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Buddhist Ethics as Moral Phenomenology: A Defense and Development of the Theory

Colin Simonds¹

Abstract

This article defends and develops the categorization of Buddhist ethics as moral phenomenology. It first examines the use of the term in Western philosophical settings and compares it to how the term is employed in Buddhist settings. After concluding that Western ethical comportment and Buddhist moral phenomenology are commensurate terms, it explores how moral phenomenology has been understood in Buddhist contexts and considers the evidence scholars have used to make this interpretation. The article then looks to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition for further evidence of a moral phenomenological approach to Buddhist ethics and analyzes further proof of this interpretation. Finally, issues that emerge from a moral phenomenological approach to ethics are addressed from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective to strengthen this interpretation and offer moral phenomenology as a viable alternative ethical system.

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Introduction

Over the last several decades, notable scholars in the field of Buddhist ethics have classified the system in numerous ways. Some, like Damien Keown, view Buddhist ethics as akin to virtue ethics, while others like Charles Goodman forward a consequentialist interpretation. Recently, however, scholars have taken up a compelling argument that Buddhist ethics do not actually resemble *any* form of Western ethics. Barbra Clayton makes this claim towards the end of her book *Moral Theory in Śāntideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya* and disagrees with the idea that “Buddhist ethics as a whole can be treated homogeneously” (112). However, if there is not a possibility of a singular approach to Buddhist ethics then we are left with a particularist approach wherein different parts of Buddhism are necessarily treated differently and the tradition itself is bereft of a consistent whole. Clayton brings up this dilemma in her conclusion, writing:

The danger involved with the particularist approach as I see it is thus to prematurely end the investigative work, by assuming from the outset that because moral views are always complex that no consistency can be found, and is therefore not worth looking for. (118)

This danger is a real one and would not only limit scholarly engagement with Buddhist ethics but the strength of Buddhism's voice in global philosophy and politics. Thankfully, rather than abandon this exercise completely, scholars have begun to formulate what a Buddhist approach to ethics might look if we were to begin not from a Western ethical standpoint, but from the tradition itself.

In *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*, Jay Garfield does just this. He shares Clayton's hesitation to commit the Buddhist tradition to a particular western mode of ethics and instead proposes a novel ethical formulation based on his reading of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist primary

texts: moral phenomenology. As he puts it, moral phenomenology is “concerned with the transformation of our experience of the world, and hence our overall comportment to it” (*Engaging Buddhism* 278). In other words, moral phenomenology is an ethical theory centered on the *experience* of an individual where *perception* and *affect* are the loci of moral development. It rests on the assertion that action stems from one’s immediate experience of the world and that to change this experience is to change one’s behavior.

This paper will defend and develop this moral phenomenological approach to Buddhist ethics. It will do so by finding analogues to this idea in Western philosophy and by reviewing the earlier work done on Buddhist moral phenomenology by Jay Garfield, Daniel Aitken, and Jessica Locke. It will then extend the theory beyond these formulations by showing how key ideas in the Tibetan Buddhist system also support this kind of categorization. Finally, it will address some of the issues that might arise from this interpretation in order to demonstrate the strength of this moral system and develop moral phenomenology as a viable alternative to virtue ethics, consequentialism, and so forth.

Moral Phenomenology in Western Philosophy

Moral Philosophy in the Phenomenological Tradition

Prior to unpacking moral phenomenology in the Buddhist tradition, it is worth seeing if there are western equivalents to this ethical system. In his article “Moral phenomenology: Foundational issues,” Uriah Kriegel differentiates between two possible meanings of the term before unpacking the implications of each. He writes: “the term ‘moral phenomenology’ could be used to refer either to (1) moral philosophy in the phenomenological tradition or to (2) the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our

moral life” (1). With respect to the former, Kriegel identifies the work of Max Scheler as exemplary in its extension of Husserl’s phenomenology into the realm of value, emotion, affect, and morality. Kriegel traces Scheler’s thought through the work of Emmanuel Levinas before culminating in a full articulation of “moral phenomenology” in Maurice Mandelbaum’s *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*. In Mandelbaum, we find a theory in which moral obligation is defined as a *force of felt demand* with respect to particular *direct moral obligations*. As Kriegel writes: “The direction of this force is *oneself*: we always experience moral demand as directed against us. And the origin of this moral demand is always experienced by us as lying outside of us, emanating from something other than ourselves” (4). Thus, in Mandelbaum we find a coherent moral theory derived from the phenomenological tradition with particular emphasis on the work of Levinas. It is noteworthy that his project is a *descriptive* one, not *prescriptive*, and that he is offering an explanatory model of moral experience rather than a tangible program for moral behavior. Likewise, subsequent philosophers in this strand of moral phenomenology pursue explanatory frameworks for moral experiences as in Sokolowski’s analysis of friendship and Drummond’s analysis of respect. Thus, moral philosophy in the phenomenological tradition seems to be comfortable remaining in the descriptive arena and leaves little room for either prescriptive speculation or the translation of theory into practice.

The First-Person Study of the Experiential Aspect of Moral Life

Contrastingly, the second variety of moral phenomenology that Kriegel identifies emerges from the position that “phenomenology is the only way to study subjective consciousness itself, as opposed to its manifestation in speech and behavior” (5). Thus, moral phenomenology might be seen as a first-person extension of moral psychology which investigates the way agents experience morality from a third-person perspective. On this

point, Kriegel writes: “our study of the realm of values must receive its own phenomenological complement, a first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life” (5). More importantly, this investigation of the “experiential dimension of morally pregnant mental states and processes” is done “in the service of moral philosophy and moral psychology” (5-6). Thus, this kind of first-person study of our moral life *does* leave room for prescriptive speculation and practice.

