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Groundwork for a Metaphysic of Buddhist
Morals: A New Analysis of *puñña* and
kusala, in light of *sukka*

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Groundwork for a Metaphysic of Buddhist Morals

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Abstract

This paper offers a new basis for assessing the nature of Buddhist moral thinking. Although consistent with Damien Keown's view that Buddhist ethics may be considered a form of virtue ethics, the account outlined here does not aim to determine which western ethical theory Buddhism most closely matches. It suggests instead that Buddhist discourse presupposes different kinds of moral agency, distinguishable on the basis of the spiritual status of the agent. The moral language characteristically employed in different texts of the Pāli Canon differs accordingly. This accounts for some of the difficulties experienced by modern authors attempting to make comparisons with western traditions. Apparent inconsistencies among the texts can be resolved if one takes careful note of the spiritual status of the moral agents under discussion. The argument is based upon an analysis of a particular conceptual schema found in the Pāli Canon, namely, the tetrad of four logical categories of action based upon the pair of the bright and the dark (*sukka* and *kaṇha*). This schema is employed in order to clarify the relationship of two more commonly discussed terms, *puñña* and *kusala*.

Section 1: *Sukka* and *Kaṇha*

One of the more fertile ongoing conversations in the field of Buddhist Studies revolves around the problem of correctly situating the principles of Buddhist

morality in relation to western ethical theories. Recent debate has focused upon the work of Damien Keown (1992), who has argued for a classification of early Buddhist ethics as a form of virtue ethics importantly similar to the system of Aristotle. Keown has indicated that both systems are centered on a teleological goal that is valued for its own sake and for the sake of which all lesser goals are sought: *eudaimonia* (happiness) for Aristotle and *nirvāṇa* in the case of Buddhism.¹ In both cases the *summum bonum* is attained through the cultivation of specific mental states that “participate in” or share the nature of the final good. For Aristotle these are the virtues. Keown argues that the conceptual frameworks of the two systems are sufficiently similar to warrant the application of this term in the Buddhist context. More recently, Velez de Cea (2004) has critiqued Keown, arguing that the system of values found in the Pāli *suttas* is unclassifiable in terms of a single western theory, but if anything most closely resembles a combination of virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and moral realism. In this paper I wish to provide some of the groundwork for a revised account of Buddhist moral thinking, one that draws upon the insights of both authors, but which attempts to assess Buddhist moral discourse in specifically Buddhist terms rather than western categories.

The point of departure for much of the current discussion pertains to the Pāli words that have been translated into English as “good.” A key chapter of Keown’s study is centered on two main terms, namely, *puñña* and *kusala*. The question posed is how, exactly, are these words conceptually related? Do they refer to precisely the same set of phenomena, or do they differ in their reference? There appear to be at least three logical possibilities. Keown takes the position that the terms refer to the same extensional set. “[E]very virtuous action is both *kusala* and *puñña* ... [*K*]*usala* and *akusala* describe the moral status of actions and dispositions *vis-à-vis* the *summum bonum*. *Puñña*, on the other hand, describes the experiential consequences of moral activity suffered by the agent” (1992:123). Velez de Cea disagrees on this point, arguing that the two represent two different kinds of action (2004:130). Others have argued for an overlap in signification, with *kusala* being the more general term (Premasiri 1976:72, see Keown 1992:122-123).²

Before we can begin our own approach to this discussion one important observation must be made. As is apparent from Keown’s remark, *puñña* and *kusala* each represent the positive pole of an antithetical pair of moral terms:

- A. *puñña* and *apuñña* (*pāpa*): karmically meritorious and karmically detrimental (merit and demerit)
- B. *kusala* and *akusala*: wholesome and unwholesome (skillful and unskillful)

Thus the question concerning the logical relations of the positive poles is, by extension, the question of the relations between the two pairs of which they are parts. In this paper an attempt is made to clarify the relationship between A and B through the introduction of a third pair, also found throughout the Pāli Canon:

- C. *sukka* and *kaṇha*: bright and dark (white and black, pure and impure, good and evil)

In choosing to examine this pair of terms I am following the lead of Peter Harvey who has already indicated its potential relevance to discussions of Buddhist morality (2000:44). Here I will argue that it forms a conceptual bridge between the other two pairs, allowing us a clearer understanding of the nature of their relationship.

While both A and B are found throughout the *Nikāyas*, scholars seem to agree that B, *kusala* and *akusala*, is the more distinctively Buddhist of the two. The division of actions and mental states into *puñña* and *apuñña* is part of common Indian *karma* theory. It refers to the potency of actions to produce positive and negative future experiences for the agent. Here the two are translated as “karmically meritorious” (or “merit”) and “karmically detrimental” (or “demerit”) respectively. Karmically meritorious actions are of many sorts, but in brief can be summarized as moral actions that cause pleasant, enjoyable future experiences. Karmically detrimental actions generate unpleasant, unenjoyable future experiences. Fear of an unhappy rebirth, and desire for the pleasures of a happy one, are common motives among Buddhists. We should note, however, that while some meritorious actions will be purposefully aimed at these goals, others are thought of as simply having such results without their being aimed for — an important point to which we will return.

