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Ethical Confusion: Possible Misunderstandings in Buddhist Ethics

Stephen A. Evans¹

Abstract

The running debate whether or not *puñña* and *kusala* refer to the same class of actions evinces a lack of clarity over the meaning of *puñña*, accompanied by unwarranted assumptions about motivation and by a tendency to conflate “karmic” results with what we would today consider ordinary consequences, that is, roughly, those accruing through material, social or psychological processes. The present paper reviews the contributions of Keown, Velez de Cea, and Adam to the discussion, then argues that in the *Nikāyas* “*puñña*” almost always refers to the force of goodness generated by certain actions and issuing in pleasant karmic results, rather than to a class of actions; that in spite of the Buddhist belief that *puñña* is gained, such actions are not typically motivated by craving; and that conflating karmic results with ordinary consequences hampers our ability to understand Buddhist ethics. It is suggested that questions about the relations among the cluster of concepts that make up the

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mythology of *kamma* and *vipāka*, and their relationship to what we call morality or ethics, be asked anew.

There has been much fruitful discussion of Buddhist ethics over the last two decades, much of it in response to Damien Keown's *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992). However, the discussion has been complicated by a number of possible misconceptions leading to less than helpful formulation of important questions and attempts to solve at least one problem that does not seem to exist in the tradition (at least the Therāvada) itself. In the present paper I address inadequate understandings of the term *puñña*, the motivations for good and right behavior in the Buddhist context, and the distinction between what I shall call "karmic results"² and "ordinary consequences."³ To motivate the discussion and provide context, I briefly review Keown's book and two responses, those of Abraham Velez de Cea (2004) and Martin T. Adam (2005). I do not mean by this choice of authors to imply that the issues and possible misunderstandings discussed here are exclusively the provenance of western scholars. Indeed Keown's thesis owes much to the work of Sri Lankan P. D. Premasiri, whom he cites, and all three authors reviewed here refer to Premasiri's position on the difference between *puñña* and *kusala*, either agreeing or disagreeing. It may well be that Premasiri initially problematized the relation between these concepts; his paper, "Interpretation of two principal ethical terms in early Buddhism," (1976) is cited in nearly every academic paper I have

² I shall use "karmic result" to refer to the results of actions accruing by the law of *kamma*, whether in the present or in a subsequent lifetime. Although "*vipāka*" often, and I believe typically, refers to karmic result, the term is also sometimes used in the *Nikāyas* for what I call here "ordinary consequences."

³ By "ordinary consequences" I mean the modern western common sense notion of "consequences of actions," roughly those results of actions that accrue through social, psychological, and material forces. Although, as we shall see, the *Nikāyas* clearly recognizes the distinction between karmic results and ordinary consequences, there seems to be no unambiguous terminological distinction.

found treating the subject.⁴ Other nonwestern scholars have discussed the issue as well, for example P. A. Payutto (2012) of Thailand (although he does not reference Premasiri) and Piya Tan (2006) of Malaysia.

My purpose is to clarify a few concepts rather than to give an exposition and critique of these authors' work. Thus, I focus only on the issues here raised rather than their overall arguments, and make no attempt at proposing an overall characterization of Buddhist ethics. Neither is it my purpose to definitively characterize the relationship between *puñña* and *kusala*, the debate about which motivates the present effort. Although I offer a suggestion here, the main purpose is rather to clarify some of the issues involved. It should also be noted that my expertise and experience are in the Theravāda, and it is to that tradition that my remarks apply.

Keown, Velez de Cea, and Adam

Damien Keown characterizes Buddhist ethics as a virtue ethics, similar to that articulated by Aristotle. In his understanding, the rightness or wrongness of actions⁵ has nothing to do with results or consequences of any kind; rather their moral status is determined solely by the "preceding motivation" (178). Actions are right to the extent that they manifest or participate in "nirvanic values" such as "Liberality (*arāga*), Benevolence (*adosa*) and Understanding (*amoha*)," (ibid.). "If an action does not display nirvanic qualities then it cannot be right in terms of Buddhist ethics whatever other characteristics (such as consequences) it might have" (177). "Nirvanic qualities" Keown identifies with *kusala*-

⁴ I have been unable to gain access to this paper. I suspect the same is true of many other scholars, as most references I have found simply paraphrase Keown's or Cousins's remarks. The only quote I have found other than in Keown simply repeats one of the quotes in Keown (122).

⁵ Throughout I mean "action" in the Buddhist sense as including thought, word, and bodily deed.

dhamma (118), that is, by his definition, “those things which are to be pursued if enlightenment is to be attained.”

But actions that are said to be good and right are associated in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the tradition with *puñña* as well as with *kusala*. *Puñña* and its opposite, *apuñña* or *pāpa*, have to do with *kamma* and the *vipāka* of karmic results, that is, actions and the pleasant or painful results necessitated by the law of *kamma*, often, though not necessarily, following rebirth. In his effort to maintain a unified ethics, Keown maintains that *puñña* and *kusala* refer to the same set of actions—with an exception for *arahants*.⁶ *Kusala* in Keown’s formulation refers to the rightness of actions, that is, in his characterization, their participation in nirvanic virtues, and *puñña* refers to the tendency of those same actions to generate pleasant results (122), though he does not follow this definition consistently. He then seems to feel constrained by his position that Buddhist ethics are strictly non-consequentialist to minimize the significance of the results of *kusala/puñña* actions, whether ordinary consequences (e.g., “A good reputation”) or karmic results (“A happy rebirth in heaven”), characterizing them as “non-moral,” “secondary, contingent, consequences of moral actions” (125), and holding that their “primary effect” is to enhance the actor’s participation in “nibbānic goods” (127).

Part of Keown’s motivation for maintaining a unified ethics, and for insisting on the referential equivalence of these two terms, is his rejection of what he calls the “transcendancy thesis,” whereby the ethics of ordinary people aim at a happy rebirth but *arahants* transcend ethics and are beyond good and evil. Keown is right to reject this thesis, and I shall take it as given that the transcendancy thesis, at least as Keown presents it, is indefensible.

