' genuine happiness and the virtues that constitute such a state. Con-

versely, no agent can pursue the virtue and genuine happiness of others without cultivating at the same time her own virtue, the spiritual qualities in which genuine happiness consists.

Given the gradualism of the Dalai Lama's virtue ethics and the diverse motivations of practitioners, and since pursuing the agent's virtue and genuine happiness as the central goal necessarily requires the cultivation of other-regarding virtues and therefore concern for others' virtue and genuine happiness, it is better not to apply to the Dalai Lama's ethics the dilemma between egoistic and altruistic motivations.

However, if one insists on applying the dilemma, one has to conclude that the Dalai Lama's ethics is closer to virtue ethics than to universalist perfectionist consequentialism. The reason is that unlike universalist perfectionist consequentialism, the Dalai Lama's ethics does not require an agent to seek simultaneously her own virtue and the virtue of all sentient beings with commitment to the principle of maximizing virtue.

Goodman summarizes the first three differences by using Derek Parfit's distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral ethical theories (Parfit 55). Aristotelian virtue ethics is agent-relative and perfectionist consequentialism agent-neutral. Aristotelian virtue ethics gives different aims to different agents because "the flourishing of each agent involves the flourishing of the small group of people that the agent cares about" (Goodman, "Consequences" 20). On the contrary, universalist perfectionist consequentialism gives one common aim to all agents: the happiness and virtue of all without allowing for "any moral significance to the distinction between their own welfare and the welfare of others" (Goodman, "Consequences" 20).

Again, the Dalai Lama's ethics does not fit clearly into either Aristotelian virtue ethics or universalist perfectionist consequentialism.

Strictly speaking, the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral theories does not apply to the Dalai Lama's ethics. The reason is that the Dalai Lama's ethics addresses different types of practitioners with diverse levels of ethical commitment. As the Dalai Lama puts it:

I do not believe everyone can or should be like Mahatma Gandhi and live the life of a poor peasant. Such dedication is wonderful and to be greatly admired. But the watchword is "As much as we can"—without going to extremes. (New 178)

It is precisely this gradualism that precludes the Dalai Lama's ethics from being either agent-relative or agent-neutral. It may be both, just one thing or the other, depending on the level of commitment of practitioners.

Ideal types of practitioners are supposed to behave ethically out of what the Dalai Lama calls "great compassion," which is unconditional and equally applied to all sentient beings. At this level of ethical practice, the Dalai Lama's ethics is certainly agent-neutral. However, this is an ideal, not the universal standard of ethical conduct for all agents. As the Dalai Lama says, "I am not suggesting that each individual must attain these advanced states of spiritual development in order to lead an ethically wholesome life" (New 124).

Less ideal types of practitioners are supposed to develop their innate capacity for empathy, transform such natural empathy into ordinary compassion, and cultivate such compassion until it becomes great compassion. This is usually a long gradual process that requires the practice of what the Dalai Lama calls an "ethics of restraint" and an "ethics of virtue."

Ethics of restraint involves the performance of what the Dalai Lama calls "ethical acts" or acts where the agent refrains from causing

harm to others' experience or expectations of happiness. The ethics of virtue involves the cultivation of what the Dalai Lama calls "spiritual acts" or acts motivated by spiritual qualities such as love, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humility, and so on (*New* 81).

Ethics of restraint and ethics of virtue work together in developing what the Dalai Lama calls "ethics of compassion," which in turn serves as "the necessary foundation and motivation for both restraint and cultivation of virtue" (*New* 128). Thus, these three kinds of ethics, ethics of restraint, ethics of virtue, and ethics of compassion are integrated and constitute a single ethical theory. However, as long as the ideal of great compassion is not fully achieved, ethical practice is likely to be, at least to some extent, agent-relative. This will be more so at the beginning stages of moral development than at more advanced stages. In other words, if one insists on applying Parfit's distinction to the Dalai Lama's ethics, one can say that it is agent-neutral in ideal types of practitioners and agent-relative in less ideal types of practitioners.

The fourth difference that Goodman discusses is that unlike Aristotelian virtue ethics, universalist perfectionist consequentialism is extremely demanding. This can be so in two distinct senses. First, perfectionist consequentialist might call for heroic acts of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Second, perfectionist consequentialism might require us to perform wrong actions. As Goodman says: "An ideal act-consequentialist agent would have to lie, break promises, or even kill innocent people, when doing so would be of benefit to many sentient beings" ("Consequences" 20).

Given the Dalai Lama's gradualist approach to ethical practice, it cannot be said that his call for universal responsibility is too demanding. On the contrary, the Dalai Lama's ethics appears to be not very demanding. Instead of heroic acts of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, we ought to do what we can:



According to your own resources, and recognizing the limitations of your circumstances, you will do what you can. Apart from this, I am not calling for any commitment as such. And if some days your actions are more compassionate than others—well, that is normal...The important thing is that whatever we do for others, whatever sacrifices we make, it should be voluntary and arise from understanding the benefit of such actions. (*New 175*)

Given that the Dalai Lama does not require heroic acts of self-sacrifice but rather doing what we can according to our limitations and circumstances, we can conclude that also this point of his ethical theory is closer to virtue ethics than to universalist perfectionist consequentialism.