The term *kusala* is usually translated as either “skillful” or “wholesome”: *kusala* actions are skillful in the sense that they lead to *nirvāṇa* or awakening;

they are wholesome in the sense of being characterized by positive, healthy qualities (*dhammas*). These qualities are perfected in one who has attained *nirvāṇa*. In this sense, actions based on these qualities have been called “nirvāṇic” by Keown and others. They “participate in” or display the qualities of *nirvāṇa*.

How, then, are we to understand the relationship between the positive poles of A and B? Are all nirvāṇic actions karmically meritorious? Are all karmically meritorious actions nirvāṇic? Or only some? Let us see how introducing pair C helps to elucidate this question.

In the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* (MN 57) the Buddha is said to have described human action as divisible into four basic categories.³ Actions may be:

1. dark with dark result;
2. bright with bright result;
3. both dark and bright and with dark and bright result;
4. neither dark nor bright, neither dark nor bright in result, the action that conduces to the destruction of actions.

The first three categories are relatively straight-forward, reflecting the general Buddhist conviction that actions have results that are in accord with, or correspond to, their character. The relationship is causal. Dark actions cause dark, unpleasant results in one’s future experience; bright actions produce bright, pleasant results in one’s future experience. The third category of action has a mixed nature and leads to a mixed result.⁴ Category 4 seems to be identifiable with the path taught by the Buddha, the path that leads to the destruction of actions, to *nirvāṇa*. Intuitively, then, we would associate this category with the term *kusala*. Categories 1 through 3, on the other hand, seem to be connected to the “karmatic” pair, A (*puñña* and *apuñña*). Indeed this connection is explicit in Harvey’s account, in which the first three categories are linked to the ideas of harmfulness and rebirth. Harvey glosses the four categories as follows:

1. that which is *dark with dark result*: harmful actions that lead to rebirths with harmful experiences in them;

2. that which is *bright with bright result*: non-harming actions that lead to rebirths with non-harmful experiences in them;
3. that which is *both dark and bright and with dark and bright result*: a mixture of the first two;
4. that which is *neither dark nor bright, neither dark nor bright in result, the action that conduces to the destruction of actions*: the will to get rid of the first three types of actions (2000:44).

Because Category 4 is less immediately comprehensible than the others we shall delay its treatment. We will begin, then, by examining the Categories 1 through 3.

It can be seen that Harvey understands a correspondence to exist between A and C. Dark actions are those that result in unfortunate rebirths (dark result); bright actions result in fortunate rebirths (bright result). The terms of both pairs are identified on the basis of their consequences. In spite of this, Harvey follows Keown in arguing that early Buddhist moral thinking cannot be considered a form of ethical consequentialism.⁵ He notes that the early Buddhist tradition does not generally understand the moral goodness of an action to be dependent on the results that follow from the action; an action is good or bad *in itself* (2000:49). Positive experiential consequences flow from a morally good action because the action is morally good; the action is not considered morally good because the positive consequences flow from it. Thus bright actions have bright results because they are bright; they are not considered “bright” because they have bright experiential results. Dark actions have dark results because they are dark; they are not considered “dark” in virtue of the fact that they have dark experiential results (p. 17). Darkness and brightness are qualities of actions *in and of themselves*.

If this is so, then we are compelled to ask: what kind of quality is being referred to? Harvey’s gloss, as noted, suggests that the darkness or brightness of an action refers both to its harmfulness or nonharmfulness and to its leading to rebirths with harmful or nonharmful experiences in them. One might question whether the rebirths in question should be principally understood in terms of the amount of harmful or nonharmful experiences they contain, as

opposed to pleasant or unpleasant experiences. But in general the connections Harvey draws between pair C and harmfulness, as well as between these and corresponding future rebirths, have a plausible ring given the suggestion of a correspondence between C and A.⁶ Nonetheless, we may yet ask whether C might be more precisely explainable in its own terms.

Actions and their results are qualified as being “bright” or “dark”; these adjectives are clearly suggestive of positive and negative moral valuations. These words are, moreover, related to the sense of sight. This is very clear in the Pāli, where the principal meanings of the terms are related to the presence or absence of physical light, i.e., “bright and dark” and “white and black.” But we also find the added moral senses of “good and evil” and “pure and impure.” As the PTS Dictionary comments under the entry for *kaṇha*, “In general it is hard to separate the lit. and fig. meanings; an ethical implication is found in most cases,” excepting those that are actually referring to the sensations of normal vision (p. 180).