⁶ His justification for the exception is based on his unsupported assertion that *puñña* refers to the feeling that accompanies an increase in virtue; but because an *arahant*’s virtue is already complete, no increase is possible (124).

Keown's thesis is immensely appealing, yet its very novelty may give one pause. Abraham Velez de Cea calls into question Keown's stripping results of moral status, a move that Velez de Cea calls the "marginalization" of "proximate goals" (125). Velez de Cea notes that many Buddhists perform good deeds and observe *sīla* motivated by "nonnirvanic virtues such as craving for a proximate goal such as a good rebirth," and even those whose ethical behavior is aimed at "nirvana do so, at least on some occasions, motivated by subtle forms of spiritual greed" (125). If so, then much ostensibly good behavior would, by Keown's criteria, be wrong, or at best non-moral. Velez de Cea, reasonably enough, finds this conclusion unsatisfactory (125).

But Velez de Cea's most decisive argument against making *nibbāna* the locus of all that is good and right exclusive of results or consequences is that "proximate goals," independent of any relation to *nibbāna*, have from the very beginning been invoked to validate the goodness and rightness of actions (126–127). Such validation is indeed ubiquitous in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and commentarial literature,⁷ although it may here be remarked that such validation in no way implies that results and consequences are determinative of moral status.⁸

Velez de Cea rejects Keown's assimilation of *puñña* to *kusala*. He gives little real justification for this position beyond the claim, citing Lance Cousins (1996) that the term "*puñña* is most often used in regard to actions intended to bring about results of a pleasant kind in the future" (Cousins 154, cited at Velez de Cea 130). Hence, because of the greedy intention, such actions cannot be *kusala*. He also claims that "Theravāda

⁷ Velez de Cea gives a long list of references, both from scholars and the *Nikāyas*.

⁸ Roman Catholics, for example, believe that receiving the sacraments will yield happy consequences in heaven; that belief may validate the sacraments for them but they do not imagine that it is those happy consequences that makes it right to receive the sacraments.

Buddhist ethics, in practice, seems to maintain a clear distinction between actions leading to the accumulation of *puñña* and the experience of pleasant consequences within *saṃsāra*, and *kusala* actions leading to nirvana.” I have detected no such clear distinction, either in text or in practice. On the contrary, *kusala* is frequently said to accumulate *puñña* in the *Nikāyas* (I return to this below) and traditional Thai Buddhists, at least, sometimes refer to very good deeds as *bunkuson*, literally “*puñña-kusala*.”⁹

Velez de Cea’s argument for an element of consequentialism in Buddhist ethics is drawn from the *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda Sutta* (MN I 414) in which the Buddha advises his son, Rāhula, to reflect carefully about whether actions are harmful to himself, others or both, defining such actions as *akusala* actions with painful yield (*udraya*) and result (*vipāka*), and defining the opposites as *kusala* actions with pleasant yield (*udraya*) and result (*vipāka*). Velez de Cea understands this as defining *kusala* actions as those that “minimize suffering for the greatest number,” hence, at least in part, as utilitarian (133).¹⁰

In spite of maintaining a distinction between *puñña* and *kusala* actions, Velez de Cea endeavors to reinstate Keown’s thesis, albeit in somewhat modified form. His insertion of consequentialist considerations sets up his solution: a “heuristic distinction between instrumental and teleological actions” wherein instrumental actions lead to “favorable conditions for cultivating nirvanic virtues,” and

⁹ I do not mean to suggest that Thai Buddhist behaviors provide a reliable guide to interpreting early and traditional texts. But they do provide a window into the psychology, attitudes, and behavior of people fully and culturally immersed in the complex of ideas and beliefs that we refer to as Buddhist ethics.

¹⁰ Dr. Velez de Cea maintains that he did not mean to assimilate Buddhist ethics to the utilitarianism of Mill or Bentham, but only to say that “consequences are morally relevant” (private communication). In any case, a more natural interpretation of the *Sutta* is that the Buddha is simply encouraging his son to be mindful in his actions, and to intend to do no harm. That is, *kusala* actions are those that intelligently intend no harm, considering likely outcomes, even if the consequences happen to turn out badly.

teleological actions manifest those virtues (129). This formulation allows him to maintain that actions that do not in themselves manifest “nirvanic virtues,” such as observing *sīla* out of craving for a heavenly rebirth, nevertheless participate in the good instrumentally, because their results or consequences are favorable to the cultivation of those virtues (130). Although he takes care to point out that the distinction he makes is “not exactly equivalent to the distinction between *puñña* and *kusala*,” it allows him to argue that both *kusala* and *puñña* actions are morally good in that they can be understood “as leading in different ways (teleological and instrumental) to one and the same soteriological goal” (131).

Responding to Velez de Cea, Martin T. Adam (2005) argues that *kusala* and *puñña* do, after all, except for *arahants*,¹¹ refer to the same class of actions. His argument is based on a discussion of the “bright and dark” (*sukka* and *kaṇha*) pair of action types, as presented in the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* (MN I 387). In Adam’s interpretation, *kusala* actions, with an important exception not only for those of *arahants* but also for those of *sekhas*, that is, *sotāpannas*, *sakadāgāmis*, and *anāgāmis*, are here represented as having bright results, thus, as being *puñña*. Neither-bright-nor-dark actions he identifies as those of *sekhas*; these actions are certainly *kusala*, but they are also *puñña* though in a different way from bright actions, that is as instrumentally but not teleologically *puñña* (72-75).¹² Having reunited *kusala* with *puñña*, and retaining Keown’s idea of a close association of *kusala* with *nibbāna* and the pursuit of *nibbāna*, he must contend with the problem that, as he believes, “*Puñña* is a term usually used to refer to actions that are *intended* to bring about pleasant results” (70, emphasis added), again citing Cousins. In other words, Adam con-

¹¹ Interestingly, Adam seems to make an exception also for the *jhānas*, which he describes as “non-intentional” (70) and as “mental states not associated with action,” (70).

