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A New Buddhist Ethics

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A Review of *A New Buddhist Ethics*

James J. Stewart¹

A New Buddhist Ethics. By Robert M. Ellis. Self Published, 2011, 325 pages, ISBN 978-1-4475-3000-8 (paperback), \$25.30 / ePub \$6.22.

Robert Ellis's *A New Buddhist Ethics* is concerned with the interesting task of updating Buddhist ethics so that it is relatable to contemporary moral issues. The result is something of a mixed bag. On the one hand, the project itself seems perfectly reasonable, even necessary; on the other hand, the execution is deeply problematic. While the book might be useful for some Buddhists as a practical guide for navigating moral problems, it is questionable as to whether the book stands up to scholarly scrutiny.

The book is broken up into twelve chapters. It opens with a chapter that outlines his methodology and his fundamental ethical theory called "the Middle Way" or "Middle Way Ethics." The rest of the book is divided into a series of chapters on applied ethics subjects. In each case, the Middle Way theory is vigorously applied in a fairly uniform way. The subjects are as follows: human relationships, sexual ethics, economic issues, environmental issues, animals, scientific issues, medical ethics, political ethics, violence and law breaking, and finally a chapter on beauty, arts and the media. The last chapter is a brief conclusion.

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Ellis' Middle Way philosophy seems to be a particular interpretation of Buddhism, though it cannot be said to reflect Buddhism as it is understood by most scholars. There is no concept of rebirth or karma in his philosophy because it is "irrelevant to resolving moral issues," a cultural accretion (13), and is an "eternalistic interpretation" of Buddhism (147); the first precept of non-violence does not actually advocate abstention from violence and violence can be produced from a "compassionate motive" (172); his Middle Way view advocates something called ego-identification which he takes to be the integration of our ego with all our other desires and psychological motives (35). These are just a few examples of Ellis' unconventional interpretations of Buddhism. Ellis believes that this way of characterising Buddhism is a better way to view Buddhism, though he accepts inconsistencies with "traditional" accounts.

It is not clear, however, whether he regards his work as a new and better interpretation of Buddhism, or whether it is intended as a total reinvention of Buddhism. In his preface he notes that, ". . . if I were to write this book again I would be rather more neutral and cautious about my use of the term 'Buddhist'" (6). He then states that his Middle Way Ethics is "independent" of the Buddhist tradition and says that, "without starting from scratch it is impossible to remove the 'Buddhist tone' which runs throughout . . . the book" (ibid). Yet, true to the book title, the remainder of the book does attempt to broach Buddhism at intervals. At times like this it appears that he does conceive the book as being about Buddhist ethics even pre-empting critics who say otherwise by stating that they would not have, "understood [his] arguments in depth" (300). Whether he means to be interpreting or reinventing Buddhism is therefore unclear.

In any case, Ellis is highly critical of applied ethics in "traditional Buddhism." This isn't surprising as much of "traditional Buddhism" goes against the advice that Ellis espouses. For the purpose of this review I will simply take "traditional Buddhism" to mean the view maintained by

the Pāli canon as Ellis is somewhat vague about how “traditional Buddhism” should be precisely defined. For Ellis, abortion and euthanasia are okay in some circumstances (206); vegetarianism is good, but veganism is better (169); wars are justified sometimes, and pacifism is “eternalist” (or nihilistic) (276); sexual relations are acceptable provided they occur within an “open and equal” relationship (76), and some forms of pornography are acceptable (310). As many scholars are aware, this interpretation is certainly unconventional: the Pāli Buddhist texts seem to discourage abortion and euthanasia. Vegetarianism is regarded with some ambivalence, and violence is generally rejected utterly. Sexual relations are viewed with abject suspicion. In these ways, Ellis is something of a maverick. He aims to reinterpret “traditional” Buddhism because he believes it to be overly conservative and dated in the type of advice it provides.