It seems no coincidence that terms related to the presence or absence of light are employed in the moral context. To see why we need to recall that in Buddhist thinking the concept of “action” is understood in terms of the underlying volition or mental intention (*cetanā*) of the agent. As the Buddha himself famously put it: “It is intention, O Monks, that I call action; having formed the intention one performs acts by body, speech and mind.”⁷ Action is distinguishable from mere behavior. And this is so precisely in virtue of the fact that it is willed or intended. This is an important point of definition, the significance of which has not always been recognized by those working in the area of comparative Buddhist ethics. It is axiomatic. Bodily, verbal and mental actions are all to be understood as defined in terms of their underlying intentional state.⁸

Thus to call an action bright, as Rhys-Davids suggests, could simply be a *figurative*, non-technical way of suggesting its moral praiseworthiness. But there is another possibility: it could be understood more *literally* as actually referring to an epistemic quality of the underlying mental state of the agent. In standard Buddhist soteriological thinking it is commonplace to note that various mental volitions have the effect of either darkening or not darkening the mind. Those that darken the mind obscure its capacity for insight and thus the final goal of awakening; other mental states do not have this effect, situat-

ing the mind in a more favorable position for the occurrence of liberating insight. Thus in Buddhist terms we can say that certain states are afflictive, obscuring the mind of the agent; others are not. Indeed this is how the Buddha himself is said to have explained these dark and bright actions:

And what, Puṇṇa, is dark action with dark result? Here someone generates an afflictive bodily formation, an afflictive verbal formation, an afflictive mental formation ...

And what, Puṇṇa, is bright action with bright result? Here someone generates an unafflictive bodily formation, an unafflictive verbal formation, an unafflictive mental formation.
(MN i 390)

Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi indicate that “afflictive” and “unafflictive” should be understood in terms of the underlying volition of the action. They cross-reference this passage to the more detailed explanation provided at MN i 47, which contains two well-known tenfold descriptions of the unwholesome (*akusala*) and the wholesome (*kusala*).⁹ Afflictive, unwholesome mental formations are conditioned by three kinds of basic mental state: the so-called “three roots of the unwholesome”: greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). Their opposites constitute the “three wholesome roots”: generosity (*dāna*), friendliness (*mettā*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Thus it is the quality of the underlying state of mind characterizing one’s intention that is the key determinant of the brightness of an action.

Now the notion of some factor *being a determinant* for something else is importantly ambiguous. It can mean “that which determines” as well as “that which one uses to determine.” Here it is understood in the former sense. Clearly the two senses are not equivalent. The criteria by which we judge an action to be good or bad do not necessarily constitute the causes of the action’s *being* good or bad. Indeed more usually they are the effects as, for example, is arguably the case with regard to the injury or non-injury an action actually does to others. These indicators are more readily observed than the mental state of the agent. We may judge an action as morally bad, based on our observation of the injury it does. But from a Buddhist perspective we would have to modify our judgment upon learning that the results were acci-

dental. We would then say that the action was “regrettable,” or give it some other description with no implication of *moral* judgment upon the action itself. This point needs to be borne in mind when evaluating the arguments of scholars assessing the nature of Buddhist morality. The distinction is not always recognized; the criteria actually employed for judgment are often confused with the causal factors in virtue of which the action *is* good or bad. An analogy here would be illness. We do not confuse a fever, which is an effect, with its cause. A person has a fever because of their underlying condition of illness. A person is not ill because they have a fever. The fever is an indicator of the illness, not a causal determinant.

Dark actions then, are not only those that have the effect of leading to negative, unpleasant future experiences for the agent — they are also actions that are unwholesome (*akusala*), based upon mental afflictions that block the mind from insight into its own nature. Bright actions are not only those that have the effect of leading to positive, pleasant future experiences for the agent — they are also wholesome. They do not afflict the mind. States that do not afflict the mind are conducive to liberating insight and the ultimate well-being of the person. There is an implicit telos here: a mind that is pure is naturally open to the possibility of self-understanding and spiritual freedom.

Where does this leave us? It would seem that A, B, and C, when used as adjectives qualifying actions, all refer to exactly the same extensional set — but with varying connotations. In the universe of discourse that is *action*, they would seem to *denote* exactly the same phenomena. However they each have *connotations* of different value domains, the karmatic, the nirvāṇic (or soteriological) and the moral/epistemic respectively. Pair A, *puñña* and *apuñña*, connotes the experiential result of the action. Pair B, *kusala* and *akusala*, connotes the quality of the action with respect to wisdom and awakening. Pair C, *sukka* and *kaṇha*, is importantly ambiguous, simultaneously pointing towards both the moral quality and epistemic character of the action itself. The moral connotation links us to the karmatic; the epistemic connects us to the soteriological or nirvāṇic. Thus according to the understanding outlined so far, there is an easy correspondence to make among the three sets of antonyms. The former member of each pair would be translatable as “good,” the latter as “bad.” In *puñña*, *kusala*, and *sukka* we would appear to have three words referring to exactly the same set of actions. Because of its double implication of

morality and knowledge the term *sukka* functions to bridge the conceptual gap between *puñña* and *kusala*. These results appear to support Keown's view that *puñña* and *kusala* refer to exactly the same set of phenomena.

This could be considered the end of the story, but it is not. There are important qualifications that must be added. Thus far we have refrained from an analysis of the fourth category of action, that which seems most immediately identifiable with the Buddha's path. This category presents conceptual challenges that call for a more detailed analysis.