There are several notable factors involved in this second conception of moral phenomenology. First, there is a development of what constitutes “phenomenality” itself. At its most narrow conception, phenomenologists have considered phenomenality (being that which constitutes phenomenal experience) the exclusive domain of the senses.² However, this definition has been broadened by recent work in the field. For instance, David Pitt has recently argued for an extension of phenomenality to the cognitive aspects of human experience, engaging the sixth of the Buddhist senses: the mind.³ Just as one can distinguish the phenomenal (visual) experience of the color red from the phenomenal experience of the color green, so too, Pitt argues, can we distinguish one thought from another. He writes: “it is only conscious thoughts have a kind of phenomenology that is different from that of any other kind of conscious mental state that one can immediately discriminate them from other kinds of conscious mental state,” and that, “it is only because type-distinct conscious thoughts have type-distinct phenomenologies (of the cognitive sort) that one can immediately distinguish them from each other.” (7-8). Similarly, Horgan et al. have extended the realm of phenomenality to include a conative and affective element with respect to the phenomenology of intentional agency. These factors (cognition, conation, and affect)

² The five senses posited in the West, that is. Sight, smell, sound, taste, touch.

³ Skt. *citta*. Tib. *sems*.

give material for a bridge from moral phenomenological theory to practice in such a way that the phenomenality of the gross senses does not.

This leads to the second notable factor of this kind of moral phenomenology: its applicability. In his aforementioned article, Kriegel looks at how the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life can be put into conversation with normative ethics.⁴ To demonstrate this, Kriegel uses the example of (monotheistic) religious experiences of “gratitude” and the much wordier “appreciation of fortune based on suspending the natural take-for-granted attitude” for those committed to “secular flourishing or *eudaimonia*” (14-15). He makes the claim that an experience akin to theistic gratitude should be articulated and promoted due to the *positive consequences* of this experience on the overall wellbeing of the individual. Both gratitude and an “appreciation of fortune based on suspending the natural take-for-granted attitude” evoke similar *phenomenological* sentiments in the individual that lead to similar outcomes on the wellbeing of an individual. Therefore, not only can we say that they are phenomenologically similar but that they are *morally* similar in that they direct an individual to “the good” (here represented as God and *eudaimonia* respectively). While this example does not give us a good account of how these phenomenological experiences might lead an individual to act in the world (a key feature of a broader ethical theory), Kriegel nonetheless suggests that this understanding of moral phenomenology can have possible ramifications on broader moral theories such as consequentialism or virtue ethics (15-16).

⁴ Normative ethics being concerned with the question of what is good and how one ought to act, as opposed to meta-ethics being concerned with the question of why a thing is good and why one should act in a certain way.

Moral Phenomenology and Ethical Theory

He is not alone in suggesting this potential. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons's article "Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory" deals with this very confluence and, after weighing some of the implications of moral phenomenology on the broader project of moral philosophy, dialogue moral phenomenology with contemporary ethics. The first conclusion they arrive at is how a moral phenomenological approach to ethics is at direct odds with consequentialism. Horgan and Timmons write: "The point is not that people never do such [utilitarian] calculating in cases of direct moral judgment, but that they just *typically* do not; moral experience in the case of direct moral judgments does not fit well with the account the consequentialist gives of obligation" (72). Thus, they conclude: "to the extent to which one puts methodological weight on considerations of moral phenomenology, one will favor non-consequentialist views in normative ethics" (72).

The other tradition they consider is, of course, virtue ethics. They write: "the specific, distinctive nature of one's moral experiences is going to be importantly shaped by one's character; so, when it comes to understanding differences in specific moral phenomenology among different moral agents, considerations of character are going to be primary" (74). Thus, we can see how "the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life" (Kriegel 1) can find a better home in the realm of virtue ethics than consequentialism. While Horgan and Timmons see nothing but tension in the relationship between the phenomenology of morality and consequentialist summation, they instead see compatibilities and possibilities for integrating the study of moral experience into a broader formulation of virtue ethics.

While Horgan and Timmons begin to tease out the implications of moral phenomenology with respect to already-existent moral theory, they neglect to take that extra step to look at how experiences of morality

can *themselves* constitute the basis for ethical theory. Both aforementioned articles look at how moral phenomenology can inform historical (western) philosophical traditions rather than look at how an ethic can emerge *out of* a first-person experience of the world. There is perhaps a simple explanation for this. As we will see, Garfield's conception of moral phenomenology in Buddhism rests on the idea that the ordinary human experience of the world is *fundamentally flawed, disordered, and unrealistic* such that the actions which emerge from this experience are un conducive to "the good." Thus, the object of Garfield's moral phenomenology is to *reorder* one's experience such that one's actions are realistic, attuned to the reality of phenomena, and ultimately compassionate. In western contexts, there is no fundamental mistake when it comes to our experience of the world. While there may be debates between materialists and idealists as to what constitutes reality-as-it-is, their positions do not describe some hidden or transcendental state of the world but attempt to outline reality as it appears to ordinary individuals in all its immanent accessibility. As a result, there is no attempt in western moral phenomenologies to change experience or explore the possibility of an ethical system emerging from this.

