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Ethical Particularism in
Theravāda Buddhism

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As scholars, we cherish the truism that some questions are better than others, but perhaps we do not ask often enough what makes one question better than another.¹

One measure of a better question is that it promises to yield an answer that is better within the framework of a specific purpose. Better questions thus mean progress, since they help to advance some particular collective project. But perhaps we should also include in the class of better questions to ask those for which certain answers are so well-established, so natural, that we feel no need even to articulate them anymore. In such cases, we need to play our own version of that old television quiz-show *Jeopardy* where the contestants formulate questions for answers that are provided to them. This process of rearticulating the questions to well-established answers gives us another important measure of a better question: instead of finding a question worth asking because it meets the needs and standards of our present purposes and understanding, we may come to see that a basic orientation is an *eminence grise* shaping and limiting our investigations more than we might have ever suspected. That is, attempting to put our most basic interpretive assumptions into the form of a question can give us a chance to consider whether some of the questions we ask inadvertently cause us to misconstrue or ignore some of the very material that we hope to understand. My basic argument this morning is that this has happened to us in our studies of ethics in Theravāda Buddhism.

Rather than forcing you to play Jeopardy yourselves throughout the rest of my presentation, by leaving you wondering “What question is he looking for?”, let me immediately identify the “already answered” question which I think has distorted our perceptions of Theravādin ethics. It can be put simply and directly: “Is there a moral theory in Theravāda Buddhism?” I see the efforts by various scholars of Buddhism over the years to describe the nature of Buddhist ethics—as eudaimonistic, consequentialist, intentionalist, a virtue-ethics, or whatever—as illustrating how many of us have approached our subject expecting that there is a moral theory underlying or structuring Buddhist ethics, one which, once identified, would provide a global justification for the specific parts of Buddhist ethics. We can see the same expectation in methodological calls for us to move beyond simple descriptions of Buddhist morality to “such matters as the logic or mode

¹ Paper presented in a panel on “Revisioning Buddhist Ethics” at the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion in Philadelphia, 20 November 1995; the oral style of the original presentation has been retained and it thus has only a minimum of references.

of moral reasoning found in particular sources and the overall pattern of justification exhibited by movements, schools, sects, or even collections of texts, which may be designated as ethical systems or subsystems.”² That such calls assume a positive answer to our question about whether Buddhists had a moral theory is quite clear in the programs for the study of Buddhist ethics which they envision, as when it is said that “a major step forward [will have] been taken [when we are able to identify] the family of ethical theory to which Buddhism belongs.”³

I think we need to determine first whether “What is the family of ethical theory to which Buddhism belongs?” is the best question. In other words, are we so sure that we should begin our investigations into Buddhist ethics assuming a generic answer to this question?—namely that Buddhists have an as-yet-unknown moral theory, one which both defines the fundamental principles of Buddhist morality and establishes the authority of those principles.

It is certainly not obvious that we should think that all of Buddhist ethics belongs to a single family of ethical theory, especially when we take the question in a manner which encourages us to conceptualize Buddhism as analogous to consequentialism or any other family of ethical theory. As a historical phenomenon, the Theravāda Buddhist tradition (not to speak of Buddhism more generally) has been internally diverse, just as Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism have been; and just as it is certainly inappropriate to speak of all of Christianity as teleological or deontological, so it is with the Buddhist traditions. We would do better to begin any investigation of Buddhist ethics with a common-sense expectation that any historical tradition worth its salt will inevitably display evidence that its practitioners and intellectuals have resorted to more than one kind of moral theory.

It is very easy to provide numerous examples from different times and places which demonstrate that Theravāda Buddhists did not have only one moral theory, but for the sake of brevity, let me consider only a single story from medieval Sri Lanka. I have picked this story because in it different modes of moral reasoning are brought into clear conflict with each other. It is about a bodhisattva—someone developing the powers and virtues identified with being a Buddha—who is said to have ruled in Sri Lanka as king; his example was esteemed so much by later kings of Sri Lanka that many of them took his name, Siri Sanga

² Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 6.