Section 2: Different Classes of Agent

In researching the root meaning of the word *kusala* Lance Cousins has concluded that in its original use it carried a sense of "intelligent" or "wise" (1996:156). In the Pāli Canon the word appears to convey an interesting double connotation, referring to both "origin" and "end," i.e., it indicates skillful mental states *produced by* wisdom and leading to awakening (*bodhipakkhiyadhamma*) (ibid:145).¹⁰ Thus it is the word most clearly associated with the Buddha's path (ibid:154). It must be noticed however that *kusala* not only appears as a qualifier of action (*karma*), but also as a qualifier of mental states not associated with action — specifically those produced through meditation (e.g., the *jhānas*).¹¹ *Puñña* on the other hand is a term usually used to refer to actions that are intended to bring about pleasant results.¹²

Thus when we look more closely and ask whether the class of the "wholesome" includes exactly the same members as the "bright" and the "karmically meritorious," we find that *kusala* is actually a more general term for any *mental state* associated with wisdom. These latter include non-intentional states such as the *jhānas*. Bright, meritorious actions constitute a large subset of the *kusala*, but do not exhaust it. We might say that *kusala* as a term applies to a wider value domain, a wider universe of discourse: one that includes morality, but much else besides.¹³

Indeed as Keown has pointed out there are scriptural passages wherein the Buddha himself is described as endowed with *kusala* states. "The Tathāgata ... has abandoned all unwholesome states (*akusaladhamma*) and is possessed of states that are wholesome (*kusala*)" (MN ii 116).¹⁴ Indeed a standard description of the *Arahat* is that of one who is "accomplished in what is

wholesome, perfected in what is wholesome, attained to the supreme attainment, an ascetic invincible” (MN ii 26).

Yet by definition an *Arahat* is one who has passed beyond the field of *karma*, beyond *puñña* and *apuñña*; he is one who will not be reborn. Hence, just as is true of the extraordinary, spiritually elevated states of mind which are the *jhānas*, so too for the extraordinary, spiritually elevated mode of existence which is Arahathood — the terms *kusala* and *puñña* do not appear to be coextensive. The spiritual states of an *Arahat* may be considered *kusala*, but they cannot be *puñña*.¹⁵

Keown appears to have been well aware of this possible reservation concerning his account, dealing with it separately in a section of his work entitled “The Position of the *Arahat*.” The difficulty is succinctly articulated: “[H]ow is it that *kusala* can be predicated of the *Arahat* while *puñña* may not?” (Keown 1992:124) Clearly this is a serious conceptual problem for Keown given his assertion that *kusala* and *puñña* represent two aspects of exactly the same set of phenomena. The solution Keown provides is rather brief and somewhat opaque; it will not be dwelt on here.¹⁶

Instead a solution to this conundrum will be proposed based upon an analysis of the fourth category of action, that which is “neither dark nor bright, neither dark nor bright in result, the action that conduces to the destruction of actions.”

One obvious suggestion would be to simply identify this fourth category with the term *kusala*; this seems a natural identification given the “wise” connotations of the latter term. It would then be only a small step to further identify it with the conduct of the *Arahat*, the figure who represents the very embodiment of wisdom. In addition the *Arahat*’s conduct appears to fit the description of being “neither dark nor bright, neither dark nor bright in result.” By definition an *Arahat* is a liberated being, one who will not be reborn — the conduct of such a person generates no future experiential results. Hence it cannot be *puñña*. Taking this line of thinking one step further we could go on to identify the first three categories with the action of non-*Arahats*, those who do reap the results of their actions. It is their action that would be describable as *puñña* (or *apuñña*) — but not *kusala*.

While the simplicity of this solution is tempting, unfortunately it does not mesh well with our analysis so far. We have already presented arguments to

show that the terms *puñña* and *kusala* both apply to the first three categories. The inadequacy of suggesting otherwise can be seen from the fact that this would leave us no clear point of reference for the term *akusala*. To whom would this term apply? But a more telling consideration pertains to Category 4 itself. This category does seem to represent *kusala* conduct; indeed, it seems to be a description of the path of action advocated by the Buddha. But the conduct of a liberated being does not actually fit the final clause of the description, “action that *conduces* to the destruction of action.” The *Arahat* has already *reached* the goal of having “destroyed action.” For this reason alone it seems clear that Category 4 cannot be identified with the conduct of *Arahats*. In fact, properly speaking, an *Arahat*’s conduct cannot be considered “action” (*karma*) at all; it is non-karmatic.

Clearly the position of the *Arahat* is a special case, one that seems to fall outside the Buddha’s fourfold schema of action. Let us momentarily put it to one side and return to our question. If not the *Arahat*, then whose actions, precisely, does Category 4 describe?

Could it be that Category 4 actions belong to the ordinary person (*puthujjana*)? The problem with this suggestion is that the ordinary person’s actions simply don’t appear to fit the description in any way. They certainly do not appear to be “neither bright nor dark,” for example. And yet we have just ruled out the *Arahat* as a possible agent for Category 4 actions. Thus it appears that we require another kind of actor whose level of spiritual attainment falls somewhere between the ordinary person and the *Arahat*. Here it seems reasonable to suggest that the agent be someone who has entered the Noble Eightfold Path, someone who has had an initial intimation of the freedom of *nirvāṇa*, but who has not yet achieved it. We may tentatively identify such a person with those categories of Noble Person (*ariyapuggala*) who have not yet reached the stage of Arahathood, the group of practitioners collectively referred to under the title *sekha* or “disciple in higher training.” This group includes the Stream-Enterer (*sotāpanna*), Once-Returner (*sakadāgāmin*), and Never-Returner (*anāgāmin*). It seems natural to identify Category 4 with the actions of disciples in higher training. Their actions represent *kusala* par excellence. They lead to, and are informed by, the highest good.