¹² See below. However it is not my purpose here to present and critique Adam’s overall argument, but to clarify terms.

cludes, *puñña* typically refers to actions characterized by the non-*kusala*, “non-nirvanic,” quality of *lobha*—craving, greed, and the like. But, he worries, how can such actions be assimilated to the class of right, *kusala*, actions? His solution is a refinement of Velez de Cea’s instrumental/teleological distinction: the same action may be *both* instrumental and teleological. For ordinary persons, good deeds may be teleologically *puñña* in that the motivation is pleasant results for oneself; “In most circumstances . . . one’s moral conduct is motivated by the desire to benefit oneself (e.g. with a higher rebirth, the prospect of pleasure, etc.)” (74). The same act, according to Adam, may be instrumentally *kusala* in that it contributes to future conditions beneficial to the pursuit of *nibbāna*. On the other hand, the actions of a person committed to the pursuit of *nibbāna* may be teleologically *kusala* inasmuch as he or she is “inevitably drawn to” *nibbāna* (but “not motivated by the goal of attaining it for him or herself”), but instrumentally *puñña* given that these actions will nevertheless issue in pleasant results should the actor fail to escape rebirth (75). For Adam, the distinction is one of intention; the teleology of an action is in the actor’s purpose or what he is “drawn to,” its instrumentality in the unintended results (74-75).

What we seem to have here are distinctions and refinements of distinctions never made in the tradition in order to answer questions never asked in defense of a thesis that has no precedent. It is not, of course, illegitimate to formulate novel theses and to propose new distinctions in the effort to understand traditional Buddhist positions in modern terms, but such theses and critiques of them should be firmly grounded in Buddhist reality, both text and practice. I submit that the grounding of the present discussion, although citing the texts, has become rather tenuous, having been led astray by a number of misunderstandings that seem to be fairly common in the field. I discuss three areas of misunderstanding below in the hope of bringing some clarification to the discussion: (1) the meaning of *puñña*; (2) human motivation in

relation to *kamma* and *vipāka*; and (3) the distinction between ordinary consequences and karmic results.

Puñña

The writers cited above are concerned with whether or not *puñña* refers to the same class of actions as *kusala* (excepting acts of *arahants*). Typically, however, rather than as an adjective predicated of action, *puñña*, appears as a noun, for example in the construction, *puññaṃ pasavanti*, “they bring forth/give birth to/produce *puñña*,” (*Pāsādika Sutta*, DN III 120), and seems to mean a force of goodness that is built up, produced, and accumulated. The phrase *apuññaṃ pasavanti* is much more common, and evidently the characterization presented here can be applied to both, though the parallelism may not be complete.

According to the PED, *puñña* is “Always represented as foundation and condition of heavenly rebirth & a future blissful state.” Although the *Nikāyas*, in fact, only occasionally make that connection explicit, it does seem to be an implicit assumption (cf. MN III 71, DN I 60, MN III 172). In other words, in its time the force of *puñña* issues positive *vipāka* as karmic result, including, though not limited to, a happy rebirth for one who possesses it. The marks of a great man as well are said to be a result of great *puñña* (DN III 149) and having accumulated much *puñña* is of great benefit to the pursuit of *nibbāna* (DN III 278). In the *Janavasa-bha Sutta*, Brahmā Sanakumāra, speaking of the destinies of the followers of the Buddha, says that he is unable to speak of the destiny of *arahants*, as they have “gone on” through splendidous *puñña*: *puñña-bhāgāti* (DN II 218). In other words, they have gone beyond rebirth by the force of *puñña*. This seems anomalous in that an *arahant* is supposed to have gone

beyond *puñña*¹³ and the mechanics of the law of *kamma*. True, the statement is put in the mouth of an unenlightened *Brahmā*, but the Buddha approves and repeats the deity's words.

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta* the Buddha speaks of beings falling from one heavenly realm to another, a kind of death and rebirth, when their *puñña* has been exhausted, making the connection with karmic result explicit (DN I 18). Besides confirming the connection with rebirth, *puñña* is here seen as a kind of store that is depleted as the *vipākas* accrue.

This force is built up and accumulated (*bahuṃ puññaṃ pasavanti*) in a number of ways. Following the teaching of the Buddha builds up the store (DN III 121).¹⁴ Being well behaved and moral like the *samana-brāhmaṇas* does the same (DN II 332). *Puñña* is generated or accessed¹⁵ in large amounts by gifts to the *Saṅgha*: the standard formula of praise for the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha* includes the statement that the *Saṅgha* is worthy of gifts and an incomparable field of *puñña* for the world (*puñña-kkhettaṃ lokassāti*) (DN II 94). The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* story of Cunda's gift of the Buddha's final meal says that the gift is of very great fruit, followed immediately by the statement that giving accumulates *puñña*: *dadato puññaṃ pavaḍḍhati* (DN II 136). In the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, the Buddha says *Kusalānaṃ bhikkhave dhammānaṃ samādānāhetu evamidam puññaṃ pavaḍḍhati*, "Monks, it is just rooted in the undertaking of *kusala*

¹³ See, e.g. Sn 121: *yodha puññañca pāpañca, ubho saṅgamupaccagā . . . tamahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ*, or S II 82: *vijjuppādā neva puññābhisankhāraṃ abhisankharoti na apuññābhisankhāraṃ*

¹⁴ But the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* seems to imply that following the Eightfold Path while genuinely endeavoring to eradicate defilements does not: "right view that is on the side of merit [*puññabhāgiyā*], that ripens unto cleaving (to new birth). . . [and] right view that is ariyan, cankerless, supermundane, a component of the Way." (MN III 72, Horner's translation). The second kind of right view would seem to refer to those at the first three levels of enlightenment, thus dovetailing with Adam's understanding of "neither bright nor dark" action (Adam 72).

¹⁵ There is sometimes a sense that the monks generate *puñña* which is then tapped into and accessed through gifts.

states that this *puñña* increases”¹⁶ (DN III 58): things *kusala* bring an increase of *puñña*. This concept of *puñña* appears to have been current beyond the Buddha and his followers. In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, for example, Pūraṇa Kassapa is said to have espoused the wrong view that actions normally thought to be right, such as giving and truth telling, bring no *puñña*: *n’atthi tatonidānaṃ puññaṃ n’atthi puññaṃ āgamo* (DN I 53). A more extended discussion of teachers who hold this and the opposite view is given in the *Apaññaka Sutta* (M II 404-407).