³ Damien Keown, “Karma and Consequentialism,” unpublished paper, 1.

Bo, as their own coronation names. Medieval Sri Lankan biographies of Siri Sanga Bo tell us that, before he ascended the throne, he recognized that the violent actions expected of a king in upholding the law and sentencing criminals to punishment were actions that would bring an individual to ruin. He thus refused an invitation to become king after pondering the story of the Buddha's previous birth as Temiya in which the future Buddha refused to succeed his father as king because he saw that his "father, through his being a king, is becoming guilty of a grievous action which brings men to hell."⁴ One could readily discuss whether the ethical theory underlying this Jātaka story, as well as Siri Sanga Bo's articulation of his reluctance to become king through a quotation from it, is consequentialist—holding that actions are bad because they bring one to an undesired end—or whether it represents some version of a deontological theory in which actions are wrong because of the sorts of acts they are. Given my immediate purposes here, I will not try to decide whether one of these possibilities might be more appropriate to our story, but I will instead move directly to the counterargument, with which, according to the medieval biographies, some Buddhist monks attempt to persuade Siri Sanga Bo to become king. These monks respond to Siri Sanga Bo's demurral with a striking simile that suggests the presence of yet another moral theory:

When the leech comes in contact with the breast, it gives pain by its sharp bite, and draws out the very blood, but not so with an infant. The latter by sucking with the tender point of his mouth, produces a pleasing sensation in the mother, and draws only milk. In like manner the ignorant unsteady man, who attains to the supremacy of a kingdom, accumulates nothing but demerit; whereas a wise and steady man, impressed with a just sense of the frailty of human life and the instability of wealth, only becomes a practitioner of the good deeds; and abounding in such highly profitable acts, acquires much merit.⁵

The moral theory structuring this response might be taken as some variant of a virtue-ethic, since it emphasizes the character of an agent as a moral determinant. The monks' metaphor about infants and leeches is sufficient to persuade Siri Sanga Bo to take the throne, but the narrative goes on to tell us that, even with all his good moral qualities (among other things, he is said to have good intentions towards all

⁴ Jātaka VI.3.

⁵ Hatthavanagallavīhāravāsa 11.

beings and to be the very personification of the Dharma)⁶, Siri Sanga Bo is unable to “nourish the world with justice and righteousness,” as the monks asked him to do. Instead, his kingdom is racked by pestilence and crime, the latter apparently because he refuses to uphold the law with violence, and in the end, he renounces his throne and retreats to the life of an ascetic in the forest, just as Temiya had preached in the Jātaka story. It would seem that this particular version of Siri Sanga Bo's life rejects an understanding of ethics along the lines of a virtue-theory.

What is important about Siri Sanga Bo's story is not its particular conclusion, since the Buddhist kings of medieval Sri Lanka who took Siri Sanga Bo's name as their throne name were obviously not dissuaded from ascending to a royal throne. Instead, I think we should recognize it as a mirror of what we find in the tradition as a whole. Stories like that of Siri Sanga Bo are discursive sites where Buddhists debated the scope and validity of the different ethical theories which they knew, and when we see these stories as such, we realize that there can be no answer to a question that asks us to discover which family of ethical theory underlies Buddhist ethics in general, simply because Buddhists availed themselves of and argued over a variety of moral theories.

At this point, I would like to take our question “Did Buddhists have a moral theory?” in another direction. It is possible to construe the question in such a way that it generates a very different kind of investigation, one which allows us to see the ethical diversity in the Theravāda as more than a historical accident. We can take the same question to be about whether or not Buddhists always employed some ethical theory or other to justify their moral principles and to guide their moral decisions. In other words, I think we should ask whether it is possible that Buddhists approached their ethical concerns without any ethical theory at all, but instead adopted a kind of ethical particularism.

