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*Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and  
Defense of Buddhist Ethics*

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# *A Review of Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*

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*Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics.* By Charles Goodman. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, viii + 250 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-537519-0 (cloth), \$74.00.

A potentially puzzling feature of Indian Buddhist philosophy is that considerable more attention was paid by Buddhist scholastics to metaphysical and epistemological issues and to philosophy of language than to ethical theory. While there is no lack of lists of recommended actions and of desirable psychological qualities to be found in Indian Buddhist texts, there are far fewer discussions of *why* some actions and habits are recommended than there are of, say, why certain kinds of evidence imply conclusions worthy of holding as convictions. Western historians of Buddhist philosophy have nevertheless been repeatedly tempted to speculate about what sort of meta-ethical theory the Buddhists would have endorsed had they become involved more enthusiastically in the business of ethical theorizing. Would they have developed a theory that can best be seen as a species in the genus of virtue ethics, or would they have favored some version of consequentialism or deontology? Or might it be that a Buddhist meta-ethical theory would not be a counterpart of any of the meta-ethical theories that have evolved in European philosophy but would provide an

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alternative not anticipated by the Greeks or by modern ethical theorists? Or could it be that Buddhists deliberately stayed out of theorizing about what general principles underlie the particular precepts that are universally recited in Buddhist texts, and if so, why?

Charles Goodman's book enters into the arena of such discussions with a book that is intended to be "a contribution to the history of philosophy, and not primarily as a work of philology, religious studies, or intellectual history." (4) Goodman takes the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy as his principal point of reference, a move which he justifies by saying:

My main reason for doing so is my belief that Buddhist texts have much to contribute to the conversation of contemporary ethics; but they can only make those contributions if the values and forms of moral reasoning they exhibit can somehow be connected with the way philosophers discuss ethics today. (4)

A problem that arises immediately in the face of such a project is that the authors of Buddhist texts in Sanskrit and Pali did not discuss ethics very much at all, much less in the manner of modern Anglo-American philosophers. The long history of casuistry that has been part of Western thinking ever since people began writing laws (or believing that God had given them laws to follow) manifests in modern discussions as hypothetical cases or *Gedankenexperiment* carefully designed to test where exactly the pale lies between success and failure in adherence to the law. Everyone who has taken a course in ethics in a philosophy department has been invited to think through her ethical convictions by being confronted with a problematic situation such as "Telling the truth is the right thing to do. But supposing you are babysitting your neighbor's infant, and an infant-devouring extra-terrestrial knocks on the door and asks whether there are any babies in the house. Is it right to give a truthful answer?" Such thought experiments are arguably the most important tools in the kit of the analytic philosopher, but they barely exist in classical Indian Buddhist literature. Goodman anticipates

this problem and responds to it by explaining that his exploration will be an attempt to make an educated guess about how the great Indian thinkers such as Vasubandhu and Śāntideva might respond if they had been confronted with the theoretical positions and methodology of modern philosophers. If those Indian Buddhists were somehow dropped into a modern classroom where an ethics professor was discussing free will, the nature of justice, and the constraints on morally acceptable punishment, where would they position themselves? Goodman is fully aware that there is no way of achieving certainty about how Śāntideva would respond to G.E. Moore or Kant, but he nevertheless thinks that asking the questions and imagining how they might be answered is a way of getting a clearer idea about the nature of Buddhist ethics. No matter what one concludes about how successful or worthwhile this methodology is, one will probably agree that Goodman plays the thought experiment game very well and comes up with hypothetical cases that are as entertaining as they are thought provoking.

The title of Goodman's book hints at the conclusion that he advocates. *The Consequences of Compassion* argues throughout that some form of consequentialism is the closest Western counterpart to the Buddhist meta-ethical position. In making this claim, Goodman carefully analyses and critiques the commonly held view that Buddhist ethics is a species of virtue ethics. He also analyses the view (held by hardly anyone but still worth exploring) that Buddhist ethics has an affinity with Kantian deontology. He also provides, in chapter two, a clear account of the prevalent Western ethical theories, including a careful delineation of the various species of consequentialism. In this context he discusses act-consequentialism (the view that an act is good if and only if it maximizes the good, however the good is construed), rule-consequentialism (whereby the rightness of an act depends on the consequences of an abstract rule of which the particular act is an example), and character-consequentialism (the view that virtues yield long-term benefits to one who cultivates them). As Goodman uses the term "character-consequentialism" it is taken "to refer to any consequentialist theory

that is based on a two-fold theory of well-being that assigns intrinsic value both to happiness and to virtue.” (70) Goodman argues in chapter three that Theravādin texts tend to advocate a form of rule-consequentialism and that at least some strains of Theravāda regard the rules embodied in the precepts as absolute and inviolable on the grounds that texts say that a buddha (or any other arahant) could never, under any circumstances, take a life or indulge in a sexual act. In Mahāyāna, and especially in Śāntideva, says Goodman in chapters four and five, the tendency to take rules as absolute is muted and yields to a preference towards act-consequentialism; that is, the bodhisattva will do any action, including an action that temporarily undermines the well-being of the bodhisattva himself, if that action will promote the general well-being and virtue of all sentient beings taken as a whole.