This understanding may be conceptualized as follows. Certain actions will, by the law of *kamma*, be followed eventually and inevitably¹⁷ by a pleasurable experience, *vipāka* as karmic result. That *vipāka*, however, may be a long time, even lifetimes, in coming. In the meantime, the force of the act hovers, as it were, waiting until it is expended in *vipāka*. That “hovering” force is *puñña*, more-or-less what we mean in English when we say that someone “has good karma.”

On the other hand, there are a few places where the term clearly is predicated of actions. In the *Mahāpandāna Sutta*, it is said of one who has gone forth: *kusala-kiriya sādhu puñña-kiriya sādhu avihimsā sādhu* (DN II 28). *Kiriya* means action, a near synonym of *kamma*, so we have *kusala* action, *puñña* action, and harmlessness as all being *sādhu*, or good. In the *Sangīti Sutta* (DN III 218), *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā* are said to be *puñña-kiriya-vatthu*, or the bases of *puñña* action, or, perhaps, bases for effecting *puñña*.¹⁸ In the *Subha Sutta* the Buddha discuss five things conducive to *puñña*: *puññaṃ kiriyāya kusalassa ārādhanāya* (MN II 204-206) translated by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi as “the performance of merit . . . accomplishing the wholesome” and Horner as “the doing of good . . .

¹⁶ Translations from the Pāli by the author unless otherwise attributed.

¹⁷ There are minor exceptions: a weak *kamma* may become inactive if its *vipāka* does not “come due” within a certain number of lifetimes (*ahosikamma*) (Bodhi, 1993 205), and when an *arahant* dies, remaining unarisen *vipāka* can no longer affect him/her.

¹⁸ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the suggested interpretation.

success in what is skilled.” In any case, *puñña-kiriya* is a kind of action. *Puñña-kiriya*, and more often *apūñña-kiriya*, turn up in a few other passages, but with nowhere near the frequency with which *puñña* appears as something that is built up and accumulated. *Puñña-kamma* scarcely appears at all in the *Nikāyas*, though it is not uncommon in the commentaries.

Puññāni karoti occurs more often, for example, in the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, where King Mahāvijita is said to be *opānabhūto puññāni karoti* (DN I 137), having become a welling spring he *puññāni karoti*. According to the PED, *puññāni karoti* (s.v. *puñña*) means “to do good,” but “performs deeds productive of *puñña*” seems quite possible as well. In any case, *puññāni* is not an adjective modifying *karoti* but a noun in the accusative, so that since *karoti* can mean “to make” or “to build” as well as “to do,” the most probable meaning is that king is a welling spring producing *puñña*.

The noun *puñña* has sometimes been translated by constructions such as “meritorious action,” for example in translations of the *Metta Sutta* of the *Itivuttaka* (It 15-16) by Peter Masefield (11) and by John Ireland (14). The passage in question reads *mā, bhikkhave, puññānaṃ bhāyittha*, “Do not, monks, fear *puññas*.” By the understanding suggested above, *puññānaṃ* would mean the force of goodness that is built up by right/good actions, not the actions themselves. The commentary would seem to support that interpretation, explaining *puñña* in this phrase by citing: “*kusalānaṃ, bhikkhave, dhammānaṃ samādānāhetu evamidaṃ puññaṃ pavaḍḍhatī tiādīsu*” (It-a I 74) “Things *kusala*, monks, undertaken, accumulate *puñña*,” and continuing, “*puñña-phale āgato*,” “the fruits of *puñña* accrue.”

This sutta continues with an interesting discussion of the concept:

sukhassetam, bhikkhave, adhivacanam iṭṭhassa kantassa piyassa manāpassa yadidaṃ puññāni. abhijānāmi kho panāham, bhikkhave, dīgharattaṃ katānaṃ puññānaṃ iṭṭhaṃ kantaṃ piyaṃ manāpaṃ vipākaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ. satta vassāni mettacittaṃ bhāvetvā satta saṃvaṭṭavivaṭṭakappe nayimaṃ lokaṃ punarāgamāsiṃ.

“*Puññas*,” monks is a word for what is happiness, pleasing, enjoyable, dear, charming. I know from experience the results of *puññas* built up for a long time as pleasant [etc]. Having cultivated a heart of lovingkindness for seven years, for seven *kalpas* I did not return to this world [but was reborn as a variety of deities].

The first sentence seems to define *puñña* simply as “good” in an affective, non-moral sense, the second as something that is built up and that has such “good” results, and the third connecting that “something” with the cultivation of lovingkindness on the one side and on the other placing the results clearly in the realm of karmic results accruing over multiple rebirths. That “something” could be either the cultivation itself, thus a kind of action, or the force of goodness built up by the cultivation. The impression here is that *puñña* is not a precisely defined concept, but “good” in a roughly affective sense with strong connotations of *kamma* and karmic results, and especially of the links between the two.

It may be noted here that the standard, if rather late, *Abhidhamma* textbook, the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha*, sometimes uses *puñña* as a synonym for *kusala* as predicated of karmic results. For example, *puñña-pākiāni*, “ripened *puñña*” is contrasted with *ākusala-pākiāni*, “ripened *ākusala*” (Bodhi 45, cf. p. 51, etc.). *Puñña* is also predicated of the *jhānas* (74), and of *kusala citta*s in general (170). In all such cases, Bodhi translates *puñña* as “wholesome,” also his favored rendering of *kusala* (389).