Ethical Comportment as Moral Phenomenology

There is, however, one idea in western moral phenomenology that takes a step in the direction of Garfield; that is ethical comportment.⁵ Horgan and Timmons's article only mentions this idea in passing when they state:

Perhaps one should allow (in addition to conscious moral beliefs, both deliberative and spontaneous) cases in which one responds in a morally appropriate way without

⁵ A distinct term in this phenomenological context, separate from the more common usage in the nursing profession.

consciously forming a moral belief at all—call this kind of experience, ‘ethical comportment’. The idea is that in persons having a high degree of moral expertise, the phenomenology of their habitual responses to morally significant situations may not include making (or coming to have) a moral judgment as part of their experience. (62-63)

While they do not develop the implications of this idea themselves, they nonetheless acknowledge its ability for novel ethical speculation and the potential for it to expand moral phenomenology beyond the limitations of its original Mandelbaumian formulation. They derive their notion of ethical comportment from an earlier work by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus titled “What is Morality? A Phenomenological Account of the Development of Ethical Expertise” in which the authors contrast the ethical deliberation present in consequentialist and virtue ethics with spontaneous ethical comportment and posit the latter as a potential ground for ethical theory.

In the eyes of Dreyfus and Dreyfus, ethical comportment (being the spontaneous *appropriate* reaction to moral situations that confront the individual) is a skill not unlike driving a car or playing chess. Thus, like driving or chess, there are differences between the experience of a novice and an expert and according stages of experiencing moral situations as one progresses through the stages of ethical expertise. In their formulation, moral expertise begins with maxims (such as never to lie) with which an individual makes sense of situations, before revising those rules in particular situations (such as to lie to save a life), and eventually abandoning the maxims altogether in favor of a natural attention to the particulars of a situation (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 240-244). What is missing, however, is *how* one progresses from stage to stage. To phrase this as a question: what actions does one take to make the steps from being a novice to achieving competency and expertise? They gesture to a vague yet vigilant form of

reflection as an answer but are more generally concerned with a theory of ethical comportment than the practice of it.

Nonetheless, after their formulation of this kind of ethical expertise, Dreyfus and Dreyfus are led to defend a particular ethic of care which was first proposed by Carol Gilligan as a response to the dominant androcentric forms of moral theory at the time.⁶ She contrasts the “justice perspective” with the “care perspective” and associates the justice perspective with those who approach ethical dilemmas through a utilitarian calculus or a situation in which universals must be applied without prejudice. In contrast, the care perspective is “doing spontaneously whatever the situation demands” based on the specific context in which a moral dilemma presents itself in and the relationships it involves (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 254). While she does not use the term herself, Dreyfus and Dreyfus categorize Gilligan’s approach as one that is built from an intuition of ethical comportment. Not only that, but they also see this kind of ethical theory as one that reflects the highest form of ethical expertise. They write:

when one measures Gilligan's two types of morality against a phenomenology of expertise, the traditional Western and

⁶ Specifically, Kohlberg’s chauvinistic development scale that categorized women as less morally developed than men but was heavily criticized by individuals like Gilligan who argued that the way in which he conducted his research was fraught with error. Kohlberg uses the moral dilemma of whether a man should steal a drug from the pharmacy which he cannot afford to save his dying wife and, according to Dreyfus and Dreyfus, concludes that men “tended to answer that Heinz should steal the drug because the right to life is more basic than the right to private property. Women, however, seemed unable to deal with the dilemma in a mature, logical way” (251). However, Gilligan contests this narrative and suggests that the women in Kohlberg’s study show a greater understanding of the nuance of the situation and writes: “Seeing in the dilemma not a math problem with humans but a narrative of relationships that extends over time, Amy envisions the wife’s continuing need for her husband and the husband’s continuing concern for his wife and seeks to respond to the druggist’s need in a way that would sustain rather than sever connection” (28).

male belief in the maturity and superiority of critical detachment is reversed. The highest form of ethical comportment is seen to consist in being able to stay involved and to refine one's intuitions. (256)

Thus, moral phenomenology can indeed have some bearing on ethical theory in western contexts. The serious treatment of ethical comportment by Dreyfus and Dreyfus and Gilligan's ethic of care demonstrate how attending to the imminent moral experiences of an individual can inform moral theory and itself be a source for ethical thought. While this notion of moral phenomenology is evidently a minority position in the broader discussion of the term, it nonetheless provides a useful bridge from western notions of moral phenomenology to the Buddhist kind found in the writing of Jay Garfield. It is to this that we will now turn.

Moral Phenomenology in Buddhist Contexts

Moral Phenomenology in Theravāda and Mahayāna Buddhism

Buddhist teachers across traditions have gestured to what we might call a Buddhist moral phenomenological approach to ethics, but its explicit identification did not come until Jay Garfield's 2010 article "What is it like to be a Bodhisattva?" In this article, Garfield looks at Śāntideva's⁷ *Bodhicaryāvatara*⁸ to see how phenomenology and morality collide in this text. Five years later, Garfield would write *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* in which he dedicates a chapter to looking at how this phenomenology-centered ethics plays out not only in the writings of Śāntideva but across various Buddhist traditions. Together, these two works form

⁷ Tib. *zhi ba lha*.

⁸ Tib. *byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*.

the core of the case for Buddhist moral phenomenology and can be used to tease out this ethical system.