If this suggestion is satisfactory, what remains to be ascertained is whether such actions are properly considered karmically meritorious (*puñña*).

In order to answer this question, we must begin by noting a peculiarity with regard to their “brightness”: according to the literal description of Category 4 these actions are not bright. Category 4 actions are *neither bright nor dark*, with neither dark nor bright result. This distinguishes them from the actions of Category 2, which are bright with bright results. This suggests the possibility that there are two usages of *kusala* as an adjective describing actions:

- a) actions that are bright and not dark (Category 2) — Ordinary people
- b) actions that are not bright and not dark (Category 4) — Disciples in higher training

Actions of Categories 2 and 4 are both *kusala*, but only Category 2 is “bright” (*sukka*).¹⁷ Given this understanding it becomes possible to ask whether they are both *puñña*. Here I will argue that they are, but in interestingly different senses.¹⁸

To see this we need to make use of a valuable conceptual distinction employed by Velez de Cea in his critique of Keown. Although it was not Velez de Cea’s intention, the heuristic device he has introduced can actually be used to defend Keown’s views. Basing himself on Aristotle, Velez de Cea has drawn a distinction between what he calls “instrumental” and “teleological” actions. As he puts it:

By instrumental actions I mean actions leading to favorable conditions for cultivating nirvāṇic virtues and by teleological I mean actions actually displaying nirvāṇic virtues or virtues characteristic of the Buddhist ideal of sainthood (2004:128).

If we apply this distinction to our fourfold schema our initial temptation is to say that Category 2 actions constitute the instrumental; although they are motivated by non-nirvāṇic considerations, clearly they are “conducive to *nirvāṇa*” and thus instrumentally “nirvāṇic” — in the sense of *resulting in circumstances* that are situationally favorable to the attainment of the final goal. Category 4 actions, on the other hand, are *directly informed* by *nirvāṇa*; they appear to match what Velez de Cea calls the “teleological.” Initially then, these results would appear to support the view, taken by Velez de Cea, that the terms *puñña* and *kusala* refer to two different kinds of action.

But this result appears to contradict our understanding that these actions are both *kusala* — the first being bright and not dark (associated with the ordinary people), the second neither bright nor dark (associated with disciples in higher training). Of course, Velez de Cea is not employing the fourfold schema in his explanations, so it remains for us to explain the discrepancy. We can do this by refining the very distinction between the instrumental and the teleological. This refinement is based on the notion that one and the same action can be considered both instrumental and teleological, depending on the end towards which the agent's intention is principally related. So while actions of Category 4 are indeed teleologically nirvāṇic (*kusala*), they are also correctly viewed as instrumentally karmatic (*puñña*), the notion of “instrumentality” being understood as referring to the unintended effects of the action. Category 4 actions participate in *nirvāṇa*; but unless the agent reaches this goal he or she will be reborn. Such actions will have had the inevitable effect of leading to a higher rebirth, even though this result will have been gained inadvertently. This beneficial result for the person *did not inform his or her intention*.

As for Category 2 actions, these have the unintended effect of leading one closer to *nirvāṇa*. But they also inevitably lead to positive future experiences for the agent, such as a pleasant rebirth. Such a concern for oneself informs the agent's intention. The agent's mental state is self-centered and does not “participate in” the final goal of *nirvāṇa*; in some basic sense it is not based in the awareness of this possibility of selflessness. The agent's actions therefore lead to pleasant future experiences, such as a better rebirth. Such a result is inevitable. There is a telos inherent in the natural order of things. We can therefore speak of such actions as teleologically *puñña* or teleologically karmatic.

Note that this way of talking assumes that the key determinant (in the causal sense) of an action's being either Category 2 or 4 is indeed the quality of awareness that marks the intention of the agent. In most circumstances an ordinary person is motivated by a concern informed by the delusion of self; one's moral conduct is motivated by the desire to benefit oneself (e.g., with a higher rebirth, the prospect of pleasure, etc.)

But an inversion happens upon entry into the Noble Eightfold Path: actions are thereafter marked by the first intimation of *nirvāṇa*; they are now in-

delibly “experienced as” leading to this final goal. They are informed by the wisdom that sees through the delusion of self. These actions are teleologically *kusala* (inevitably leading to *nirvāṇa*) and instrumentally *puñña* (unintentionally leading to a higher rebirth).¹⁹

By refining the tool provided by Velez de Cea, we reach the conclusion that all *kusala* action is *puñña* and all *puñña* action is *kusala* — but in two different ways:

- Category 2: teleologically *puñña* and instrumentally *kusala*, (*sukka*, not *kaṇha*); the action of ordinary people
- Category 4: instrumentally *puñña* and teleologically *kusala*, (neither *sukka* nor *kaṇha*); the virtuous action of disciples in higher training

A final inversion occurs upon Awakening, when the telos is realized. At this point one can no longer properly speak of action (*karma*) at all.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

The appropriate description of “good” or “moral” conduct in early Buddhist thought hinges on the mental state of the agent, which in turn should be set in the context of the agent’s spiritual status. Broadly speaking we must distinguish at least three classes of agent and the descriptions of their respective moral conduct.