Similarly, the Dalai Lama does not advocate the second type of demandingness, that is, doing something wrong when that would be of benefit to many sentient beings. This lack of demandingness follows from the Dalai Lama's gradualist approach to ethics. Ideal types of practitioners might feel compelled to break a precept for the greater good, but this is always an extremely exceptional and supererogatory action, never a universal demand for all practitioners in all kinds of situations.

As a general rule, the Dalai Lama encourages us to respect vows and observe ethical precepts. This general rule applies to both ideal and less ideal types of practitioners. Although he does not reduce ethical practice to mere rule following, the Dalai Lama has a high regard for precepts. Even when he addresses a mainly secular western audience, he speaks about the importance of having a set of basic ethical precepts to guide us in our daily lives. One reason behind the need for precepts is that on some occasions we cannot afford to "devote time to careful discernment" (*New 150*). Another reason is that ethical precepts are useful instruments that help us to form good habits, habits that will facilitate the ethical soundness of our actions in situations where we have to act at

once. Yet another reason is that precepts are “reminders always to keep others’ interests at heart and in the forefront of our minds” (New 150).

However, for the Dalai Lama precepts are not absolute or exceptionless, not even the precept against killing. Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama’s standing commitment to compassion and the principle of non-harming is beyond question. For instance, regarding the famous case of killing a criminal out of compassion in order to prevent him from killing many innocent people, the Dalai Lama seems to follow Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism to which he belongs.

Tsongkhapa did not list compassionate killing for overall good consequences as an obligation, but he nevertheless allowed such action despite it generating negative karma for the agent. However, Tsongkhapa, in contrast to Śāntideva, holds that a monk may kill on compassionate grounds without losing his status as a monk, only if he is a bodhisattva who has reached the Noble stages (Harvey 140). The same applies to compassionate stealing and lying, though interestingly not to sexual intercourse.

As a response to a question about the possibility of compassionate killing when overall good consequences follow, the Dalai Lama explicitly states that he has not reached the level of spiritual development necessary to break the principle of non-harming (Ingram 24-25).

Given that the Dalai Lama, following Tsongkhapa, does not view compassionate killing for overall good consequences as obligatory for all agents, and given that such a hypothetical act is constrained by virtue ethical considerations (being at a particular level of spiritual development), it seems that also in this regard the Dalai Lama’s ethics is closer to virtue ethics than to universalist perfectionist consequentialism. However, in this case the similarity with Aristotelian virtue ethics is limited because unlike the Dalai Lama, Aristotle views certain actions including

theft and murder as not admitting of a mean and as always incorrect: “it is true without qualifications that to do any of them is to be in error” (1107a18-9). Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama and Buddhist ethics in general would agree with Aristotle’s view of certain feelings such as spite, shamelessness, and envy as never correct (1107a11-2).

The last difference that Goodman discusses relates to the metaphysical bases of virtue ethics and universalist perfectionist consequentialism. Goodman suggests that Perfectionist consequentialism “may draw support from metaphysical theses that undermine the significance, or even the existence, of the unity of an individual human life, and thereby of fundamental distinctions between persons.” On the contrary, virtue ethics “could receive no support from this kind of metaphysics; it is much more at home with the view of substance found in Aristotle’s metaphysical writings” (“Consequences” 21).

Although the Dalai Lama’s ethics is rooted in a non-substantialist metaphysics,<sup>3</sup> this does not make it closer to perfectionist consequentialism. If something can be inferred from our discussion of the Dalai Lama’s virtue ethics, hitherto is precisely that the connection between a non-substantialist metaphysics and a consequentialist ethical theory is not a necessary one.

The application of Goodman’s test to the Dalai Lama’s ethical theory clearly demonstrates that universalist perfectionist consequentialism is not the only possible interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. Although the results of this test do not necessarily undermine Goodman’s consequentialist reading of Śāntideva and Asaṅga, they nevertheless contradict his overall interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. If the Dalai Lama’s ethics is not a form of universalist perfectionist consequentialism, and if he is a living representative of Mahāyāna

---

<sup>3</sup> Dalai Lama, *How to See Yourself as You Really Are* and *The Buddhism of Tibet*, 51-104.

Buddhist ethics, then Goodman's interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics needs to be revisited.

### **Is The Dalai Lama's Ethical Theory A Form Of Pluralistic Virtue Ethics?**

Having established that the Dalai Lama's ethics is better understood as a form of virtue ethics rather than as a version of consequentialism, the question now is to clarify the approach to virtue ethics that allows us to interpret the Dalai Lama in the most sympathetic and consistent way. My contention is the Dalai Lama's approach to virtue ethics is best understood as pluralistic. In order to demonstrate that the Dalai Lama's approach to virtue ethics is pluralistic I compare it to the approach to virtue ethics of Christine Swanton, which is also pluralistic. My goal is not to suggest that Swanton's ethics is the closest Western analogue to Buddhist ethics but rather to illuminate the uniqueness of the Dalai Lama's ethics through comparison.

Swanton's pluralistic account of virtue ethics centers on her conception of virtue. For her a virtue is "a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way" (19). In other words, virtues are responses to the morally significant features of people, inanimate objects, situations, inner states, or actions (1).