To first give some background, Garfield comes to moral phenomenology through his observation that there is a distinct quality to Buddhist writings on morality that elude perfect Western categorizations. In the case of the *Bodhicaryāvatārā*, he writes: “Śāntideva’s understanding of how to lead such a life is distinctive, and is very different from accounts of the moral or the exemplary life familiar in the Western tradition” (“What is it like” 334). This sentiment also carries over to a more general reading of Buddhist ethics, as evident in Garfield’s introductory statement:

In Buddhist philosophical and religious literature we find many texts that address moral topics, and a great deal of attention devoted to account of virtuous and vicious actions, states of character and lives. However, we find little direct attention to the articulation of states of principles that determine which actions, states of character or motives are virtuous or vicious, and no articulation of sets of obligations or rights. (*Engaging Buddhism* 278-279)

Thus, overall, Garfield contends that “Buddhist moral theorists see ethics as concerned not primarily with actions, their consequences, obligations, sentiments or human happiness, but rather with the nature of our experience” (*Engaging Buddhism* 279). In both his article and his chapter, he weighs the possibility of Buddhist ethics resembling those of the western philosophical tradition but nonetheless dismisses them in favor of reading Buddhist ethics as a unique kind of moral theory. Therefore, his argument for a moral phenomenological approach to Buddhist ethics emerges from a reluctance to subsume Buddhist ethics under a western ethical tradition.

In Garfield's usage, the term "moral phenomenology" differs slightly from the ways the term is used by Mandelbaum or Kriegel. He writes: "Buddhist ethics is a moral phenomenology concerned with the transformation of our experience of the world, and hence our overall comportment to it" (*Engaging Buddhism* 279). This contrasts with the earlier forms of moral phenomenology wherein moral experience was used to analyze the experience of morality for its own sake. Garfield's definition of moral phenomenology is close to Dreyfus and Dreyfus's ethical comportment but surpasses this term insofar as it clearly delineates a *moral project*. While their notion of ethical expertise implies a developmental model of ethical comportment, there is no clear path to be taken, actions to be done, or a particular touchstone of what constitutes an ethical expert.

Thus, while ethical comportment may be similar to Buddhist moral phenomenology, the latter includes a clear path, specific practices, and a plethora of archetypes for measuring one's moral development. These include the Eightfold Path and the *pāramitās*, specific meditations to cultivate particular mental experiences, and a pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas who serve as representations of a perfected moral state. These buddhas and bodhisattvas also serve as a signifier for the goal of moral development. Moral development in Dreyfus and Dreyfus's model does not serve some explicit larger purpose (other than perhaps a general wellbeing of self and other) but is largely developed for its own sake. In Buddhist moral phenomenology however, the refinement of one's moral experience is in service of the greater goal of the liberation of all sentient beings, making it a robust moral and soteriological⁹ project.

⁹ While etymologically, soteriology implies a "salvation" by an "other," god-like force, I follow Jeffrey Hopkins' understanding of the term to describe the achievement of provisionally and ultimately good states. I agree with him that soteriology is preferable to neologisms such as liberatology or lysiology. While liberation, freedom, or awakening

Further, according to Garfield, moral phenomenology is a ubiquitous mode of ethics across all Buddhist traditions past and present. In the Theravāda tradition, he locates moral phenomenology in the *brahmavihāras* or the Four Immeasurables¹⁰ and their attention to how particular experiences regulate interpersonal relationships.¹¹ In terms of *karuṇā*,¹² he writes that adopting a compassionate attitude is:

more than an act of recognition; it is also to adopt a mode of comportment to the world, a mode in which the welfare and suffering of others is that which is ascertained in perception, in which sentient beings are perceived intentionally *as suffering*, and in which the actions that are readied in the perceptual cycle are actions designed to alleviate suffering. (*Engaging Buddhism* 289)

are distinct from “salvation,” they serve a similar function in the Buddhist religion as salvation does in Christianity. For both this reason and the consistency of terminology across Buddhist studies (in which soteriology is common) I will use soteriology to refer to the above. See: Hopkins “A Tibetan Perspective” (225-227).

¹⁰ Skt. *caturapramana*. Tib. *tshad med bzhi*.

¹¹ While the following discussion will primarily take part in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the *brahmavihārās* are an active part of Tibetan Buddhism as well as Theravada Buddhism. The *brahmavihārās* are not found in the Theravada tradition alone (in the *Dīgha Nikāya* and the *Visuddhimagga*) but are also present in Mahayana and Vajrayāna traditions in texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, and Bön texts such as the *mdzod phug* (*A Cavern of Treasures*). Thus, Garfield’s words on them are relevant to the broader discussion of moral phenomenology in Tibetan Buddhism.

¹² Tib. *snying rje*. Typically translated as compassion, though Garfield prefers “caregiving” or “caring for” due to the former’s lack of engagement. Compassion is a feeling while caregiving is both a feeling *and* an action. Though I agree that the active component of compassion should be stressed, I will be using the more common “compassion” to translate *karuṇā* to be consistent with the majority of Buddhist scholars who translate it as such.