In a much-cited paper Lance Cousins writes:

As a noun [*puñña*] is applied either to an act which brings good fortune or to the happy result in the future of such an act. Of course the early Buddhists certainly taught that the kind of act which brings good fortune is precisely one which is blameless and praiseworthy, one which is skilful in the sense that it is produced by wisdom or at all events because it is the kind of thing that a wise person would do or approve. (155)

This is accurate as far as it goes, if we substitute “adjective” for “noun,” and these usages are recognized by all three of the authors discussed above, though focusing on *puñña* as applied to actions. Our discussion above, however, suggests that by far the more usual meaning of the term, alluded to but not explicitly recognized by the authors, is a force of goodness, generated through certain actions and accumulated until expended in actually experienced *vipāka* as karmic result. When it appears as an adjective modifying action, it would be natural to understand *puñña* actions as those that build up *puñña* for the actor, but the rarity with which it appears this way, provides insufficient evidence for a high degree of certainty. It may well be that, as suggested by Cousins, actions believed to be right and good were simply not distinguished from those issuing in pleasant karmic results, and that *puñña* as an adjective often simply meant “right and good”—with an underlying assumption that pleasant results would obtain.

The diversity of usages, and the fact that the word is not used anywhere nearly as often as is *kusala*, suggests that *puñña* is not a precisely delineated technical term in the *Nikāyas*. That suspicion is supported by the fact that the term seems not to appear at all in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, which, among other things, constitutes a compendium of technical terms. Cousins comes to the same conclusion (153).

Velez de Cea alludes to the typical meaning suggested here when he writes of “actions leading to the accumulation of *puñña*” (131) Keown occasionally does the same, for example writing that observing the precepts is “associated with the production of merit (*puñña*)” (46). But elsewhere (122), Keown suggests that *puñña* refers to the “pleasant consequences of good deeds” themselves, as does the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha*, and on the same page, to a class of actions, and again on the next page as the “felt consequences of an increase or decrease in virtue.” I would suggest that these slippages in meaning may reflect ambiguity in the sources themselves, and that the question of the relationship between *kusala* and *puñña* actions, and the attendant problem, may be demanding more precision than one (at least) of the terms is capable of bearing.

The Thai scholar-monk P. A. Payutto, for one, does not seem to find the relationship between these terms deeply problematic. In his voluminous *The Buddhadhamma* (2012), he defines *puñña* in the following way:

The *Buddhadhamma* teaches that the good is of value in cultivating the mind, cleansing, purifying and elevating it, called *puñña*, giving rise to flourishing beauty in the life of the mind/heart for going beyond, that is, liberation both of mind and of wisdom, acting intelligently, acting according to wisdom boosting mental health, called *kusala*. (765)¹⁹

Thai famously can be quite ambiguous and he could be saying either that they are the same or that the first leads to the other, but on page 164 he lists *puñña* as a synonym of *kusala*, and in his most explicit discussion of the relation between these two concepts, having asked,

¹⁹ Quotations from *Buddhadhamma* translated from the Thai by the author.

almost rhetorically, what is the difference between them, given they are often used interchangeably he writes,

In their widest meanings *puñña* . . . and *kusala* . . . mean the same thing, but in actual usage [of the Buddha], the meaning of *puñña* is narrower and takes a more specific perspective. (169)

Puñña, he continues influences the substratum of rebirth (*opadhika*) and is to be identified with *lokiya kusala*. It does not fully correspond to *kusala*, in that there is *lokuttara kusala* but no *lokuttara puñña*, he writes, citing the commentaries, especially to the *Itivuttaka* (169-170).²⁰ However, Ven. Payutto is here discussing the concepts themselves and does not indicate that they specifically apply to actions.

Given these considerations, the question whether *kusala* and *puñña* name the same class of actions might better be rephrased as whether the class of *kusala* actions is exactly the class of actions that build up *puñña*, or even better, given the ambiguity of the latter term, whether the class of *kusala* actions is just that class of actions that generate future pleasant karmic results. Adam comes close to this formulation with, “Are all nirvāṇic actions karmically meritorious?” (65).

Motivation

The attempt to understand *puñña* and its precise relationship to *kusala* seems to have been complicated by a serious misunderstanding about motivation—both as described in Buddhist texts and in the psychology of actual human beings. That is, the assumption that because right actions

²⁰ This portion of Payutto’s *Buddhadhamma*, Chapter 5 (pp. 151-222), has been translated into English as *Good, Evil, and Beyond*, by Bruce Evans (1996). However, the discussion cited above was omitted as “not particularly relevant to non-Buddhist cultures” (Evans xi).

are believed to lead inevitably to pleasant experiences, people perform such actions motivated by desire for those experiences. This assumption has been around at least since C. A. F. Rhys Davids asserted in the early days of Buddhist Studies that “The Buddhist, then, was a Hedonist,” and “his morality . . . utilitarian” (Rhys Davids xciii). As we have seen, Lance Cousins (130) claims that the term *puñña* typically refers to actions intended to achieve future pleasure. Velez de Cea and Adam then wrestle with the problem that in Velez de Cea’s words, moral action for Buddhists may often be motivated by “craving for a proximate goal such as a good rebirth” (125). The hope of rescuing Keown’s central thesis then leads them to the instrumental/teleological distinction, whereby actions with “non-nirvanic” motivations may yet be counted as morally good.

But all this is unnecessary. First, nowhere in text or commentary, as far as I am aware, does *puñña* refer specifically to actions motivated by craving for pleasant results. The *Mahāniddesa* defines it as whatever is of the nature of *kusala* (PED s.v. *puñña*) and, as we have seen, in the *Nikāyas*, *kusala* actions are said to generate the force of goodness, *puñña*, that eventually issues in pleasant karmic results; but then, those same *kusala* actions would seem to lack craving by definition (MN I 47; DN III 269) and the problem how *puñña* actions could also be *kusala* disappears—assuming that *puñña* actions are those that generate *puñña*. Keown does not make this mistake and notes (180) that there is “something is wrong with the premises of the argument,” that a Buddhist would cultivate, say, compassion for selfish reasons. Indeed, it is hardly credible that in all cases, good or right actions would, *in the act itself*, be characterized by craving for pleasure to come in a probably distant future in which there may not even be the memory of this lifetime and these actions. As a child with a Christian upbringing, my young friends and I were taught that certain kinds of action would store up treasures in heaven and that other kinds of action would earn black marks against our names in God’s

ledger. But although these beliefs validated for us the rightness or wrongness of certain actions, we did not really visit the elderly *in order* to build up treasure in heaven; we did not really refrain from stealing candy in order to avoid those black marks; certainly, adult Christians do not typically act with such motivations. Rather, people typically perform, say, acts of charity out of compassion, piety, or just because they believe them to be right, knowing also that such acts build up treasures in heaven or *puñña*; at other times they perform acts of dishonesty or infidelity, knowing also that such acts build up *pāpa* or earn black marks in God’s ledger. The intention of the act itself remains to give or to cheat, though the prospect of future pleasure or pain may help to tip the balance in a decision.