By ethical particularism, I mean something analogous to a very old problem in western philosophy, the “problem of the criterion” as it is now called in contemporary epistemology. This problem is generated by the apparent plausibility of two propositions:

1. “First, in order to recognize instances, and thus to determine the extent, of knowledge, we must know the criteria for it.

⁶ Hatthavanagallavihāravāsa 11.

2. Second, in order to know the criteria for knowledge (i.e. to distinguish between correct and incorrect criteria), we must already be able to recognize its instances.”⁷

Most studies of Buddhist ethics seem to have approached their task as if it were clear the first proposition is true and the second false—apparently assuming that only by theoretically knowing the criteria for ethical knowledge can we recognize any particular instance of morality as such. In approaching their task in this manner, they have embraced what Roderick Chisholm calls *methodism*, since their concern has been with identifying the method by which Buddhists have decided whether a particular action or character trait is a good one; one of the characteristics of methodism is a high regard for consistency, a characteristic that has been a guiding principle in much of our work.

It is worth noting, however, that it is also possible to take the second proposition as true, while rejecting the first as false; of course, one could take both as true or false, but this leads to skepticism, and it is the topic of another paper to investigate the extent to which we see skepticism operating as a philosophical option in Buddhist thought. This option has been called *particularism* by Chisholm, since it says that we recognize particular instances of knowledge even if we do begin with criteria that would justify our confidence that this knowledge is true. Moreover, in response to those who hold that the first proposition is true, the particularist also points out that unless we already know what counts as an instance of knowledge, we will not be able to choose any criterion to justify that knowledge as valid.

An example of ethical particularism in modern European philosophy is W.D. Ross's account of *prima facie* duties; from Ross, we have learned to expect that “in ethics everything is pretty messy, and there is not much room for the sort of moral theory” that would meet the standards of those who look to theory to provide a list of basic moral principles, a justification of what is on the list, and an account of how to derive more specific attributes or actions from the basic principles.⁸ Ross's account of *prima facie* duties does not suggest that some moral principles are more important than others; it also eschews any attempt

⁷ Robert Audi, general editor, *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 653; see as well Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1973).

⁸ Jonathan Dancy, “An ethic of *prima facie* duties,” *A Companion to Ethics*, edited by Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 219.

to discover any consistency in the things which we take to matter morally. In the rest of this paper, I wish to look at some evidence from the Theravāda Buddhist tradition that suggests that some Theravādins, at least, approached ethics in an analogous manner.

An obvious place to look for ethical particularism in the Theravāda is the commentarial tradition on the Maṅgalasutta. At first glance, the Maṅgalasutta might appear to be a very slight text, and it is frequently dismissed by students of Buddhism as being so commonplace in some of its contents as to hardly deserve the adjective Buddhist at all. It is slight, being only twelve verses in length, but it is one of the most popular and influential texts in the Theravāda Buddhist world. It has been included in many anthologies, and in fact it is found in two different places in the canon; it is included in the collection of texts that are chanted as part of protective rituals to ward off misfortunes; it also has been the subject of numerous commentaries in various languages used throughout the Theravādin world. One of the largest of these is the *Lamp on the Meaning of Auspiciousness*, which was composed in the Pali language in northern Thailand in the sixteenth century and is over five hundred pages long. Five hundred pages on twelve verses is a good indication that Theravādins have seen a lot in the canonical text, but what they apparently have not seen is a moral theory.

The canonical text itself appears to be a list of thirty-eight *prima facie* duties, in Ross's sense, all of which are construed as instances of "auspiciousness" or maṅgala. There is no doubt that we are in the realm of the ethical since the list includes such things as "the five precepts," "diligence in ideals," "profitable courses of actions," "ceasing and refraining from evil," and "doing actions that are blameless." At the same time, the list is quite inclusive and includes taking care of one's spouse and children as well as abstinence from sexual intercourse; not associating with fools as well as attaining the Path and seeing the Four Noble Truths; worshipping those worthy of worship as well as the realization of nirvana.