Ultimately, he argues that compassion is “tied directly to the phenomenology of perception as well as to the ideology of the four noble truths and of dependent origination” (*Engaging Buddhism* 289). There are a couple things to unpack in this presentation that are important to understanding the relationship between view, perception, and action. On this account, compassion arises not only from a particular *kind* of perception but a particular *object* of perception. The direct perceptual experience of *duḥkha*, *samudaya*, *nirodha*, and *marga* causes the feeling of compassion from the experiential recognition of *duḥkha*¹³ in oneself and in others and the possibility of its cessation. Similarly, a direct perceptual experience of *pratīyasamutpāda* orients an individual towards *action* because they can directly see how particular actions have particular consequences, all of which are implicated in the *duḥkha* of self and other. For these perceptual encounters to truly install a comportment of compassion in an individual, they cannot be one-off events but a consistent lens through which one views the world.

A similar sentiment carries over to the other *brahmavihārās* as well. Garfield characterizes *mettā*¹⁴ as “an attitude of spontaneous positive emotion and well-wishing toward others” which “focuses intentionally and cognitively not specifically on the suffering of others, but on positively promoting their welfare” (*Engaging Buddhism* 289-290). This compliments compassion which is concerned with the alleviation of negative states rather than the promotion of positive ones. Nonetheless, Garfield states that, like compassion, “[lovingkindness] is not a reflective attitude, but a perceptual set” (*Engaging Buddhism* 290). This perceptual reading can be found with the third *brahmavihārā* as well. *Muditā*, or sympathetic joy, is the unfabricated happiness in the wellbeing of others and is commonly

¹³ Tib. *sdug bsngal*. *Duḥkha* is often translated as suffering but also refers to dissatisfaction or unease. These terms will be used interchangeably in this paper.

¹⁴ Pali. Skt. *maitrī*. Tib. *byams pa*. Eng. Lovingkindness.

seen as the antithesis of envy or jealousy. In Garfield's formulation, sympathetic joy is again "not simply a post-perceptual cognitive judgment and appraisal, but part of a perceptual set, a way of being embedded in the world" (*Engaging Buddhism* 290). And finally, Garfield sees equanimity or *upekṣā*¹⁵ as again being something that concerns itself primarily with a perceptual engagement with the world. He states that equanimity is the process in which "we dislodge the sense that the world revolves around us or even the sense that the events in our immediate environment resolve around us" which, in turn, "allows us to care about what happens per se, not about its impact on us" (*Engaging Buddhism* 290). And like the other *brahmavihārās*, Garfield calls equanimity "perceptual sets, ways of experiencing and taking up with the world" (*Engaging Buddhism* 291). Thus, these qualities are framed as *perceptual modes* by Garfield such that the focus of ethics is on an individual's *experience* of the world rather than their actions per se. By taking up these lenses, one's actions will spontaneously accord with these ethical ideals such that no moral calculus is necessary.

Garfield also identifies a similar approach in Mahāyāna Buddhism. He sees the Mahāyāna ethical tradition as a drive for "a universal concern for the enlightened welfare of all sentient beings and to the cultivation of states of character that reflect this awareness and commitment." (*Engaging Buddhism* 294). While the latter half of this definition might lead one to believe that Mahāyāna ethics are indeed a virtue ethic, the final portion needs be emphasized to understand Garfield's position. Yes, the cultivation of states of character are recognized as a component of this ethical framework, but these states of character are *reflections of a particular awareness* or *perceptual mode*. Thus, he brings Mahāyāna ethics back to a focus on moral phenomenology. And like his presentation of moral phenomenology in the Theravāda tradition, Mahāyāna ethics rests on the particular

¹⁵ Tib. *btang snyoms*.

(perceptual) cultivation of *karuṇā* as the “central moral value and the model of the bodhisattvas caring” (*Engaging Buddhism* 296). Where this cultivation eludes a virtue ethic interpretation, however, is in the mode of cultivation. One does not directly cultivate an attitude of care. Rather, it is a by-product of an experiential appreciation of *pratītyasamutpāda*. This is absolutely key to understanding Buddhism moral phenomenology theoretically and practically. Garfield lays out this relationship thusly:

Care, grounded in the awareness of our joint participation in global life, hence, from the Mahayana perspective, is the wellspring of the motivation for the development of all perfections, and the most reliable motivation for morally decent actions. Care is also, on this view, the direct result of a genuine appreciation of the emptiness and interdependence of all sentient beings. Once one sees oneself as nonsubstantial and existing only in interdependence, and once one sees that the happiness and suffering of all sentient beings is entirely causally conditioned, the only rational attitude one can adopt to others is a caring and careful one. (*Engaging Buddhism* 296-297)

Intrinsic to this presentation is how suffering is bad *per se* regardless of *whose* it is and that, in this tradition, “to fail to take another’s suffering seriously as a motivation for action is itself a form of suffering and is irrational” (*Engaging Buddhism* 296). This is because the *duḥkha* one experiences is bound up with the *duḥkha* of others and, likewise, one’s own liberation is contingent upon the liberation of all other beings. Garfield uses the case of Thich Nhat Hanh to demonstrate this orientation and looks to his text “Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings” as an exemplary case of Mahāyāna moral phenomenology. He writes that, in the case of traits such as “non-attachment,” “freedom of thought,” and “openness,” *awareness* is emphasized as the object of moral cultivation rather than particular

actions or maxims (*Engaging Buddhism* 298). Thus, Garfield sees Hanh as arguing that “ethical perfection consists primarily in a way of seeing things, in a kind of awareness of others and of one’s place in the world” and that this perfection is validated “because of its congruence with an understanding of the nature of existence and human life” (*Engaging Buddhism* 298). He therefore sees in Thich Nhat Hanh another piece of evidence for asserting Buddhist ethics as a moral phenomenology.