This well-meaning attitude is complicated by moments of conservatism: it is noted that it is “the Chinese practice” to steal organs from prisoners (225); surrogacy is compared to prostitution (223); it is implied that artificial insemination is only for lesbians (or that only they would want / need it) (223); the women’s right to choose an abortion is dogma and “nihilistic” (218); similarly, feminism is dogma (74); at one point Ellis even questions whether date rape is a real thing (he refers to as “so called ‘date-rape’”) (73). At other times he makes claims that are just odd or downright false. For example, people that worry a lot about genetically modified crops are too attached to “the world as we know it” (195), and money spent on infertility treatments could be better spent elsewhere (221) (I note however, that the latter argument is not applied to the military industrial complex discussed later in the book). All of these rather controversial statements might be acceptable if he had solid arguments to back them up. Unfortunately the main argument he supplies is problematic.

His general objection to a given applied subject is that it is either dogmatic or nihilistic. He does not define what he means by these terms

other than that they both represent extremes that violate the Buddha's middle way principle: "The first step towards doing ethics in a broad sense, taking into account all the conditions, is to avoid dogmatic beliefs" (18). He gives a few examples here, and states that dogmatism arises from claims made that are impossible to verify with evidence (19). Here are some of his examples: "The world was created by God" and "There's no such thing as morality" and "I'm free to do what I like"(ibid). These are dogmatic statements, he believes, because they cannot be supported through evidence. This seems doubtful, however, as people provide evidence for all these statements, and quite often. The evidence may not always be convincing, or it may be of a rational rather than an empirical character (the latter is what Ellis seems to mean here), or it may be that there is no evidence and yet we have a good idea of what it would or ought to look like. But none of these options are what Ellis seems to have in mind – he states that there is no evidence at all for these claims, and that there never can be. This seems false.

In general, Ellis's anti-dogmatism principle could have benefited from more attention and detail. Throughout the book the reader is told again and again that a given position is dogmatic or nihilistic. For example, the Catholic view that masturbation is wrong is dismissed off hand as being dogmatic (83). No particular reason is given for why this is the case. It is just assumed that it is. I happen to agree with Ellis here, but I would also like to hear the reasons why this view is dogma. Sometimes the charge of dogmatism or nihilism is outlined in more detail, but often the subsequent analysis does not make much sense. For example on a woman's right to choose an abortion he states, "This 'woman's right to choose' is nihilistic because its sources of value are nothing higher than individual wishes and conventional acceptance" (218). The reader is generally left with the impression that if a view is dogmatic, or nihilistic, then the view in question is too extreme. But it seems to me that such an objection is unsatisfactory as we rightly believe that some extreme positions are correct: the statement "murder is always wrong" is an extreme position, and probably a justified position too. Torture, I would

like to argue, is similarly always wrong. Some extreme positions really are unjustified, but the fact that a position is extreme does not make it, by that fact alone, wrong.

Further, Ellis often makes statements of an empirical nature but then fails to substantiate them; teachers, Ellis says, “find themselves less concerned with developing the characters of their students than trying to push them through exams” (96). What teachers? Where? No evidence is supplied. Another example – Ellis states fish are often mistreated and that overfishing is an epidemic problem in the West (163). This claim may well be true, but Ellis needs research to back it up. Occasionally Ellis will cite evidence to support his empirical claims, but when he does, they often are a flop: at one point he observes that Americans earn more than people in third world countries. In this case, Ellis supplies a footnote, but we are let down when we discover that it just reads, “UN Food & Agricultural Organisation and the World Bank” (116). Not a very helpful reference, and probably one of the few times Ellis does not need a citation because it is so obvious. In general, Ellis’s diligence in terms of referencing is sub par: the book is 325 pages long and it contains all of 30 references, not all of them useful. The book has no bibliography.