It is precisely this inclusiveness which prevents us from taking the items on the list as together providing a portrait of an ideal moral agent, such as we might find in a virtue-theory of ethics. Some of the items appear to be mutually exclusive with respect to each other: one cannot simultaneously take as duties both care for spouse and children and sexual abstinence. Indeed, rather than the outline of any particular underlying ethical theory, the impression that one takes away from this list of thirty-eight inauspicious things is that all sorts of things matter.

Among the things that apparently matter are that one should help others in a variety of ways; that one should not harm others; that one should not let people down; that one should be concerned about one's own well-being; and that one has obligations to others because of their own past acts of kindness. Moreover, these things that matter morally can be discussed with quite different moral theories, such that the way that one should act may be understood both by awareness of the consequences of an act, the nature of act, or by awareness of one's own earlier actions or the actions of others towards oneself.

This impression that all sorts of things matter, but in a way that is not structured by systematic consistency, is strengthened when one turns to the commentaries on the Māṅgalasutta. Given what we have just seen in the story of Siri Sanga Bo, we should already expect that the “theoretical” orientation of these commentaries varies. Some,⁹ while others (like Buddhaghosa, the fifth-century commentator who is the greatest of the Theravādin thinkers) tend to interpret the items on the list with as much attention to the nature of actions as to their consequences.

The commentary that stands at the head of this exegetical tradition, Buddhaghosa's, can in fact be taken as a warning against any attempt to find a single metaethical principle that would make sense of everything on the list with an account of the occasion on which the canonical text was first taught. This account explains that people in India used to listen to recitations of long texts like the Rāmāyana and on one occasion, someone asked a question about the nature of auspiciousness when he heard that such recitations were auspicious. People began to argue about this, and gradually the argument spread throughout India and eventually to the realms of the gods, all without conclusion. Various factions suggested that auspicious things were seen, or heard, or smelled, etc, naming instances of things that were taken as good omens (seeing a pregnant woman or a child decked out in finery, for example), but a counterargument was always made in a consistent manner. For example, when someone said that the visible was something auspicious, someone else responded that “the eye sees both what is clean and what is unclean, likewise what is fair and what is

⁹ See “Auspicious Things,” translated by Charles Hallisey, in *Buddhism in Practice*, edited by Donald Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 415-26.

ugly, agreeable and disagreeable. If the seen were what is auspicious, then whatever is seen would be auspicious.”¹⁰

At first glance, the logic of this counterargument looks unpromising, if not in fact nonsensical, but it may appear more appealing if it is translated into more conventionally philosophical terms. I take the point of the exchange not to be a denial that there are particular instances of, say, visible good omens, for indeed many of the specified omens would have been well-accepted in the Buddhist communities which made use of these commentaries. Instead, I think the account is an attack on methodism, which you will recall is the expectation that in order to recognize individual instances of knowledge, we must first know the criteria for knowledge. It is noteworthy that in Buddhaghosa's account, people do not disagree about particular instances of a visible good omen. This suggests that somehow they all recognized instances of auspiciousness without being able to agree on the criterion that would determine these as such. It is only when they turn to possible criteria by which one would justifiably recognize something as a good omen that they argue without any prospects of conclusion, and it is at this point that they begin to lose sight of what might count as auspicious at all. As one of the commentaries puts it, “This brouhaha continued for twelve years,” because, “in the end, there was no one who could back up what she or he said with proper proof, and since each appeared to know what he or she was talking about, there was nothing that they could do but argue with each other.”¹¹ In Buddhaghosa's commentary, when the gods send a representative to the Buddha to ask what is really auspicious, the Buddha does not respond with a specific criterion for what makes something auspicious, but instead only gives the list of the thirty-eight auspicious things. I take this as an affirmation of particularism over methodism.