(1) Ordinary persons (*puthujjana*): a good action is bright, teleologically meritorious and instrumentally skillful (i.e., such action results in experiences that better situate one to pursue liberation, e.g., a happy rebirth). Hence, for this kind of agent, good conduct is describable as *puñña*, *kusala*, and *sukka*.²⁰

(2) Disciples in higher training (*sekha*): a good action is neither bright nor dark, instrumentally meritorious, and teleologically skillful (informed by *nirvāṇa*: born from wisdom and proceeding there too). The agent is inevitably drawn towards *nirvāṇa*, but, paradoxically, not motivated by the goal of attaining it for him or herself. The delusion of self has been penetrated by insight, even if it and the other unwholesome roots have not been entirely

eradicated. For this kind of agent, good conduct is accurately described as *kusala*, *puñña*, and not *sukka* (neither *sukka* nor *kaṇha*).

(3) *Arahats* (including the Buddha): good conduct is beyond duality — neither bright nor dark, neither karmically meritorious nor detrimental, neither wholesome nor unwholesome. There is, in fact, some ambiguity as to whether the *Arahat*'s good conduct should be called wholesome.²¹ As we have seen, *kusala* states are said to be perfected in the *Arahat*. On the other hand, because *kusala* and *akusala* are often understood as applying to *action* (*karma*), we would also expect to find passages indicating that the conduct of *Arahats* is neither. Properly speaking such activity cannot be considered action in the normal sense. The activity of *Arahats* is never described as *puñña*; it no longer generates future experiences. Thus, as well, the *awakened activity* of this category of “agent” cannot be described as “bright with bright result.” For this kind of agent, good conduct is accurately described as neither *kusala*, *puñña*, nor *sukka* (nor their opposites).

More generally, this schema may be rearticulated to include non-moral sentient beings like animals, in terms of the degree of awareness and freedom informing their conduct.

(0) Animals. This kind of sentient being has little awareness informing its conduct; it does not know what it is doing and therefore its behavior is not intentional (i.e., it is involuntary, unfree). Hence for this kind of sentient being rather than speaking of action (*karma*) we may speak simply of *behavior*.

(1) Ordinary persons. The ordinary person has a greater degree of awareness; one is capable of knowing what one is doing. Much of one's behavior is intentional (voluntary, free). Such behavior is, however, informed by the delusion of self. Because the behavior is intentional we speak principally of *action*.

(2) Disciples in higher training. Members of this group have an even greater degree of awareness informing their behavior. Their behavior is intentional (voluntary, free), but is moreover informed by the veridical awareness that is insight into lack of self. The conduct of such persons becomes progressively more pure as they proceed toward *nirvāṇa*. Here we speak principally of *virtuous action*.

(3) *Arahats*. These beings have reached full awareness. Their activity is entirely free from delusion.²² It proceeds from the realized state wherein the

false dichotomy of self and other has been entirely eradicated. Here we may speak of enlightened conduct or *awakened activity*.

Clearly these classes represent ideal types.²³ Also note that this schema allows for a loose distinction to be made between the moral conduct of the laity and the monastic community (i.e., associated with classes one and two respectively), assuming that it is more common for members of the latter group to have had the experience of transformative insight, which marks one's entry into the supramundane path.

Notes

¹ I employ the anglicized Sanskrit words “*nirvāṇa*” and “*karma*” in place of the Pāli, *nibbāna* and *kamma*.

² Technically, this “overlap” could take one of three logical forms. *Puñña* could be a subset of *kusala*. Or *kusala* could be a subset of *puñña*. Or, while sharing some common members, both *kusala* and *puñña* could each encompass some members not included in the other.

³ This formula is not unique to Buddhism (e.g., see *Yoga Sūtras*, IV 7). In the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* the Buddha is concerned to explain the nature of the relationship between actions and their results to two ascetics, one of whom has chosen to undertake a practice of imitating the behavior of a dog, and another who is copying the conduct of an ox. Beyond the specifics of their individual cases, the Buddha advises that there are four general possibilities: *Cattār' imāni, puṇṇa, kammāni mayā sayamaṃ abhiññā? sacchikatvā paveditāni, katamāni cattāri: atthi, puṇṇa, kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇhavipākamaṃ; atthi, puṇṇa, kammaṃ sukkaṃ sukkavipākamaṃ; atthi, puṇṇa, kammaṃ kaṇhasukkaṃ kaṇhasukkavipākamaṃ; atthi, puṇṇa, kammaṃ akaṇhaṃ asukkaṃ akaṇhāsukkavipākamaṃ, kammaṃ kammakkhayāya saṃvattati.* “O Puṇṇa, there are four kinds of action taught by me after realizing them directly myself. What are the four? There is, O Puṇṇa, dark action with dark result. There is, O Puṇṇa, bright action with bright result. There is, O Puṇṇa, action which is dark and bright, with dark and bright result. There is, O Puṇṇa, action which

is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result, action that conduces to the destruction of actions.” (MN i 389)

⁴ We will not deal with this sort of action in detail; it suggests the idea that we are beings of mixed motive: our intentions are a confusion of the positive and the negative. There are conceptual problems with this category. According to the *Abhidhamma*, strictly speaking, at any one moment an action can only be either one or the other, not both; there can be no shades of grey. Thus the description of the action as of a “mixed” nature must be understood as indicating a rapid fluctuation in underlying motive (Harvey 2000:44).