The morally significant features of such "items" include status, bonds, value and what is beneficial or good for the agent and/or recipient of actions. Metaphorically speaking, these morally significant features make demands on us. Thus, for Swanton, virtue ethics has to do with responding to or acknowledging sufficiently well what she calls "the demands of the world," that is, the demands of morally significant features of items in the fields of virtues (21).

Unlike Swanton's work, the main concern of the Dalai Lama's ethical writings is not focused on virtue ethical theory but rather on practical methods for cultivating virtues or spiritual qualities. Although the Dalai Lama does not speak in terms of responding to or acknowledging well the demands of the world, spiritual qualities can be interpreted as appropriate responses to the morally significant features of the world inside and outside us.

Spiritual qualities are what Buddhists call "positive or wholesome mental states" (*kuśala dharma*). They are similar to virtues in that they can be cultivated and form character traits, though they are not necessarily habits or dispositions to behave in certain ways.<sup>4</sup> They can be isolated mental acts without being rooted in a character trait. Nevertheless, spiritual qualities enhance our moral sensitivity and counteract what the Dalai Lama calls "afflictive emotions." Like spiritual qualities, afflictive emotions can be interpreted as responses to the demands of the world, in this case, as inappropriate responses to the world. Afflictive emotions are "the very source of unethical conduct . . . the cause of our destructive behavior both toward others and to ourselves" (*New* 87). Conversely, spiritual qualities are the source of ethical conduct and the cause of behavior conducive to genuine happiness in both oneself and others.

The expression "spiritual qualities" refers mainly to affective mental factors such as compassion and love. However, other mental factors that are primarily cognitive such as wisdom, concentration, and mindfulness also fall under the category spiritual qualities.

Given that spiritual qualities include both affective and cognitive mental states, one may say that spiritual qualities serve not only to positively respond to the world and counteract inappropriate responses to it,

---

<sup>4</sup> In this regard they are not like Aristotelian virtues.

but also to properly acknowledge the morally significant features of the world.

Swanton's virtue ethics is pluralistic in at least five different ways, regarding the number of: (1) bases and (2) modes of responsiveness or acknowledgment; (3) traits that make a virtue a virtue; (4) standards of virtue, and (5) the criteria of right action (2). Here, I limit myself to discussing the first two ways in which Swanton's ethics is pluralistic, that is, in terms of bases and modes of response.

Swanton defines a basis as "a morally significant feature of the item responded to or acknowledged, and which at least partially grounds or rationalizes the form or mode of acknowledgment" (2). Thus, bases and modes are interrelated: bases provide the grounds or reasons for particular modes of response or acknowledgment, and modes are the appropriate forms of response or acknowledgement required or demanded by those bases.

Different ethical traditions emphasize different bases and modes. The main basis for consequentialism and Nietzsche is value, which requires a proper mode of response, promotion; life-affirming and creative values in the case of Nietzsche, and maximizing or at least satisfactorily promoting value in the case of consequentialism. For Kantians, the key basis is status, which requires respect as the appropriate mode of response or acknowledgment. For relationship ethics, the fundamental basis is the bonds between persons and the appropriate modes of response are diverse forms of love and receptivity. Swanton believes that "there is some truth in all these ethical views, and this truth needs to be preserved in a pluralistic virtue ethics" (2).

Swanton focuses on four bases: status, value, benefit or good for, and bonds. Swanton does not claim that these four bases and corresponding modes exhaust all the possible bases and modes. Her goal is not

to provide a comprehensive list of bases and modes but rather to “motivate a conception of virtue which allows a virtue ethics to accommodate the views of a wide variety of moral theories on what is morally significant” (24).

Similarly, the Dalai Lama does not to provide a complete list of morally significant features that ground or rationalize diverse forms of response or acknowledgment. However, the Dalai Lama’s ethics seems to presuppose an irreducible plurality of bases and modes of response. The most appropriate mode of response in a given situation depends on multiple factors: the nature of the bases to be responded to or acknowledged, the circumstances, and the characteristics of the moral agent, which include her level of commitment and her stage of spiritual development. Likewise, the moral significance of bases depends on a variety of factors: the status, dignity or intrinsic worth of the items to be responded to or acknowledged; the kind of bond the agent has with them; the value or benefit of the item, whether it is pleasure, health, wealth, honors, friendship; and whether it is beneficial or good for attaining temporary or genuine happiness.

Perhaps the closest equivalents to the base “value” and the mode of response “promotion,” are the base “harm for those involved now and in the future” and the mode “minimization.” As we have already said, when facing ethical dilemmas, the Dalai Lama recommends consequentialist considerations to minimize harm.

Nevertheless, this principle of minimizing harm does not render the Dalai Lama’s ethics consequentialist. First, the principle is not applicable to all cases, only to ethical dilemmas. Second, minimizing harm is not required from all agents regardless of their level of commitment and stage of spiritual development. Third, the principle of minimizing harm has to be supplemented, and if necessary overridden by the principle of non-harm or non-violence. The principle of minimizing harm and the

principle of non-violence cannot be applied without what the Dalai Lama calls discernment, i.e., practical wisdom. In other words, the principle of minimizing harm is not a universal decision procedure, and the base “harm for those involved now and in the future” is just one among many morally significant features that the agent must take into account. The same can be said about the mode minimizing: it is not the exclusive mode of response, it is not always the most appropriate, and not everybody has the obligation to pursue it.

