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A Review of *Buddhist Ethics*

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Buddhist Ethics. Cambridge Elements in Ethics. By Maria Heim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 66 pp. ISBN 978-1-108-70662-9 (paperback), \$20.00.

Maria Heim's *Buddhist Ethics* is an elegant and informed exploration of two of the greatest thinkers in the history of Indian Buddhist moral philosophy. This slim volume juxtaposes the ethics of the fifth century Buddhaghosa, from his classic *The Path of Purification*, and the ethics of the eighth century Śāntideva, the author of *How to Lead an Awakened Life* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, or BCA) and the *Compendium of Training*. These two authors dominate ethical thinking in their respective traditions—the Abhidhamma tradition for Buddhaghosa and the Mahāyāna for Śāntideva—but rarely serve as each other's interlocuter. Not so in Heim's book. Although not primarily a comparative project—the main project seems to be presenting two compelling, and different, Buddhist ethical systems in their own terms—Heim highlights some of the major points of connection and divergence between these thinkers. And these points, especially of divergence, turn up some fascinating questions of broad ethical significance, such as whether it is useful to make universalist moral claims (Śāntideva: Yes; Buddhaghosa: Not really), whether moral development is about eliminating bias in oneself (Buddhaghosa) or requires cultivating radical

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altruistic intention toward others (Śāntideva), and whether we need ontology to ground ethics (Śāntideva: Yes; Buddhaghosa: Not really). Bringing these thinkers together creates the conditions for some compelling moral theorizing.

The book is aimed at advanced students and professionals who want to become better acquainted with Buddhist ethics, and fast. (It is a quick sixty pages.) It will appeal to those who appreciate a tour through primary texts, and readers who have some background knowledge of Buddhist philosophy will have an advantage here. This is not a volume that explains the field of “Buddhist ethics” to the reader, but rather acts as an informed tour guide helping the reader navigate Buddhaghosa’s and Śāntideva’s ethical landscapes. We get introduced to their systems as they appear in their texts, and not through the lens of Eurocentric ethical categories with which some readers may be more familiar. This, I think, is a virtue of the volume, although those readers with training or familiarity only in Western moral theory will have to work harder. I admire, too, that Heim quotes other contemporary thinkers only to highlight their insights and does not pick easy fights. This stylistic habit elevates the tone of the book and allows her to avoid an academic slog through the philosophical terrain that can seem predictable to professionals and pedantic to newcomers.

The book is no simple introduction to Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva; it is an informed and persuasive interpretation of texts and theories based on Heim’s previous work in Buddhist ethics, especially her work on Buddhaghosa. (See Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things* and “Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion.”) Heim interprets Buddhaghosa as a phenomenologist who is primarily interested in freedom, in this case freedom from dysfunctional and unwholesome mental and emotional states, as well as freedom from problematic biases. This interpretation highlights what she considers to be a point of divergence between Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva, whom she argues relies on the ontology of emptiness to ground his radical altruism (Heim *Buddhist Ethics* 41). The book is,

in short, a masterful presentation of the complex ideas of two sophisticated moral philosophers.

Perhaps because of Heim's long history with Buddhaghosa, not to mention her philosophical sympathies with him, the volume can, at times, seem slightly lopsided. Compared to Buddhaghosa, Śāntideva receives harsher and more recalcitrant criticism. Of course, philosophical criticism isn't egalitarian; some ideas just deserve more than others. But some of the strengths of Buddhaghosa's may come with unexplored downsides, and some of the weaknesses Heim points to in Śāntideva's system may not be as dire as they seem.

For example, Heim worries that on Śāntideva's view, compassion is conceptually linked to delusion. The problem that she raises is that if compassion depends on the category of person—for what else would be the object of compassion?—but if the category of person is empty of inherent existence, then any attitude, including compassion, that presupposes this category, trades in delusion. Śāntideva responds to this worry by suggesting that some delusions need to be embraced. Compassion, he says, is appropriate for “anyone projected through the delusion which is embraced for the sake of what has to be done” (BCA 9.75; Heim *Buddhist Ethics* 53). Heim argues that this response

is worrisome because the entire path is aimed at dismantling delusion since delusion is a fundamental defilement in Buddhist thought. . . . These verses suggest that far from supporting compassion the ultimate truth of emptiness makes it much harder going, and that one must resort to delusional conventional notions of personhood to manage it at all. But have not we been working steadily all along to get rid of such delusions? (*Buddhist Ethics* 53–54)

But it is not clear that embracing delusion requires such a bizarre turn away from the Buddhist path. There is a difference between being confused by a delusion, which is problematic, and embracing a delusion for

the sake of what has to be done, which is not obviously problematic and in fact seems inevitable. One way to dismantle delusion is to see it as delusion, something to be embraced in certain contexts and set aside in others. It is a freedom to embrace (or not) the delusion that makes one's relationship to that delusion non-delusional.