⁵ Utilitarianism is thus ruled out as a possible western “match” for Buddhist ethical theory. These considerations appear to be decisive for early Buddhist moral thought; they may be considerably less so for the *Mahāyāna*, which rejected such a belief in inherent qualities (*svabhāva*).

⁶ The notion of “harm” is, of course, ambiguous. If we read the possible object of harm to be oneself as well as others then Harvey’s view may work; for by definition any action that results in future experiences that impede the attainment of *nirvāṇa* — one’s ultimate well-being — can be considered “harmful.” If, on the other hand, we understand harm as referring only to the harming of others the view runs into difficulties; for it seems clear that many karmically negative actions are performed that do not hurt others. This is especially so in the case of mental actions that are not bodily or vocally performed. These remain private, but do have karmic consequences.

⁷ AN iii 415. Quoted in Gethin (1998:120). Also see Gethin (2004:169) and Nyanatiloka (1972:68).

⁸ A failure to adhere to this understanding inevitably leads to a fractured account of Buddhist meta-ethics, such as that offered by Velez de Cea. In personal correspondence received just prior to the publication of the present article, Velez de Cea has clarified that he sees Buddhist ethics as unified, *sui generis*, and irreducible to any one western system of ethics. Thus he shares the goal of understanding Buddhist ethics in its own terms. According to Velez de Cea Buddhist ethics do not correspond to a form of virtue ethics as

Keown defines it, but rather to a system of virtue ethics with features of utilitarianism and moral realism. In my view this position demands a detailed explanation as to how and which features of these diverse ethical systems might be considered mutually consistent in the context of Buddhism.

⁹ The unwholesome consists in killing, taking what is not given, sensual misconduct, malicious speech, harsh speech, gossip, covetousness, ill-will, and wrong view. The wholesome is listed as the negation of the unwholesome (MN i 47).

¹⁰ It is only later, in commentarial literature, that this meaning is generalized to refer to morally “good” or “wholesome” states (Cousins 1996:156).

¹¹ In order to distinguish between these kinds of state I shall refer to them as the intentional and the non-intentional respectively. For reasons mentioned above, intention is associated with action. Thus “non-intentional” is here used to indicate mental states not associated with action. Clearly a great deal of work remains to be done in order to give this conception of the “non-intentional” more precision. But here let me indicate a minimal conception: by non-intentional I mean neither that the state was not intended nor that the state lacks an intentional object of consciousness. Rather the term is meant to indicate an awakened quality of awareness which does not understand itself in terms of possible future positive or negative results for oneself.

¹² These observations by Cousins appear to have led Velez de Cea to assert that *puñña* and *kusala* “refer to two different kinds of actions” (2004:130). But this does not follow. Cousins himself is discussing usage, not logical relations; his scholarship is here *descriptive*, not analytical. There is absolutely no inconsistency in maintaining both that in terms of *usage* the word *kusala* is the term principally used in reference to the Buddha’s path, and that *conceptually* the term *puñña* is applicable to the very same actions. Cousins himself suggests that the Buddha and his early followers would have no reason to object to the notion of *puñña*, even if they might have understood it somewhat differently from their non-*sangha* contemporaries (Cousins 1996:155). Velez de Cea actually seeks to sidestep the seemingly intractable hermeneutical problems associated with the relationship between *kusala* and *puñña*; he does so by introducing a different conceptual distinction that he

takes to be more crucial to the correct interpretation of Buddhist ethics — that between instrumental and teleological actions (to be discussed below).

¹³ In this wider universe of discourse, for any *x*, *x* is *puñña* only if it is *kusala*, but it is not the case that if *x* is *kusala* then it is *puñña*.

¹⁴ *Sabbākusaladhammapahīno ... Tathāgato kusaladhamma samannāgato ti*. Quoted in Keown (1992:118).

¹⁵ One is here tempted to speak of “actionless action” or action that has no fruit (unless, perhaps, we speak in a different way of fruit *for others*). This conduct may be characterized as “skillful,” in a qualified sense — no longer leading towards one’s own liberation, but selflessly oriented towards the liberation of others. This thread appears to have been seized on and developed in the *Mahāyāna*.

¹⁶ Keown appears to argue that because the *Arahat* is as good (*kusala*) as it is possible to be, his happiness cannot increase or decrease either. Happiness is associated by Keown with *puñña*, the “experiential indicator” of *kusala*. Because happiness cannot increase or decrease, the *Arahat* can be said to have passed beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*. As *puñña* is an epiphenomenon of progress in *kusala*, and no such progress occurs for the *Arahat*, “it is meaningless to speak of him producing *puñña*.” In my view, this doesn’t adequately solve the problem, so much as rephrase it, and rather darkly at that. It appears that Keown may be conflating *puñña* and happiness. In any case, it remains true that some phenomena (i.e. the mental states of the *Arahat*) would be describable as *kusala* and not *puñña*.