Moral Phenomenology in Śāntideva’s Bodhicaryāvatārā

For Garfield, no other work gets this point across more clearly than Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatārā*. He appeals to this text in support of this position in *Engaging Buddhism* and dedicates the whole of “What is it like to be a bodhisattva?” to unpacking the text in order to articulate a broader moral framework. “What is it like to be a bodhisattva?” was published before *Engaging Buddhism* and might be seen as the initial motivation for rethinking how Buddhist ethics were categorized in the first place. As Garfield writes, “Śāntideva’s understanding of how to lead such a life is distinctive, and is very different from accounts of the moral or the exemplary life familiar in the Western tradition. It is, I will argue, primarily a phenomenological account” (“What is it like” 334). Key to this understanding is the importance of *bodhicitta* in Śāntideva’s work. *Bodhicitta* is at the heart of both the *Bodhicaryāvatārā* and the Mahāyāna path in general. This can clearly be seen in the words of Chatral Sangye Dorje:¹⁶ “The enlightened wish to benefit others and the *bodhicitta* of application are essential because they are at the root of the Mahāyāna.”¹⁷ *Bodhicitta* is also one of the Sanskrit

¹⁶ Tib. *bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje*. A wandering yogi (Tib. *khyams pa*) and Dzogchen master of the Longchen Nyinthig (Tib. *klong chen snying thig*) lineage. 1913-2015.

¹⁷ Tib. *gnad gzhan pha byang chub smon ’jug sems / ’di theg chen rtsa ba yin pa’i phyr*. Sourced from: *sangs rgyas rdo rje* (114-115). For an alternate translation, see: Chatral Rinpoche, “Words of Advice.”

terms typically left untranslated in English scholarship due to its semantic variability. For example, Francis Brassard has shown how *bodhicitta* can refer to a desire for enlightenment, an object of concentration, a cultivation of awareness, an aspect of renunciation, an aspect of conversion, and an aspect of contemplation.¹⁸ Nonetheless, after dedicating an entire book to parsing these various aspects of the term he ultimately concludes “the best translation I can . . . imagine for *bodhicitta* is *bodhicitta*” (150).

Despite this alleged untranslatability we can nonetheless define the term operationally. Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen,¹⁹ who himself transmitted the *Bodhicaryāvatarā* to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, gives the following definition:

Supreme bodhicitta is desire to
clear every fault from each and every sentient being
and to produce infinite good qualities in each of them.
Even among the wondrous this is wondrous!²⁰

Here, we can see the *intentional* or *perceptual* character of Buddhist ethics even in this classical definition. *Bodhicitta* in this brief account involves the wish to perfect other beings—a wish that emerges from a deep perceptual realization of *pratītyasamutpāda* or *śūnyatā*. Moreover, a distinction is made in Tibetan settings between *bodhicitta in aspiration* and

¹⁸ Each of which he dedicates a chapter to exploring in his book *The Concept of Bodhicitta in Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatarā*.

¹⁹ Tib. *khu nu bla ma bstan 'dzin rgyal mtshan*. A Nyingma and Kagyu yogi who notably taught the *Bodhicaryāvatarā* to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. 1895-1977.

²⁰ Tib. *sems can re re'i skyon kun sel / re re'ng yon tan mtha' klas pa / skyed 'dod byang chub sems mchog ste / rmad byung las kyang 'di rmad byung*. Sourced from: *bstan 'dzin rgyal mtshan* (7). For an alternate translation, see: Khunu Rinpoche (31).

bodhicitta in application.²¹ The former is a perceptual or intentional set in which one generates the *wish* for the removal of flaws and development of good qualities in others. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche calls it “compassion directed impartially toward all sentient beings, without discriminating between those who are friends and those who are enemies” (2). In order to realize this goal, it is necessary to become fully liberated oneself, therefore aspirational *bodhicitta* also is the wish to achieve complete awakening for oneself so that one can subsequently help others do the same. *Bodhicitta* in application is, curiously enough, often defined as the *pāramitās*. In *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche separates these into two categories: “Generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, and meditative concentration are the first five *pāramitās* which are of the aspect of the practice of skillful means. Wisdom is the sixth *pāramitā* and concerns the accumulation of primordial wisdom.”²² And yet, these must be practiced concurrently and cannot be separated, as is evident in Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche’s statement:

These two bodhicittas, the skillful means of compassion and the wisdom of voidness, should never be separated. They are like a bird's two wings, both of which are necessary for it to fly; you cannot achieve enlightenment through compassion alone, nor through the realization of voidness by itself. (4)

²¹ Tib. *smon pa sems bskyed* and *jug pa sems bskyed*. Śāntideva makes this distinction in his *Bodhicaryāvatārā* (1.15) which states: “In brief, one should know that *bodhicitta* has two aspects: the mind which aspires to enlightenment and the very application of enlightenment.” Tib. *byang chub sems de mdor 'bsdus na / rnam pa gnyis su shes bya ste / byang chub smon pa'i sems dang ni / byang chub 'jug pa nyid yin no*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā* of Śāntideva (6).

²² Tib. *sbyin pa tshul khrims bzod pa brtson 'grus bsam tan te / thabs spyod pa'i phyogs kyi pha rol tu phyin pa lnga / shes rab ye shes kyi tsogs te drug yin*. Sourced from: *rdza dpal sprul 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po* (309). For an alternate translation, see: Patrul Rinpoche (234).