My experience among traditional Buddhists in Thailand is indeed that the intention of putting food in a monk’s bowl is typically something resembling piety, or to a beggar, compassion. In Thailand such acts are typically referred to as *thambun*, usually translated “making merit,” but *tham* means “to do” as much as “to make” (*sang, ko*), thus “doing/making *puñña*”—the sense is doing good and producing or accessing goodness, which by definition includes building up one’s store of *puñña*. One typically puts food into a monk’s bowl not in order to store up treasures in heaven, but to transfer the spiritual essence of the food to one’s deceased relatives in their next lives;²¹ similarly, one gives robes to a monk as a way of transferring clothing to those who have gone on.²² Giving to a beggar is an act of pure compassion, as it is thought that the same gift to a monk would produce or access a greater store of *puñña* and

²¹ The indigenous Thai understanding of rebirth is mixed up with animist conceptions of going to live in the *phii* (ghost) village with a *phii* family etc. But the issue here is the motivation for performing actions believed to generate *puñña*.

²² I am not aware that this understanding appears in the major *Nikāyas*, but it certainly does appear in the Commentaries, e.g. in the *Peta Vatthu* story of the bald *peta*, *Khallāṭṭiyapetavatthuvaṇṇanā* (Pv-a 46-53), in which clothing is transferred to a naked *peta* via a gift of clothing to a *sāvaka*.

accompanying prospects for a happy rebirth. I do not of course deny that more selfish motives often come into play,²³ especially when contemplating and planning future activities in the abstract. But as Keown writes, “some Christians keep the commandments in the hope of going to heaven [but that is no argument that] Christian morality is merely enlightened self-interest” (74).

On the other hand, although it is incontestable that actions free of craving, hatred and delusion, are *kusala* and generate *puñña*, it is not entirely clear that all *kusala* actions are devoid of craving. In spite of the many texts that seem to so imply, others seem to equivocate. In the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*, for example, the Buddha speaks of “right action” that is “with cankers,” hence presumably craving, “conducive to *puñña*,” and “ripening in attachment [i.e. rebirth]” (*sammākammanto sāsavo puññabhāgiyo upadhivepakko*) (MN III 73). The term used is *sammā* rather than *kusala*, but the statement is given in the context of the Eightfold Path, all of which is presumably *kusala*. Thus, actions harboring some element of craving and the other *akusala* roots are not universally presented as morally reprehensible or even as *akusala*. It may be noted too, that in teaching Rāhula the difference between *kusala* and *akusala* actions, the Buddha makes no mention of craving and the like. Buddhaghosa seems to allow that *kusala* actions may have *akusala* qualities when he grades moral virtue (*sīla*) as inferior, middling, or superior depending on whether it is motivated by craving (*kāmatā*) for fame, for *puñña*, or undertaken in pursuit of the *ariyan* condition (Vism 10, 13). Velez de Cea (134) notices, though with different motivation, that in the *Nikāyas* whether or not an action is *kusala* is not necessarily determined

²³ At least one monastery in Bangkok solicits donations with a large banner reading, “Make Merit and Get Rich.” Too many fall for this, donating their meager incomes in expectation of winning the lottery as a result of *puñña* gained.

by the exclusive presence of *kusala* roots, referring to a standard list of 10 *kusalas*.²⁴

Certainly, mental states add unwholesomeness or wholesomeness to actions, but it is important to highlight that (MN I.47) does not state that . . . external bodily and verbal actions are unwholesome or wholesome depending on just the mental root from which they originate.

That craving for pleasant *vipāka* may, as it were, contaminate otherwise right actions is rarely recognized explicitly in the *Nikāyas*, but there is a story toward the end of the *Pāyāsi Sutta* (DN II 354–357) that illustrates how desire for a happy rebirth diminishes the goodness of deeds without rendering them morally reprehensible.²⁵ King Pāyāsi, desiring *puñña*, establishes a center for distributing food and clothing in hopes thereby of earning a heavenly rebirth. However, because of his lack of genuine generosity, the food given was poor fare and the clothing used and worn. After being rebuked for his stinginess by the manager of the distribution center, the king authorized more lavish provisions. Nevertheless, because his motivation was a happy rebirth rather than true generosity, he was reborn in the lowest regions of heaven in a lonely, empty mansion, whereas the manager who gave unstintingly and with his own hands was reborn in the Tāvātimsā heaven.

Given that “*puñña* actions” does not specifically refer to actions motivated by desire for future pleasure, and that such motivations, if present, diminish the *puñña* accessed, without necessarily rendering the

²⁴ Abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false, malicious and harsh speech, and gossip, together with non-covetousness, non-malevolence, and right view, (MI 47).

²⁵ Peter Harvey makes the same point: “the greater the concern with *puñña*, the lesser the degree of the good result” (202). However, the texts he cites do not clearly support this interpretation.

actions *akusala*, the problem of how *puñña* actions could also be *kusala* actions disappears. However, that brings to light another set of questions having to do with the precise relations among moral/immoral actions, *kusala/akusala* actions, *kusala/akusala* roots, and pleasurable/painful karmic results. Exploring these is beyond the scope of this article. I would comment, however, that if it is the case that *kusala* actions might harbor *akusala* elements, then Velez de Cea's teleological/instrumental distinction may have utility in understanding why and how that may be.

Consequences and Karmic Results

The final issue I raise here is the tendency to conflate the ordinary consequences of actions (e.g., those resulting from psychological, social, and/or material causes) with karmic results, the pleasurable and painful personal experiences that are the inevitable effect of right and wrong actions according to the law of *kamma*. Although there seems to be no unambiguous terminological distinction in Pāli, the Buddha himself recognized not only the operations of the law of *kamma* but also that actions were socially and psychologically effective, independent of that law—that certain actions tended, socially, psychologically, or materially, to produce happy or sad results as ordinary consequences (e.g., *Devadahasutta* M II 214). Moreover, it is well known that *Nikāyan* doctrine holds that much but not all suffering is due to past *kamma*.