The keystone to Goodman’s edifice is chapter six, in which he claims—uncontroversially, one would think—that the Buddhist conception of an enlightened being serves as the paradigm of moral rectitude. While it may be uncontroversial that for a Buddhist, a buddha’s conduct is that than which no better exemplar can be found, it may not be entirely obvious just what it is about buddhas that makes their conduct so worthy of imitation. In giving his account for what features make buddhas morally admirable, Goodman makes a number of claims that are far less obvious than the claim that is his point of departure. One such claim (110–114) is that enlightened beings no longer reflect on moral rules and no longer make careful deliberations about which actions (or kinds of actions) are the right ones to do. Rather, they unconsciously, intuitively, and spontaneously act out of kindness, compassion, and equanimity. To the unenlightened person who interacts with the enlightened being, it no doubt would *appear* as if the enlightened one is following a model of act-consequentialism and is carefully weighing the probable consequences of every action and deciding in favor of those actions that conduce to the welfare of all sentient beings. But, says Goodman, no such deliberations are taking place. The reason is that such deliberations are all based on at least a

subtle notion of a self that endures long enough to experience the consequences that unfold from an action, but the enlightened being has realized that there is no such enduring self and therefore cannot be deliberating about what might conduce to that putative self's welfare. (This is a somewhat oversimplified statement of Goodman's argument, which is subtler, but even this simplified version is not far from capturing the essence of his argument.)

A second non-obvious claim that Goodman makes about enlightened beings is that they no longer labor under the illusion of free will. Writing about buddhas and saints, Goodman says:

But since the illusion of free will has disappeared for them, it no longer seems to them that they can do anything other than what would be best. Once they see what would have the best results, the corresponding movements just happen, without intervening states such as decisions and the formations of intentions. The cause of these movements is the unimpeded flow of natural great compassion. The abandonment of all selfish desires has removed all hindrances to the operation of this compassion, which now spontaneously produces bodily and vocal movements that cause the happiness and relieve the suffering of others. (120)

The heart of Goodman's argument is that the central doctrine of Buddhism is dependent origination and that anyone who understands and fully subscribes to the notion of causality realizes that there is no room in causal relationships for exceptions to the causal law. Causality is deterministic at all levels, including in the psychological realm. If the doctrine of karma is to be understood as a special application of the general law of causality, then karma must be deterministic and allow no exceptions. That being the case, there is no room in Buddhism for freedom of will. Freedom of will is one of the illusions attendant to the illusion of there being a person. This issue is explored in detail in chapter eight, in which Goodman critiques the view of Mark Siderits that early Buddhism represents a kind of compatibilism (the view that free will is

compatible with determinism), and the view of Paul J. Griffiths that Buddhist karmic theory represents a version of libertarianism (the view that free will is logically inconsistent with determinism, but free will exists, and therefore determinism is false).

In chapter nine, Goodman offers a number of excellent criticisms of the penal system in the United States and observes that the US penal system seems to be based mostly on a combination of hatred and ignorance, whereby inflicting pain on wrong-doers seems to be more important to many people than reforming them. While those criticisms of the US penal system from a Buddhist perspective are well worth making, it is not clear that in this chapter Goodman succeeds in making a convincing argument for what he claims to be the case, namely, that Nāgārjuna's advices on the topic of punishment "provide additional evidence for two interpretive theses that we should believe anyway, on independent grounds: that Indian Buddhists are consequentialists, and that they are hard determinists." (165)

Many philosophers will, it seems safe to predict, disagree with Goodman's convictions that Indian Buddhism is much better seen as a form of consequentialism than of a kind of virtue ethics, and that Buddhism advocates a position of hard determinism that is incompatible with free will. Therefore, one of the contributions that Goodman's book will make is that it will stimulate others to reply with counterarguments and to keep the debate moving along, thus keeping the field of philosophy alive for another few years. Many Buddhists who read this book may well wonder why it matters at all whether Buddhism subscribes to virtue ethics, character ethics or one of the flavors of consequentialism; this may be one entry on the list of "questions that tend not to edify." While Goodman's book is philosophically stimulating and passionately argued, it has probably not provided a convincing case for what is gained by putting Western philosophical labels on the long tradition of Buddhists (most especially Mādhyamikas) who argued that

putting philosophical labels on things is part of the problem, and not part of the solution.