The Dalai Lama would probably agree with Swanton in rejecting the “hegemony of promotion thesis,” which claims that promotion is the only right-making mode of moral acknowledgment. Given that the Dalai Lama does not advocate what I would call the “hegemony of minimization thesis,” it seems safe to infer that he would reject the tendency to view the promotion of happiness as the most appropriate mode of response in most cases. Even in ethical dilemmas, the promotion of happiness and minimization of harm are not the main principles or the only right-making modes of moral acknowledgement. That is, the Dalai Lama’s ethics includes consequentialist considerations, but it cannot be reduced to consequentialism, either in general or when facing ethical dilemmas.

Similarly, the Dalai Lama would probably concur with Swanton when she argues against what she calls “the thesis of value-centered monism.” According to this thesis, the only factor that makes an option preferable to others is the degree or strength of a value. For Swanton, the degree or strength of status as well as the degree or strength of bonds needs to be taken into account too. Similarly, the Dalai Lama, as a traditional Tibetan Buddhist, does acknowledge the greater moral significance of harming Buddhas and bodhisattvas compared to harming ordinary human beings, which in turn is much worse than harming animals. Likewise, for the Dalai Lama not all precepts possess the same status: re-



ardless of considerations of the promotion of value or minimization of harm, breaking minor precepts of the monastic code such as eating at improper times is morally less significant than breaking the precepts entailing expulsion from the order of monks such as murder, theft, and having sexual intercourse. Interestingly, for Tsongkhapa, unlike murder and theft, sexual intercourse is never allowed for the monastic bodhisattva on compassionate grounds (Tatz 212). It seems safe to assume that the Dalai Lama, as an orthodox member of the Gelugpa school, would agree with Tsongkhapa on this matter.

Likewise, the Dalai Lama would probably endorse what Swanton calls “the value-relatedness thesis.” According to the value-relatedness thesis, “what is right is reckoned in relation to what is actually valuable or good (or disvaluable or bad)” (48). For Swanton, this thesis does not entail value-centered monism but rather that determining the appropriateness of moral responses “requires a prior sorting of items in the world into value categories” (49).

The Dalai Lama’s emphasis on discernment does presuppose a particular sorting of morally significant features into value categories. These value categories allow the agent to lexically order moral significant features and thus discern the appropriateness of different modes of response. The existence of value categories and the possibility of lexically ordering values and goods do not imply that behind the plurality of bases there is a super-category or underlying value to which all the different goods or values can be reduced. Thus, value-relatedness does not amount to value-centered monism.

I am not sure whether the Dalai Lama would agree with Swanton when she says that the degree of value “is not necessarily commensurate with other morally relevant bases of moral responsiveness, such as degree of status and strength of bond” (42). If the expression “not necessarily commensurate” simply means that that the morally relevant bases

are not always incomparable, then I do not see why the Dalai Lama would object. However, if the expression suggests that the morally relevant bases are always incomparable, then the Dalai Lama would disagree because the assessment of morally significant features presupposes the possibility of their comparison. That is, for the Dalai Lama, sometimes practical wisdom requires the pondering of conflicting courses of action rooted in different bases of moral responsiveness. This pondering cannot take place unless the bases are to some extent comparable, and therefore, not fully incommensurable.

If the Dalai Lama's principle of minimizing harm is the closest equivalent to Swanton's base and mode of promoting value, the base "genuine happiness" and the mode "cultivation" are the closest equivalents to Swanton's base and mode of promoting benefit or what is good for someone or something. Whereas promoting happiness and minimizing harm are bases and modes typical of consequentialism, cultivating what is beneficial or good for the agent's genuine happiness is characteristic of virtue ethics.

The base genuine happiness is the highest good or value category, though not the only kind of good or value. The Dalai Lama speaks also of temporary happiness and external factors including friendship, health, wealth, honors, and sensual pleasures.

Genuine happiness requires two basic modes of response: the development of spiritual qualities and the restraint of afflictive emotions, including their expressions through thoughts, words, and conduct. Spiritual qualities are "beneficial" or "good for" the genuine happiness of oneself and others. Conversely, afflictive emotions are "harmful" and conducive to suffering for oneself and others. Thus, the Dalai Lama's ethics is teleological in a way similar to Aristotelian virtue ethics: the virtues or what is beneficial and good for the agent constitute the highest good. However, unlike Aristotelian's *eudaimonia*, the Dalai Lama's genu-

ine happiness does not require external goods. The Dalai Lama's ethics is not teleological in a way similar to universalist perfectionist consequentialism. That is, the Dalai Lama does not advocate the principle of promoting virtue or genuine happiness as much as possible in all cases and contexts. Rather, the Dalai Lama's approach to ethics seems to require the cultivation of spiritual qualities as much as we can given our circumstances and level of commitment, which at the very least entails the restraint of harming acts. In this sense of requiring different things from different people depending of their context and ethical commitment, the Dalai Lama's ethics is gradualist, not consequentialist.

