



Ok-Sun An. *Compassion and Benevolence: A Comparative Study of Early Buddhist and Classical Confucian Ethics*. *Asian Thought and Culture*, vol. 31, General Editor Sandra Wawrytko. New York: Peter Lang, 1998, ISBN 0-8204-3801-4, £26.

Reviewed by

Damien Keown
Reader in Buddhism
Department of Historical and Cultural Studies
Goldsmiths College
University of London
d.keown@gold.ac.uk

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This useful study in comparative religious ethics was formerly the author's doctoral dissertation undertaken at the University of Hawaii under the guidance of the renowned Buddhist scholar Professor David Kalupahana. The objective is "to interpret and compare early Buddhist ethics with classical Confucian ethics from the perspective of self-transformation" (p. 1). The author regards both traditions as forms of "character building ethics," and sees their major concern as "the cultivation and development of a desirable character through the process of transforming oneself" (p. 1).

In each case she believes there is a common core task through which the process of self-transformation is to be achieved, namely embodying compassion (*karuṇā*) or benevolence (*jen*). The transformation takes place within the framework of the path to self-realization leading to the highest moral goal: *nibbāna* for Buddhism and Tao for Confucianism. This process culminates in the transformed personality of the noble one (arhat) in Buddhism, and in that of the virtuous one (*chun tzu*) in Confucianism, and the final image of the ideal person is represented in the notion of the enlightened one (Buddha) and of the sage (*sheng jen*).

Compassion is what sets in train the alchemy of change. Compassion is a paradoxical virtue in that as well as transforming the self (as with all virtues) it also has an inescapably social dimension. For this reason, the

author maintains that two common misconceptions about both Buddhism and Confucianism cannot be sustained. These are the views that depict Buddhism (particularly in its early form, which is the focus of the present study) as egocentric, and Confucianism as concerned only with the happiness of the collective group. This seems an eminently sound conclusion.

The book compares both systems side by side in a series of chapters analyzing them under various headings. A typical chapter will look first at Buddhism, then Confucianism, and conclude with a comparative analysis. The discussion of each tradition is sometimes of an introductory nature but is generally thoughtful and interesting, and the parallels and contrasts in the comparative sections often illuminating. The central chapters examine the “metaphysical groundwork of virtue” (chapter two), the “development of compassion and benevolence” (chapter three), the “realization of compassion and benevolence” (chapter four), and “the objectivity of compassion and benevolence” (chapter five).

The author shows a good familiarity with contemporary discussions in Western ethics, such as in chapter five on the subject of moral objectivity. This is certainly more fruitful than an earlier generation of studies that confined itself to the concepts within the source material itself and neglected the more critical approach to ethics evolved in the West. In particular, the contemporary interest in virtue ethics is clearly reflected in this volume and should make it of interest to western ethicists seeking to extend their knowledge of comparative material.

A problem in coming to an assessment of the overall value of this project is that readers are likely to have a background in only one of the two traditions studied. This is so in the case of the present reviewer; I lack the knowledge of Confucian ethics that would allow me to assess the legitimacy of the comparisons drawn. The study of Confucian ethics has become increasingly popular in recent years so the book is certainly timely, but perhaps only a sinologist would be competent to evaluate that part of the material.

As far as the discussion of Buddhist ethics goes, however, the arguments and conclusions are soundly based on early canonical sources. I am not persuaded that compassion (*karuṇā*) is the core virtue in early Buddhism, or indeed that any single virtue can claim this status. The classical Greeks deemed there to be four cardinal virtues on which all the others “hinged” (Latin: *cardo*), and I do not believe it is possible to distill all good human qualities into a single virtue. Generosity (*dāna*), for example, is also extremely important in Theravāda Buddhism (as seen in the tale of Prince Vessantara), and seems to require independent recognition. In Buddhism virtues are more commonly found in groups (like the *paramīs* or

parāmitās) rather than all rolled up into one, although it must be admitted that at times Mahāyāna Buddhism comes close to elevating *karuṇā* to the status of a master–virtue.

One shortcoming in the present study is that it contains only 140 pages of text and divides its attention between two very large and complex traditions: inevitably, there is little space to pursue issues in great depth. Nevertheless, this volume opens the way for further studies of a similar kind, generating a genuine comparative Asian axis in ethics while at the same time moving to a more sophisticated level of analysis showing awareness of contemporary scholarship on ethics in the West.