¹⁷ From this we may conclude more generally: a *kusala* action is an action that is *not dark*. This kind of logical analysis does, of course, result in a rather colorless account of good action, which in the *suttas* themselves is described in rather more glowing terms. Nonetheless the account is important insofar as it allows us to see the deeper logical structure of Buddhist moral thinking. Here, for example, we can see that for disciples in higher training the association between *kusala* and *sukka* breaks down.

¹⁸ This means that for disciples in higher training the association between *puñña* and *sukka* breaks down.

¹⁹ Another way of putting these results is as follows: as long as an action is not dark it is wholesome. If it is not dark and is bright then it is instrumentally wholesome (and teleologically meritorious: it has the effect of situating one in a better circumstance to attain *nirvāṇa*, but this was not the intention). If it is not dark and not bright then it is teleologically wholesome (and instrumentally meritorious: it has positive karmic effects, but these were not intended).

²⁰ This is not the traditional *Theravāda* understanding.

²¹ Following Keown, in this paper I have argued in line with the understanding that the states of an *Arahat* may be considered *kusala*. As discussed, there appears to be clear support for this notion in the *Nikāyas*. However, there is an Abhidhammic understanding that the conduct and intention of the *Arahat* are of an indeterminate nature (*avyākata*), on account of carrying no karmic consequences. They are neither *kusala* nor *akusala*. See *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* p. 190-191 (Ref. in Gethin 2004:202). This intuition conforms to the understanding that *nirvāṇa* itself is of an indeterminate nature. It may well be the case that different passages of the *Nikāyas* reflect different understandings as to whether the mental condition of the *Arahat* is to be considered *kusala* or *avyākata*. This must remain an area of further research. The following initial considerations appear germane.

In the *Nikāyas* the conduct of certain *bhikkhus* is said to be *sīlavā*, but not *sīlamaya* — moral, but not “full of” morality (MN ii 27). Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995:651) translate this phrase as “virtuous, but he does not identify with his virtue.” The description fits one who has their basic orientation reversed; actions are no longer experienced for the sake of one’s self. Harvey follows Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (*ibid*:1283) in taking this description as referring to *Arahats* (Harvey 2000:44-45):

“And where do these wholesome habits (*kusala sīla*) cease without remainder? Their cessation is stated: here a *bhikkhu* is virtuous (*sīlavā*) but he does not identify with his virtue (*no ca sīlamaya*) and he understands as it actually is that deliverance of mind and deliverance by wisdom where these wholesome habits cease without remainder...”

This is followed by a description that fits disciples in higher training, those who are striving for Arahathood: “And how practicing does he practice the way to the cessation of wholesome habits? Here a bhikkhu awakens zeal for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states (*anuppannānaṃ pāpakānaṃ akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ*), for the continuance, non-disappearance and strengthening, increase, and fulfillment by development of arisen wholesome states and he makes effort, arouses energy, exerts his mind, and strives. One so practicing practices the way to the cessation of wholesome habits.” Shortly thereafter it is wholesome intentions (*sāṅkappa*) that the *Arahat* is said to go beyond. Thus the *Arahat* is one whose intentions are not wholesome (*avyākata*), but who is “accomplished in what is wholesome, perfected in what is wholesome, attained to the supreme attainment, an ascetic invincible.”

²² The epistemic quality of delusion, as one of the three unwholesome roots, is to be factored into all unawakened conduct. Actions that are “good” in terms of the absence of greed and hatred may still be based on delusion. Such actions may be considered deluded in part because the agent does not fully realize their repercussions, their harmful effects. There is, then, a deep moral logic at work here, related to the degree of awareness of the agent. Early Buddhism seems logically committed to the view that one who is fully aware (i.e. an awakened being) can do no harm. This view is consistent with that of Rupert Gethin who has recently argued that intentional killing, even on ostensibly compassionate grounds, is impossible for a being who is fully aware of the nature of their act (2004:181).

Is this implausible? Some have thought so. This point may in fact be connected to the so-called great schism of the early *sangha*. The *Mahāsāṃghikas* appear to have judged *Arahats* as having too high a view of themselves vis-à-vis their potential for wrong conduct. The rejection of this concept of the *Arahat* would naturally have allowed for a different way of reasoning about ethics, namely, a more consequentialist one, consistent with the Bodhisattva ideal.

In the *Mahāyāna* the understanding that intentional killing is ruled out for an awakened being may have been confined only to Buddhas. I know of no

Mahāyāna text in which a Buddha is described as intentionally killing, even on compassionate grounds. Full awareness would appear to preclude this as a live option. See Adam (2005).

²³ In principle there could be some overlap between neighboring classes (particularly between one and two). The author would like to thank Dr. Michael Picard, a University of Victoria philosopher whose words were like water in cultivating some of the key ideas found in this paper.

Abbreviations

All references to the Pāli texts are to the edition of the Pāli Text Society, Oxford. References are to the volume and page number.

AN *Āṅguttara Nikāya*

DN *Dīgha Nikāya*

MN *Majjhima Nikāya*

SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

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