As a traditional Buddhist, the Dalai Lama believes that there is a connection between cultivating spiritual qualities and the experience of both temporary and genuine happiness. In other words, spiritual qualities are not only conducive to and constitutive of genuine happiness, but also help to achieve states of temporary happiness and external goods such as friendship, health, wealth, and honors. Although for the Dalai Lama there is a connection between cultivating spiritual qualities or virtues and the experience of lower goods and temporary happiness, the value of lower goods does not depend on virtues. That is, lower goods are good independently of virtue, though virtue is instrumental in achieving them. In this point, Swanton's virtue ethics seems to clash with that of the Dalai Lama.

Although Swanton does accept that there are valuable things independent of virtue such as "natural objects, human infants, and animals," (38) she does not think that knowledge, pleasure, friendship, wealth, and honors are goods or valuable independently of virtue. They are goods or values if "handled well—that is, virtuously, where 'handling' covers behavior, motivation, and emotional response" (36).

Swanton applies the same reasoning to the four main bases: value, status, benefit, and bonds. As Swanton says, "it is not the case that

these features are in general set up as good or evil independent of virtue, and that a virtue is standardly a form of responsiveness to these goods” (40). Here again, Swanton’s ethics differs from the Dalai Lama’s, where the moral relevance of features such as value, status, benefit, and bonds, does not seem to be necessarily dependent on virtues.

Swanton reaches this, in my view, counterintuitive conclusion, so as to be consistent with her rejection of what she calls the “the thesis of non-aretaic value.” According to this thesis, “virtues and vices are understood derivatively as forms of responsiveness to, or as instrumental in the promotion of (or minimization of respectively) ‘base-level’ goods or evils, or intrinsic values or disvalues, understood non-aretaically” (34). That is, one starts with a list of objective values or goods and then derives the virtues, the actions and the attitudes conducive or constitutive of those values.

However, accepting different bases of response that are morally relevant independently of virtue, does not commit oneself to the “the thesis of non-aretaic value.” For instance, the Dalai Lama does not derive virtues or spiritual qualities from a fixed list of “base-level” goods and values, and yet, he accepts the existence of diverse goods, values, and bases of response that are morally significant independently of virtue.

Overall, Swanton speaks about three kinds of items in terms of value. (1) There are those that have value independently of virtue (human infants, animals, rivers, large rocks, and rock formations). (2) There are those whose value is dependent on virtue. She distinguishes two subtypes: (2a) virtue is necessary to make them good (pleasure, wealth, friendship, and honors); (2b) they are good because they are instrumental for the operation of virtue—for instance, she mentions a lump of clay as good for the creativity expressed in a fine statue. (3) There are those that are not good, but instrumental for the operation of virtue—for instance, sickness borne patiently (40-41).

The Dalai Lama would probably agree with Swanton's list of items that have value independently of virtue, though he would include also those that for Swanton require the necessary presence of virtue to be considered valuable.

Besides bases and modes of response characteristic of virtue ethics and consequentialism, the Dalai Lama's ethics also contains bases and modes typical of deontological ethics.

Regarding the base "status" and the mode of response "respect," the Dalai Lama speaks about human rights, which cannot be overridden by utilitarian calculus. For instance, while discussing the potential dangers of certain kinds of experimentation, the Dalai Lama says, "the attribute of utility can surely never justify the deprivation of an individual's rights. This is highly dangerous and very slippery slope" (*New* 156). Thus, for the Dalai Lama, human rights seem to have a special status, intrinsic moral worth which requires protection or respect as the most appropriate mode of response.

However, the fundamental human right for the Dalai Lama is the right to be happy and to avoid suffering. This aspiration to be happy is a natural inclination, an innate part of our nature. The Dalai Lama claims that from such inclination "it follows that each individual has a right to pursue this goal" (*New* 28). For the Dalai Lama "this is our birthright, and it does not need further justification" (*Expand* 113). Although the Dalai Lama seems to justify rights ultimately on a deontological base (the special status or worth of our natural aspiration to be happy), he often refers to compassion in order to reinforce respect for such rights, for instance, when he says, "One aspect of compassion is to respect others' rights" (*Healing* 5).

Similarly, while discussing the issue of euthanasia, the Dalai Lama seems to presuppose a deontological base when he talks about the "su-

preme preciousness of life.” As he states: “If there is a general principle, I think it is simply that we recognize the supreme preciousness of life” (*New* 155). That is, the status, intrinsic worth or dignity of human life is the fundamental morally significant feature or base in the case of euthanasia, which requires respect as the appropriate mode of response.

Likewise, the special status or worth of life is presupposed when the Dalai Lama speaks about abortion:

In general Buddhists believe that human life is something precious. . . . Generally speaking, abortion is negative, for it is an act of killing. The other day I read about the human rights of fetuses. That’s very, very true from the Buddhist viewpoint, because the unborn fetus is also considered to be sentient, a living being. (*Healing* 51)

These considerations, rooted in the base status and the mode of response respect, do not make the Dalai Lama’s ethics deontological. One might say that, like the limited consequentialist calculus required in specific ethical dilemmas, the deontological tenets found in the Dalai Lama’s ethics are constraint by virtue ethical considerations, specifically, by the compassionate principle of non-harming and by practical wisdom. For instance, while discussing the possibility of exceptional cases where abortion may be justified, the Dalai Lama says:

The most important thing is to judge according to the circumstances. You may have a generalization, but always there will be exceptional cases, which even include mercy killing. Of course, generally speaking, abortion must be avoided. But under certain unique circumstances abortion may be an understandable option. (*Healing* 52)

This non-absolutist attitude does not entail relativism or the rejection of general moral principles applicable to most occasions. This

lack of absolutism is consistent with the Dalai Lama's skepticism about the possibility of fully codifying ethics. In fact, the Dalai Lama speaks of certain actions as unethical by definition. For instance, while discussing the execution of civilian prisoners, the Dalai Lama says: "according to the principle of non-violence I have put forward, such killing would by definition be an unethical act" (*Healing* 29). The existence of actions that are unethical by definition seems to presuppose a deontological base.