In keeping with this problematic methodology, Ellis does not examine in any detail the views of Buddhist Studies scholars. Some scholars are mentioned briefly- Peter Harvey makes an appearance (11); Damien Keown is discussed in a footnote (216), etc - but their positions are not engaged with and they are often dismissed off hand as being dogmatists or as offering obviously defective overly-traditional readings of Buddhism. For example, in discussing the conventional Buddhist interpretation that a fetus is not a person he states in a footnote: “This basic dogmatic view is not challenged by academic writers on Buddhism and Abortion (such as Peter Harvey, Damien Keown and Robert Florida) because they see their task as descriptive rather than normative” (216). The fact that Keown is not a Buddhist but is nonetheless commenting on Buddhist ethics is later described as lamentable (322): I don’t see what

Keown's religious views have to do with the quality of his research. Peter Harvey is also singled out for special treatment. Of him, Ellis writes, "The ethics he offers are entirely descriptive. One could characterise this as 'What people do in Thailand' approach to Buddhist ethics" (11). Ellis's objection that Buddhist scholars are only concerned with descriptive ethics is a sticking point for him. For him, scholars do not broach the topic of normative ethics sufficiently well. I do not agree with Ellis's concern, however: if the Buddhist texts say that greed is bad (and they do) then that implies that you ought not be greedy. In this way, descriptive facts can produce normative advice.

In any case, Ellis does not approve of contemporary Buddhist scholarship. The same treatment, however, is also doled out to western philosophers. He states, for example, that philosophers have not been able to produce "an alternative system of ethics" (9) and that scientism is stubbornly adhered to by philosophers (all of them?) (188). Philosophers (again, all of them?) approach medical ethics with "dogmatic assumptions" (205) and therefore cannot settle any of the ethical questions posed by medicine adequately. Peter Singer is mentioned with some praise (208), but all other philosophers (unnamed) are painted with a negative brush. Ellis views applied ethics, and western philosophy in general, as flawed, but he does not provide a very detailed analysis of why this is the case. This lack of detailed engagement with the western applied literature seems especially problematic given that his book is more about applied ethics than it is about Buddhism.

In light of all of this, it seems to me that his book cannot be considered a scholarly contribution. But it is not entirely clear that Ellis conceives of things in this way. Ellis seems to regard his book as an alternative to the prevailing interpretations of Buddhism that have been offered by other scholars. As he does not really engage those thinkers in a serious and detailed way it seems to me that it is impossible to conceive of his interpretation of Buddhist ethics as an alternative, whether or not the book is intended as such.

Who is his book for then? Whether or not Ellis intends his book to be a contribution to Buddhist studies, it certainly seems much more likely that he wants the book to be read by practicing Buddhists, probably western Buddhists. In that context it might be considered a book offering practical advice as to how to navigate difficult moral problems. We get a sense of Ellis's ambitions here at various places throughout the book. For example, in his conclusion he implies that Buddhist practitioners need more practical advice on how to act (322). He also sometimes frames his discussions as being intended for certain Buddhists who maintain certain occupations. For example, he states that a Buddhist farmer may be able to kill animals without any guilt (126); later he states that Buddhist scientists can in principle engage in animal experimentation (176). These examples seem to indicate that Ellis would like the book to speak to ordinary Buddhists.

I have some reservations as to whether the book can succeed even here. As mentioned above, there are some significant difficulties attached to his case for a Middle Way Ethics. Nonetheless, it is plausible that people might get a lot out of his discussions and certainly some of his conclusions seem to be true, even if the arguments that get one there are often unreliable.

The upshot is this: the book does not add much to the scholarly community due to, in part, its methodological problems. There are many carefully researched studies on Buddhist ethics available and Ellis's book does little to upset the dominance of these studies; for example, Peter Harvey's *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (2000). On the other hand, if one were interested in general applied ethics, applied ethics unconnected to Buddhism, there is a wealth of literature available - a good example of such a text is Mike Martin's *Everyday Morality* (2006). Ellis does little to engage that body of work either. In this way, Ellis' book might only appeal to a very broad readership of Buddhist practitioners.