Keown lists traditional benefits of observing *sīla*, including both ordinary consequences and rebirth in heaven, treating them as morally and qualitatively equivalent, in spite of a separate section entitled “A Happy Rebirth” (45-46). Keown later examines five of these benefits:

1. A large fortune produced through diligence.
2. A good reputation.

3. Entering confident and unconfused into any assembly.
4. An unconfused death.
5. A happy rebirth in heaven. (125-126)

The first four of these we would today normally call consequences (i.e., “ordinary consequences”), the fifth being karmic result. He terms all five “secondary, contingent, consequences of moral actions.” But there is nothing contingent about karmic results. Whether or not one who observes *sīla* gains “a large fortune produced through diligence” and “a good reputation,” depends on such factors as social and material context and may or may not accrue (at least in this life). Rebirth, on the other hand, is dictated by the immutable, as it were contextless, law of *kamma*.²⁶ In his effort to assimilate karmic results to ordinary consequences, Keown writes, “*Kamma* is not a form of sympathetic magic by which the universe mechanically rewards moral action . . . not an occult power; . . . stated simply it is the principle that moral actions have consequences,” effectively erasing the distinction. To the extent that *puñña* has to do with karmic results, Keown sustains the erasure when he conflates *puñña* with the pleasure of social approval for good deeds (179) and when, as we have seen, he identifies *puñña* with the feeling accompanying an increase in virtue; these would be social and psychological consequences rather than karmic results. He does, however, recognize the distinction between consequences for oneself and for others (180). Similarly, Velez de Cea, after insisting on the importance to Buddhist ethics of “proximate goals” such as a good rebirth, proceeds to speak indiscriminately of “consequences,” evidently including both ordinary consequences and karmic results. Adam does not fall into this equivoca-

²⁶ Of course, when and where karmic results accrue may well be influenced by circumstances, contingencies, that give opportunity for such results to arise, but the results themselves are not the outcome of what we would today consider an ordinary sequence of events.

tion as he focuses primarily on the karmic result of rebirth rather than ordinary consequences and he indicates an appreciation of the distinction, for example, in Note 6 (Adam 78).

One may wish to take the doctrine of *kamma* and karmic result as a mythological way of recognizing the connection between actions and their social and psychological effects, i.e., recognizing that “actions have consequences.” Indeed, the actions that the Buddha considered right and good were, for the most part, those that were socially acceptable and that would tend to have beneficial results for the actor in sociological and psychological ways. Such results would be contingent; things would only *tend* to work out that way rather than following the necessity of the law of *kamma*. Such discrepancies are, I believe, acceptable in demythologizations. The myth expresses the sense of an equivalence of the right and the good, of what is morally right with what is beneficial, and of the *necessary* goodness of the right, even where that goodness is not evident. The problem with this approach is, first, the problem with all demythologization: the myths were *believed* by those who propounded them; they meant exactly what they said. The more serious problem is that, as noted above, the *Nikāyas* make an explicit distinction between these realms of causation, and insist on the law of *kamma*, not as myth, but as actual and as distinct from “ordinary” causation.²⁷ As a bit of an aside, I would say that the passages equating heavens and hells with the experience of pleasure and pain do not at all call the existence of karmic results or of heavens and hells into question, or reduce them to metaphors for this-life ordinary consequences. Rather they simply state the obvious, that what makes hell hellish is the experience of pain, and that what makes heaven heavenly is the experience of pleasure.

²⁷ Again, this is not to deny that material causes may provide the occasion for a karmic result to accrue.

The tendency to assimilate karmic results to ordinary consequences may be due to the utter unfamiliarity—at least to some scholars—of concepts such as *puñña* and karmic result, and with lingering hopes that Buddhism can be characterized as rational in a thoroughly modern sense, almost even as scientific.²⁸ Dale Wright, proposing a “naturalized” (i.e. demythologized) concept of karma, asks incredulously of the practice of merit transfer: “What kind of magical or supernatural entity would karma have to be to make such a gift of merit make sense?” (87). The answer is: precisely that kind of magical or supernatural entity. Although I am not aware that such transfers are explicitly mentioned in the *Nikāyas*, *puñña* is there said to be accumulated, held, and expended, and its transfer is fully coherent. Wright worries that with this practice it is “inevitable that you come to realize that donating your merit to another . . . can’t help but win you lots of good merit” (87). But this is not what actually happens.²⁹ Typically, one transfers merit, or the spiritual essence of the food and clothing offered to monks, to one’s deceased friends and relatives. It is a way of connecting with them and assisting them in their next lives; I have never known it in practice to be understood and felt as a means of redoubling one’s own merit.³⁰

Failure to appreciate the “magical or supernatural” character of *kamma* and karmic results and to clearly distinguish them from ordinary consequences gets in the way of asking what seem to me important questions of Buddhist ethics. For example, why should the class of actions manifesting “nirvanic virtues” (to use Keown’s formulation) and the class of actions yielding pleasurable karmic results be identical? Why

²⁸ I have elsewhere challenged the characterization of Buddhism as scientific or empirical in any modern sense (e.g. “Pāyāsi”).

²⁹ Note that I am *not* denying that such transfers are held in the tradition to generate more personal *puñña*.

³⁰ Wright is thinking of a Mahāyāna context, while my experience and expertise are in the Theravāda. Nevertheless, I doubt that the psychology of merit transfer is radically different.

should those same actions, by and large, be those that enjoy social approbation? Does the cosmos just happen to be structured that way, or is there some hidden, meaningful connection among them? Conflating ordinary consequences and karmic results also muddies the waters in the discussion whether or not Buddhist ethics has an element of consequentialism or utilitarianism, given that we are here dealing with a fundamentally different kind of result than has been considered significant by consequentialists and utilitarians. But more importantly, it makes it difficult to focus specifically on the significance of the law of *kamma* for Buddhist ethics.