One time my husband helped an elderly neighbor out of a taxi. She was refusing to leave the taxi because she did not recognize her own house. Nor did she recognize her husband, who was urging her out of the taxi, in tears. My husband was able to engage her in a conversation about Elvis, following her cues that her mind was more in the 1950s (at least at that moment) than in the present. In Śāntideva's words, he embraced a delusion for the sake of what had to be done. And it worked; she was able to get out of the taxi and into her house. It did not seem to affect my husband's grip on reality.

Compassion is like that. It responds to suffering, and suffering thrives in delusion. It is not clear that one could understand or feel compassion without understanding delusion. Sometimes we share delusions with others—that is, we are deluded in the same way—and empathize with whatever injuries arise from that joint delusion. But we need not be caught up in the same delusion to feel compassion, as long as we can understand the delusion and the complex ways it causes suffering to arise. We could see Śāntideva's suggestion to embrace delusion less as a last-resort argument or a bewildering indifference to the core Buddhist aim to uproot delusion and more as a recognition of the complex conceptual and causal dependence of compassion, suffering, and delusion.

On the flip side, I would have liked to hear more about the challenges Buddhaghosa's ethics might face. For all of his brilliant insights—to which I am very sympathetic—there are some limits of Buddhaghosa's approach that Heim mentions but doesn't probe deeply. For example, in her conclusion she writes that Buddhaghosa's approach requires us to give up on universalist moral claims but implies that is a small loss compared to what his system can deliver (*Buddhist Ethics* 60). She argues that

Buddhaghosa doesn't get philosophically bogged down in the same ways as Śāntideva because Buddhaghosa uses ontological theories, such as not-self and emptiness, as tools for achieving freedom, allowing him to pick them up and put them down at his convenience. This strategy is not available to Śāntideva, who treats emptiness as a universal truth, which means he has to account for it at every turn. This makes his arguments convoluted and infamously fraught in places (e.g., BCA 8.90–8.105; 9.75–9.77).

But the fact that Buddhaghosa avoids such conflicts through unabashed pragmatism isn't necessarily a virtue; it could just be conflict averse. At the very least, it raises questions. What is the extent of Buddhaghosa's ontological pragmatism? Is he committed to a radical ontological pragmatism according to which the usefulness, rather than the truth, of an ontology would be the sole determinant of whether it should be incorporated into an ethical system? On this read of Buddhaghosa, emptiness is a useful tool because it works to help eliminate unfree and unwholesome states, and that alone is enough to recommend it. When emptiness complicates matters, as in compassion meditation, it is better left out. But perhaps Buddhaghosa's pragmatism is more moderate. It could be the case that he thinks that emptiness or not-self is a universal truth but doesn't see his project as one that needs to defend it. So, he helps himself to emptiness or not-self when he needs to, not simply because it is useful, but because it is useful and true, but he doesn't take himself to be arguing for its truth. It would be helpful to know which, if either, of these Heim thinks is true of Buddhaghosa.

If Buddhaghosa is the second kind of pragmatist—the kind who thinks emptiness is both useful and true, but whose project isn't tackling the truth of the emptiness—then it seems that he would be vulnerable to the same problems that arise for Śāntideva concerning the conceptual tension because compassion and emptiness. Not tackling the tension would be, at best, a bracketing of a thorny philosophical problem, or, less charitably, just kicking the philosophical can down the road. To be fair, though, it seems that Heim usually reads Buddhaghosa as the first kind of

pragmatist—the one for whom ontology is only a tool (*Buddhist Ethics* 56). This kind of pragmatist is free from the philosophical tensions that trouble Śāntideva, but not without a price. There are some immediate epistemic problems that come with this more radical pragmatism: What counts as useful? For whom and when? (We can use conceptual analyses in lots of ways, but that doesn't make them all useful.) Do we have to give up on universal truth altogether? If so, can Buddhaghosa's work function as an ethics (and, for whom?) or is it more of a sophisticated method of "brain-hacking" in order to get a certain kind of result? My guess is that Heim has answers to these questions, but ones that space did not allow her to present in this volume. Perhaps a sequel is in order?

That this book, in a slim sixty pages, prompts a reckoning with such thorny metaethical issues, all the while being accessible, informative, and tackling two complex and sophisticated thinkers, speaks to its mastery of both content and style. This book makes an important contribution to the study of Buddhist ethics, as well as Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva studies, and I anticipate it will be much appreciated by students and professionals interested in a short but deep dive into Buddhist ethics.

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