Likewise, when the Dalai Lama commends practices such as prostrations and offerings to the three Jewels, Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, as well as to one's own Gurus and lineage of masters, he seems to presuppose the special status or worth of certain precepts and practices, which require respect or observance as the most appropriate mode of response. For instance, the Dalai Lama says that

After having undertaken the practice of refuge, you should observe the precepts of refuge, the abandonments, and the affirmations, all these precepts should be studied from *Lamrim Chenmo* by Lama Tsongkhapa. This text is like the constitution; it is very important, and you should study and practice it. (*Path* 123)

Observing certain precepts and showing respect for Gurus or the three Jewels lead to good consequences such as prosperity and a good rebirth. Likewise, these actions are beneficial or good for cultivating virtues that constitute genuine happiness. However, the Dalai Lama does not reduce the base status and the mode respect to consequentialist or virtue ethical bases and modes of response.

The same can be said about respecting other items with special status or worth including life, human rights, and our natural aspiration to happiness. Respecting these items leads to good consequences and can help us to develop virtues such as love and compassion. However, the

Dalai Lama does not reduce the base status and the mode respect to other bases and modes.

In other words, the Dalai Lama does not use compassion and the principle of non-harming to ultimately justify the consequentialist principle of minimizing harm and the deontological principles of respecting the preciousness of life and human rights. Thus, it seems more adequate to treat the base status and the mode respect as separate, though sometimes related to consequentialist and virtue ethical bases and modes of response and acknowledgment.

It might be objected that the Dalai Lama's ethics is inconsistent: his non-absolutist stand regarding some hard cases of abortion and euthanasia seems to clash with his commitment to human rights and the principle of non-violence or non-harming. Similarly, the Dalai Lama's ethics seems to be ambiguous on the question of ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, the Dalai Lama says that one is justified to tell a lie in order to save a human life (*Path* 153). On the other hand, he says that the attribute of utility never justifies depriving an individual of his/her rights (*Path* 156). So when exactly and under what circumstances can someone break a precept?

If the principle of non-harming were justified exclusively on deontological grounds and if the base status and the mode respect were not to be supplemented by other ethical considerations, then the application of such a principle would have to be absolute, and then the Dalai Lama's ethics would be contradictory. However, given that the Dalai Lama does not view status as the only morally significant feature and respect as the only appropriate mode of response, the Dalai Lama does not contradict himself when he claims to be committed to the principle of non-harming and at the same time, he acknowledges the possibility of hard cases where that principle can be overridden.



There is no contradiction as long as the principle of non-harming is itself understood in non-absolutist terms. That is, as allowing exceptions in hard cases. This is possible because the principle of non-harming is not a deontological decision procedure but rather a general principle that applies to most cases. As we have seen, the Dalai Lama does recommend to weigh the benefits of actions when facing ethical dilemmas and to adopt the least harmful in the long run. This consequentialist principle to minimize harm, however, is constrained by the principles of compassion and practical wisdom, non-harming and discernment. Virtue ethical principles supplement, and if necessary, override consequentialist principles. Similarly, when facing ethical dilemmas where breaking the principle of non-harming is unavoidable, one has to exercise moral judgment, making sure that the motivation is pure, and taking into account the consequences for all involved now and in the future. In this sense, the bases and modes characteristic of deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics are intertwined. Overall, and especially in ethical dilemmas, the Dalai Lama's ethics requires from the agent the assessment of a plurality of morally significant features and diverse modes of moral response and acknowledgment.

Regarding the base bonds and the mode of response love and receptivity, the Dalai Lama does not speak about diverse family and role-dependent bonds that require different forms of love and receptivity. Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama's attitude toward his mother and other family members, as well as his special bond with the Gelugpa school and the Tibetan people in general, seems to indicate that the Dalai Lama does accept the moral significance of many family and role-dependent bonds.

However, the bond that mostly concerns the Dalai Lama's ethical writings is the one that exists between all sentient beings qua sentient beings. The ideal mode of response to this universal relationship is great compassion, though this response is not to be expected from all practi-

tioners, only from those with bodhisattva vows at a high stage of moral development. Besides great compassion, the Dalai Lama's bond with other sentient beings allows for two other modes of response: ordinary compassion or compassion with some degree of attachment, and at the very least restraint of harmful conduct. Only the third mode of response, restraint from harmful conduct, is obligatory for all practitioners. Ordinary compassion seems to be the appropriate response in those cases where the bond is family, society, or role-dependent.

The Dalai Lama uses traditional Buddhist meditations to encourage ethical restraint and transform ordinary compassion into great compassion. Some meditations focus on the organic nature of reality and the interrelatedness of our interests. Others focus on the doctrine of rebirth and view all living beings as having been one's mother in the past. Still others reflect on the sameness of our nature in that we all have a common aspiration to be happy and to avoid suffering. This meditation called "equalizing oneself and others" is usually accompanied by another meditation where one imaginatively exchanges oneself for others in a variety of happy and unhappy situations.