Again, the *Nikāyas* themselves do not maintain a clear terminological distinction between these two realms of causation, and the Buddha himself often uses *vipāka* evidently to refer to both; to the Buddha's listeners it would not always have mattered by what mechanism right action yielded happiness. But as noted, the *Nikāyas* do recognize the distinction, and both realms of causation are taken for granted. We moderns need remind ourselves of the reality of the law of *kamma* for the *Nikāyas* and Buddhist traditions if we are to explore the underpinnings of Buddhist ethics without slipping into what are to us common sense notions of cause and effect, right and wrong.

Conclusions

This discussion has brought to light a number of possible misunderstandings: (1) that *puñña* refers to actions that are motivated by craving; (2) that it is impossible that *kusala* actions could harbor any element of craving; (3) a conflation of ordinary consequences with karmic results; and (4) a failure to appreciate *puñña* as a force of goodness that is accumulated through actions and expended through karmic results. Not all the authors reviewed here share all these "misunderstandings" or share them in the same degree.

It should now be evident that an inadequate understanding of the concept of *puñña* led to the formulation of a potentially significant question about *kamma* and *vipāka* in a way that is less than fully adequate: whether or not *kusala* actions and *puñña* actions are the same class of actions. *Puñña* most often appears as a noun referring to a force of goodness generated or accessed by certain actions, issuing at some later time in karmic results, rather than to a class of actions themselves. When it does appear as an adjective modifying action it may well refer to actions that generate/access *puñña* but it may often simply mean right and good. In any case, the term only very rarely modifies action, and “*puñña* action” does not appear to be a precise, or even doctrinally significant, concept. The question demands too much precision of the term. I would suggest that for Keown, a failure to appreciate the meaning of *puñña* as force of goodness that is built up, together with his tendency to assimilate karmic results to ordinary consequences resulted in his rather tortured explanation for excluding the actions of *arahants* from the class of *puñña* actions—the completely novel, and inconsistently maintained, idea that *puñña* refers to the feeling accompanying an increase in virtue.

A subsequent misunderstanding, which Keown does not share, is that *puñña* actions are those otherwise good actions motivated by craving for future pleasure. That, in turn, led to concern over how greedy actions could count as *kusala*, and to attempts to solve the problem with distinctions and refinements. However, nowhere in text and tradition, is it said or implied that *puñña* refers to good actions motivated by craving. Indeed, if *kusala* actions lack craving by definition, then the *Nikāyan* passages that link *kusala* actions with *puñña* indicate that *puñña* actions do not harbor an element of craving. On the other hand, text and tradition seem to allow that *kusala* acts can indeed have an element of craving, but that the *puñña* accessed thereby is

diminished. In either case, the problem exists only in the minds of certain Buddhist Studies scholars.

I shall not here address the validity of Keown's main thesis, but the question of the relation between *kusala* and *puñña* actions, properly stated, would seem to be easily answered. Understanding *puñña* as a force of goodness issuing in pleasant karmic results, we would ask whether those actions building up *puñña* are just those termed *kusala*. Given that the concept *puñña* itself may be less than precise in text and tradition, we might better ask whether or not *kusala* actions are just those actions that set up subsequent pleasant karmic results. The *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* gives an answer that, as far as I can tell, is consistent with the *Nikāyas*: all *kusala* actions, and only *kusala* actions (of non-*arahants*), set up pleasant karmic results. The actions of *arahants*, termed *kiriya* rather than *kusala* but otherwise identical with the *kusala* actions of non-*arahants*, do not. Precisely why the exception for *arahants* should hold is an important, and not so easily answered, question,³¹ but the first task is to realize that it does exist and has to do with the fact that *arahants* no longer generate the (magical?) forces that bring future karmic results, that is, *puññas*. The fact of the exception, if not the mechanics, is unproblematic, however, given that the goal of the Buddhist path is escape from rebirth and karmic results.

Other issues raised in the discussion that bear further exploration include the relation between *kusala kamma* and the *kusala mūlas*: is it really possible, as suggested here, that *kusala* actions may include, say, craving, and if so, what are the implications for existing characterizations of Buddhist ethics such as those discussed here? The *Abhidhamma* literature does not allow that any "moment" of action can

³¹ When I asked my traditional teacher why, given that *cetanā* is a universal quality of action, including for *arahants*, and that the Buddha taught that *cetanā* is *kamma*, *arahants* commit no *kamma*, he first said that *pañña* predominates. When pressed, he gave the standard evasion: "Only a Buddha knows."

both be *kusala* and include *akusala* roots, but it may be that some other Theravāda literature implicitly understands an “act” as including many such moments. The evident discrepancy here suggests a need for us to discover and articulate the theories of action assumed in the various literatures of the Theravāda.

Why should it be the case that right actions necessarily (with the standard exceptions) issue in pleasant karmic results? That these same actions are conducive to and manifest *nibbāna* and escape from karmic results? It also occurs to me that the moral category itself is in need of delineation. For example, it is generally recognized that *kusala* is broader than morality (Harvey 199), yet in practice we tend to treat it as a surrogate for that category (Harvey 176).

My purpose has been clarification, and in spite of criticisms, I believe that the scholars cited here have made important contributions to the conversation. I would also emphasize that there can be no objection to restating in modern terms and demythologizing Buddhist doctrines by and for contemporary Buddhists. I believe, however, that it is incumbent upon scholars to continue to endeavor to understand and elucidate the mythology that is to be reinterpreted and to be absolutely clear when we are engaged in one exercise or the other. That means, among other things, taking the mythology of *kamma*, *puñña*, and *vipāka* seriously.

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Abbreviations

References to DN, MN, and S are to volume and page of the Pali Text Society editions. References to It, It-a, Pv-a, Sn, and Vism are to page numbers of Pali Text Society editions.

DN: *Dīgha Nikāya*

It: *Itivuttaka*

It-a: *Itivuttaka Commentary*

MN: *Majjhima Nikāya*

Pv-a: *Pettavatthu Commentary*

Sn: *Sutta Nipāta*

S: *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

Vism: *Visuddhimagga*

PED: *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*

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