By this account, even the action-oriented virtues of generosity, patience, and so forth are *necessarily* tied to a perceptual experience of emptiness. Thus, when analyzing the *pāramitās* in light of the Tibetan emphasis on *bodhicitta*, they can best be seen as the consequences of a particular perceptual mode and a particular way of experiencing both oneself and one's relationship to the entire world of sentient beings.

This accords well with Garfield's employment of the term. He writes: "Bodhicitta is a complex psychological phenomenon. It is a standing motivational state with conative and affective dimensions. It centrally involves an altruistic aspiration, grounded in compassion, to cultivate oneself as a moral agent for the benefit of all beings" ("What is it like" 334-335). Moreover, this motivational state has associated obligations. It "demands the development of skills in moral perception, moral responsiveness, traits of character, insight into the nature of reality so deep that it transforms our way of seeing ourselves and others, and what we would call practical wisdom" ("What is it like" 334-335). Garfield finds evidence for this position as he parses Śāntideva's text. At the start of the *Bodhicaryāvatārā*, "Śāntideva begins by considering how, having developed aspirational bodhicitta, one cares for and nurtures the attitude; he then turns to how one develops the concentration required to maintain introspective awareness of one's own motivational and affective states" ("What is it like" 347). However, towards the end of the text we see a more poignant case for *bodhicitta* being a form of moral phenomenology. Garfield writes:

The final chapters of the text address the role of meditation in stabilizing the qualities and ways of seeing cultivated earlier, and finally the importance of a particular kind of wisdom as the foundation of the engaged bodhicitta that is the foundation of awakened life—that is, the ability to see all phenomena—including oneself, that to which one is

intimately related, and other moral agents—as empty of inherent existence, as interdependent and as impermanent. For Śāntideva, the culmination of ethical practice is a cognitively rich perceptual skill—a new way of experiencing oneself in the world. (“What is it like” 347-348)

Thus, *bodhicitta* not only has conative and affective dimensions but also a *perceptual* or *experiential* dimension, and the cultivation of *bodhicitta* involves reworking one’s *default perceptual mode* to orient it towards seeing oneself and all phenomena as interdependent, impermanent, and ultimately empty of intrinsic existence. The close relationship between this cognitively rich perceptual mode and the affective and conative states it can engender is what makes moral phenomenology unique amongst ethical theories.

It is also worth looking at some of the specific passages Garfield uses in his argument for moral phenomenology as the dominant moral theory in Buddhism. The passages are varied and come from different points of the text, but are all connected by a prioritization of *experience*, a *cultivation of attention*, and a *perceptual shift*. For instance, he quotes the first chapter’s mention of *bodhicitta* as a core source of the experiential orientation of morality in Śāntideva’s work:

If they were to generate bodhicitta, in an instant,
the destitute who are tightly bound in saṃsāra
would be proclaimed as the children of the *tathāgatas*, and
will be paid reverence by all those in the worlds of humans and gods.²³

²³ Tib. *byang chub sems skyes gyur na skad cig gis / 'khor ba'i btson rar bsdams pa'i nyam thag rnam / bde gshegs rnam kyi sras zhes brjod bya zhing / 'jig rten lha mir bcas pas phyag byar 'gyur*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatara of Śāntideva* (4). For an alternate translation, see: Garfield “What is it like” (345).

Such positioning of *bodhicitta* as a supreme quality evidences the importance of having a correct *experience* or *perception* of the world in Buddhist settings, especially given how *bodhicitta* was earlier defined as a perceptual set with conative and affective dimensions. Garfield also points to the following passages that state how misdeeds stem from a fundamental misperception of reality:

Therefore, because I have not realized
that I myself am temporary,
through delusion, attachment, and anger,
I have done many kinds of evil deeds.²⁴

Those who desire to protect their training
fully concentrating themselves, they should protect their
mind.

If one does not protect this mind,
No possibility exists for them to protect their training.²⁵

Because one lets free the elephant of the mind
it is the cause of injury and unending torment.
Untamed, intoxicated great elephants
do not cause as much harm as this.
If the rope of thorough mindfulness
firmly binds the elephant of the mind
all fear will cease to exist and

²⁴ Tib. *de ltar bdag ni glo bur zhes / bdag gis rtogs par ma gyur pas / gti mug chags dang zhe sdang gis / sdig pa rnam pa du ma byas*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā of Śāntideva* (23). For an alternate translation, see: Garfield “What is it like” (346).

²⁵ Tib. *bslab pa gsrung bar ‘dod pa yis / ra btu bsgrims nas sems bsrung ste / sems ‘di bsrung bar ma byas na / bslab pa bsrung bar yod mi nus*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā of Śāntideva* (52). For an alternate translation, see: Garfield “What is it like” (346).

all virtue will arrive in one's hands.²⁶

Finally, there are clear passages in the *Bodhicaryāvatārā* that point to an experiential understanding of Buddhist philosophy as the means to overcome negative states of mind, achieve liberation from *duḥkha*, and perfect morality.