This affirmation of particularism over methodism helps us to appreciate the very form of many of the commentaries on the Maṅgalasutta. Some of you might have been wondering how any commentator, even the most inventive, could have written five hundred pages on the twelve short verses of the canonical text, as happened in The Lamp on the Meanings of Auspiciousness. In fact, stories represent most of the contents of this commentary, with multiple stories told in connection with each one of the thirty-eight auspicious things named in the canonical text. The significance of this becomes apparent when we ask how it

¹⁰ Khuddakapāṭha, 118.

¹¹ Auspicious Things, 417, 416.

is that any individual comes to know the truth of the *prima facie* duties listed in the Maṅgalasutta. *The Lamp on the Meanings of Auspiciousness* seems to assume that stories provide us with a knowledge which is analogous to personal experience, especially to those experiences that make us more sensitive to those aspects of a situation which will help us to negotiate the conflicts that inevitably occur among *prima facie* duties. That is, through close attention to the moral life of others, as it is made immediately available to us in stories, we come to develop a sense of judgment that allows our own moral decisions to be acutely sensitive to the context in which they are made—so much so that we begin not only to appreciate the possibility that some general truths are evident before us in a particular case, allowing us to recognize a *prima facie* duty as such, but also that we begin to feel comfortable with the possibility that precisely those features which might count in favor of a given action in one context may count against it in another. Thus, in Theravādin commentarial literature, the Buddha is portrayed as intervening in one case to ensure the safe delivery of a child, against the demands of karma, while in another case, he uses the grief that comes from the death of a child to bring a mother to a spiritual awakening. In one case he encourages monks to support their dependent parents with the property of the monastic order; in another case, he encourages monks to keep their distance from their families. The diversity of stories associated with each one of the duties included in the Maṅgalasutta encourages us, in turn, to respond to the rich particularity of each situation before us without holding ourselves to a standard of moral consistency generally associated with taking guidance from a single ethical theory.

Since the theme of this panel is “revising Buddhist ethics,” let me close by drawing your attention to three interpretive choices which have informed my paper and which I think are critical if we are to improve our collective understanding of Buddhist ethics. First, throughout, I have assumed that the study of ethics in Theravāda Buddhism is best pursued historically, in the sense that, when we wish to make generalizations about the Theravāda, we must acknowledge, even if we cannot take into account, the full range of evidence available to us and not limit ourselves only to the Pali canon. Second, the full scope of the ethical heritage of the Theravāda includes many stories which we need to take seriously as sites of Buddhist moral reflection and reasoning. Third, I have freely used terms which are quite foreign to Theravādin discourse, terms like “ethical particularism,” without apology. This is not to minimize the significance of the differences between such

vocabulary and the discourses employed by Buddhists historically. Indeed, tracing those differences is part of the very rationale for Buddhist studies as an academic field. At the same time, ideas like consequentialism or particularism are heuristically necessary because they provide tools with which we can learn more about the specific contours of ethics in the different Buddhist traditions. Moreover, these ideas also help us to learn from Buddhism, to think with Buddhist resources. It is important that we try to fashion terms like “ethical particularism” into interpretive bridges if we are ever to make the study of Buddhist ethics a part of academic discussions of ethics as well as a concern of Buddhist studies. Such efforts at translation will necessarily be halting and tentative—indeed, many of them will probably fail—but this should not discourage close attention to Buddhist ethical thought as a resource for broader academic discussions about ethics. In this vein, let me end by suggesting that close consideration of ethical particularism in the Theravāda promises to enrich and advance the discussions about the distinctions between concrete and generalized others which have attracted so much attention from contemporary Western ethicists in the last few decades.¹²

¹² See, for some examples, the literature cited in Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory,” in *Ethics: a Feminist Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 267-303; Marilyn Friedman, *What are Friends For?: Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Terrance McConnell, *Gratitude* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), especially pages 114-47.