All these meditations are intended to transform narrow and exclusivist conceptions of self-identity and gradually develop a bond of empathy and eventually compassion with all sentient beings.

The Dalai Lama's version of the golden rule has its context in these meditations to foster ethical restraint and to gradually cultivate a bond of compassion with all sentient beings: "a feeling of closeness toward all others can be developed based on the simple recognition that just like myself, all wish to be happy and to avoid suffering" (*New* 127). However, like other formulations of the golden rule, the Dalai Lama's version also appears in contexts where ethical conduct in general is justified. As the Dalai Lama puts it: "ethical conduct is not something we

engage in because it is somehow right in itself but because, like ourselves, all others desire to be happy and to avoid suffering” (*New* 127).

The ultimate rationale for ethical restraint, ordinary compassion, and great compassion does not seem to be our natural aspiration to happiness but rather the interdependent nature of reality (*New* 127).

The Dalai Lama sometimes combines discussions of the key Buddhist doctrine of interdependent origination with the doctrine of emptiness and what he calls “identitylessness.” This concept of identitylessness, also known as non-self, should not be mistaken with nihilistic teachings, even less with the negation of moral agency. As the Dalai Lama explains: “It is human to have a valid feeling of ‘I’” (*Expand* 113). The concept of “identitylessness,” far from denying valid notions of “I” and moral agency “points rather to the way in which things exist: not independently but in a sense interdependently” (*New* 45).

That the doctrines of dependent origination and identitylessness do not render absurd our ordinary sense of “I” and moral agency can be inferred from texts where the Dalai Lama appeals to the interconnectedness of both reality and our self-interests. For instance:

Because self and others can only really be understood in terms of relationship, we see that self-interest and others’ interest are closely interrelated. Indeed, within this picture of dependently originated reality, we see that there is no self-interest completely unrelated to others’ interests. Due to the fundamental interconnectedness which lies at the heart of reality, your interest is also my interest . . . It is in everybody’s interest to do what leads to happiness and avoid that which leads to suffering. (*New* 47)

This self-regarding consideration is what the Dalai Lama calls “being wisely selfish.” Unlike ordinary selfishness, wise selfishness fo-

cuses on both our needs and the needs of others: “when you are concerned about others, your own welfare is fulfilled automatically” (Way 80). Being wisely selfish however, though recommended by the Dalai Lama to those skeptical about his concept of universal compassion, is not the highest ethical ideal. Rather, the ethical ideal is the development of wise compassion where concern for oneself and others is motivated by spiritual qualities including insight into the interdependent and empty nature of reality.

It might be objected that the Dalai Lama’s ethics is ambiguous because it appeals to diverse kinds of motivation and requires different things from different people. In my account however, the Dalai Lama simply shows psychological depth and awareness of the complexity of the moral landscape.

In the Dalai Lama’s ethics, even a single base, in this case the bond with all human beings, can be related to a plurality of bases and accordingly, require different modes of response and acknowledgment besides love and receptivity. For instance, if one relates the bond with all humans to the fundamental right and aspiration to happiness, the appropriate response is not necessarily love and receptivity but rather respect. If one relates the bond to the interdependence of our own interests and the interests of others, then once again, the most appropriate response is not love and receptivity but rather the promotion of everybody’s interests. However, if one relates the bond to wise compassion, then the appropriate mode of response is expressing compassion, ideally great compassion, and at the very least restraining from harmful actions.

By justifying a single base in several ways and by accommodating diverse modes of response to such a base depending on the circumstances and motivation of the agent, the Dalai Lama’s ethics is not ambiguous or inconsistent. Rather, it is subtle and defies simplistic dilemmas such as the dilemma between absolutism and relativism, or between agent-

relative and agent-neutral ethical theories. In other words, the bond with all human beings is justified in different ways, pluralistically, so that they can appeal to a wide range of agents, from the most self-centered to the most altruistic and compassionate.

Overall, the Dalai Lama's ethical theory is irreducible to clear-cut versions of consequentialism, deontological, or Aristotelian virtue ethics. In order to capture the unique complexity of the Dalai Lama's ethics, it may be helpful to characterize it as a pluralistic approach to virtue ethics. This pluralistic approach to virtue ethics remains *sui generis* or characteristically Buddhist for its emphasis on certain spiritual qualities and for its resort to gradualism and what Buddhists call "skillful means."

### Conclusions

We have seen that the Dalai Lama's ethical theory is substantially closer to virtue ethics than consequentialism. First, the Dalai Lama's ethics establishes a necessary connection between genuine happiness and virtues, which he calls spiritual qualities. Second, for the Dalai Lama actions or traits are ultimately justified for constituting or contributing to the agent's highest good or genuine happiness, which precisely consists in spiritual qualities including other-regarding virtues.

Even when the Dalai Lama's ethics supplements such ultimate justification with the consequentialist principle of minimizing harm, it remains within a virtue ethical framework. The principle of minimizing harm is not a universal decision procedure: it applies only to ethical dilemmas, and it is constrained by two principles characteristic of virtue ethics: the principle of non-harming or non-violence, which is rooted in

compassion,<sup>5</sup> and the principle of discernment, which is rooted in wisdom.

Strictly speaking, the Dalai Lama's ethics cannot be labeled either agent-neutral or agent-relative for two main reasons. First, it is gradualist in the sense of addressing different types of practitioners with diverse motivations and distinct levels of commitment to ethical practice. Second, pursuing the agent's virtue and genuine happiness as the central goal necessarily requires the cultivation of other-regarding virtues and therefore concern for others' virtue and genuine happiness.

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama's ethics is closer to virtue ethics in that it lacks the demandingness of perfectionist consequentialism: not all agents are required to perform heroic acts of self-sacrifice in all contexts or act always in accordance with the principle of minimizing suffering for the greatest number. Rather, the Dalai Lama's gradualism and skillful means require agents to do what they can, i.e., according to their limitations and circumstances. Similarly, the Dalai Lama's ethics does not require all agents to break moral precepts when doing so would be of benefit to many sentient beings. The general rule to be followed in the most cases is to observe vows and respect moral precepts. The breaking of ethical precepts out of compassion is extremely rare and never the norm for ordinary practitioners. Even the Dalai Lama humbly admits that he is far from having the moral development necessary to hypothetically break the principle of non-violence.

In order to demonstrate that the Dalai Lama's ethics is better understood as a form of virtue ethics, we have used the same test that Charles Goodman deploys to justify a perfectionist consequentialist interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. Since it seems uncontrovers-

---

<sup>5</sup> "Ahimsa, or nonviolence, is not just not harming others, it is an act of compassion." Dalai Lama, *Live in a Better Way: Reflections on Truth, Love and Happiness* 140.

sial to claim that the Dalai Lama is a living representative of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics, Goodman's consequentialist interpretation cannot be applied to Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics in general and, therefore, to Buddhist ethics as a whole.

In order to show that the Dalai Lama's approach to virtue ethics is best understood as pluralistic in nature, I have compared the Dalai Lama's ethics to that of Christine Swanton. The goal of this comparison was not to suggest that the closest Western analogue to Buddhist ethics is Swanton's ethics, but rather to provide a consistent reading of his ethical ideas and facilitate understanding of the Dalai Lama's unique approach to virtue ethics.

In the process of comparing Swanton and the Dalai Lama, I have responded to two possible objections to his ethical teachings. The first objection claims that there is an inconsistency between the Dalai Lama's non-absolutist stand regarding certain precepts such as killing and lying on the one hand, and his commitment to the principle of non-violence and human rights on the other hand. I have suggested that there is no contradiction because the principle of non-harming is not exclusively justified on deontological grounds. The principle is ultimately justified based on compassion and it must be supplemented by the principles of wise discernment and minimizing harm. That is, the principle of non-harming is not a universal moral law to be understood in absolutist terms but rather a general principle that applies to most cases.

When facing ethical dilemmas where breaking the principle of non-harming is unavoidable, one has to exercise moral judgment, making sure that the motivation is pure, and take into account the consequences for all involved now and in the future. Thus, the Dalai Lama's ethics does not contain a universally applicable decision procedure, but rather requires the exercise of judgment to assess a variety of morally

significant features and to determine the most appropriate mode of response in each hard case.

The second objection is that the Dalai Lama's ethics is ambiguous because it appeals to diverse motivating factors and requires different things from different agents. I have contended that this only demonstrates the depth and complexity of the Dalai Lama's virtue ethics, which is irreducible to simplistic dilemmas and clear-cut versions of consequentialism, deontological, and Aristotelian virtue ethics. In my reading, the alleged ambiguity of the Dalai Lama's virtue ethics is in fact characteristically Buddhist in that it pluralistically addresses a variety of agents in diverse contexts, at different stages of moral development and with distinct levels of commitment. Far from being an exception or a recent innovation, the Dalai Lama's ethical ideas are typically Buddhist in its gradualist and pluralistic approach to virtue cultivation.

## Bibliography

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999.

Dalai Lama. *Ethics for the New Millennium*, New York: Riverhead Trade, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Healing Anger: The Power of Patience from a Buddhist Perspective*, Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. *How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life*, New York: Pocket Books, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Flash of Lightning in the Dark: A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1994.



\_\_\_\_\_. *Transcendent Wisdom: A Commentary on the Ninth Chapter of Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_. *How to See Yourself as You Really Are*, New York: Atria Books, 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Buddhism of Tibet*, Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Path to Bliss: A Practical Guide to Stages of Meditation*, Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Live in a Better Way: Reflections on Truth, Love and Happiness*, New York: Viking Compass, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. *How to Expand Love: Widening the Circle of Loving Relationships*, New York: Atria Books, 2005.

Goodman, Charles. "Consequentialism, Agent-Neutrality, and Mahāyāna Ethics." *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 58, no. 1 (2008): 17-35.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Harvey, Peter. *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Ingram, Catherine. *In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2003.

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

Railton, Peter. "Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134-71

Tatz, Mark. *Asanga's Chapter on Ethics With the Commentary of Tsong-Kha-pa*, Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986.

Thurman, Robert. *Why the Dalai Lama Matters: His Act of Truth as the Solution for China, Tibet, and the World*, New York: Atria Books, 2008.

Swanton, Christine. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.