All of these aspects
were taught by the Muni for the purpose of wisdom.
If, therefore, one wishes to be cleansed of *duḥkha*
and desires peace, they should generate wisdom.²⁷

Because one has not realized emptiness,
a mental state which has ceased will later appear again
just as when one sits in nonconceptual meditation.
For that reason, one must meditate on emptiness.²⁸

Pride, which is the cause of suffering,
will increase as a result of confusion regarding the self.
One may ask if that process is irreversible,

²⁶ Tib. *sems kyi glang po yan btang bas / mnar med gnod pa byed pa ltar / glang chen ma thul myos pa yis / 'di na de 'dra'l gnod mi byed // kun nas dran pa'i thag pa yis / sems kyi glang po dam btags na / 'jigs pa thams cad med 'gyur zhing / dge ba thams cad lag tu 'ong*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā of Śāntideva* (52-53). For an alternate translation, see: Garfield "What is it like" (350).

²⁷ Tib. *yan lag 'di dag thams cad ni / thub pa shes rab don du gsungs / de yi phyir na sdug bsngal dag / zhe bar 'dod pas shes rab skyed*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā of Śāntideva* (185). For an alternate translation, see: Garfield "What is it like" (353).

²⁸ Tib. *stong nyid dang ni bral ba'i sems / 'gags pa slar yang skye 'gyur te / 'du shes med pa'i snyoms 'dug bzhin / dus na stong nyid bsgom par bya*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā of Śāntideva* (197). For an alternate translation, see: Garfield "What is it like," (354).

but, to this end, the meditation on selflessness is supreme.²⁹

Thus, Garfield's emphasis on the *Bodhicaryāvatārā* in both "What is it like to be a bodhisattva?" and *Engaging Buddhism* is well founded. In it, we find compelling evidence for categorizing the ethics of Śāntideva and later Buddhists who follow his work as a moral phenomenology based on his prioritization of *bodhicitta* as a religious ideal, his diagnosis of a misapprehension of reality as the source of negative states of mind and misdeeds, and his prescription of an experiential understanding of Buddhist ethics as the means to overcome *duḥkha* oneself, help others do the same, and act ethically to that end.

Defining Buddhist Moral Phenomenology

With Garfield's foundational work thoroughly parsed, we can now posit a clear definition of moral phenomenology in the Tibetan Buddhist system. Moral phenomenology is an ethical theory centered on the *experience* of an individual where *perception* and *affect* are the loci of moral development. It rests on the assertion that action stems from an individual's experience of the world and that to change one's experience of the world is to change one's behavior. It entails a radical change of an individual's moral behavior by going directly to the root of *experience* rather than refining one's ability to conduct a moral calculus or developing secondary qualities that themselves emerge from the grounds of experience. As such, moral phenomenology primes an actor to respond *spontaneously* to situations as they present themselves in a manner which accords with their

²⁹ Tib. *sdug bsngal rgyu yi nga rgyal ni / bdag tu rmongs pas 'phel bar 'gyur / de las kyang bzlog med ce na / bdag med sgom pa mchog yin no*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā of Śāntideva* 205. For an alternate translation, see: Garfield "What is it like" (354).

broader realization of their situatedness in myriad relationships, communities, ecosystems, and so forth.

Key to this kind of ethical theory is what we might call a *default perceptual mode*. This is the lens through which we see the world and involves both our bare sense experience and, more importantly, the way we label and process that sense data through our acquired conceptual frameworks. It is the way in which we experience the world as it happens, in the present, without reflection. And while it certainly involves concepts, these concepts and their associated affective states are instantly applied as indivisible from the sensory experience itself. Important to my employment of this term is how default perceptual modes are *fluid* in that they are not biologically determined but adapt to the conceptual contexts an individual develops in. These default perceptual modes can also be influenced throughout one's life and in dependence upon the conceptual frameworks one encounters and subscribes to.

This is a key idea in the Buddhist tradition (though not explicitly referenced) and is essential to its project of transforming the *duḥkha*-permeated experience of an ordinary being to a liberated experience of a buddha. In Tibetan Buddhism, the fundamental cause of *duḥkha* is *avidyā*,³⁰ which can be translated as ignorance, misapprehension, or not (properly) seeing. It is our misapprehension of ourselves and of phenomena writ large that leads us to cling to them as permanent, independent entities, and it is this clinging that causes *duḥkha*. This *avidyā* characterizes the way in which ordinary sentient beings (i.e., those who have not progressed on the Buddhist path) perceive the world. We feel as though we have a self, and we interact with phenomena as though they are independent entities. However, under analysis, no self is to be found amongst the *skandhas* that

³⁰ Tib. *ma rig pa*.

make us up,³¹ and phenomena are found to have no substantial, independent essence. Therefore, the solution to *duḥkha* in many schools of Tibetan Buddhism is to correct this fundamental misapprehension of self and of phenomena. Such an approach involves installing a particular *ontological view* (in this case, *anātman* or *śūnyatā*) as one's default perceptual mode, overriding the earlier default perceptual mode that led to undesired outcomes. As a result, an intimate relationship between ontology and ethics becomes apparent. Similarly, a moral phenomenological approach to ethics takes *avidyā* as the root of unwholesome actions and seeks to refine an individual's ethics through a reorientation of their default perceptual mode via the introduction of different ontological positions. As such, there is also a similarly intimate relationship between ontology and ethics to the point where the experiential realization of particular ontological positions is *itself* ethical.

When we take a look at this articulation of moral phenomenology as a whole, there are both similarities and differences with the term's use in western philosophical settings. Clearly Kriegel's first definition of moral phenomenology as "moral philosophy in the phenomenological tradition" (1) does not reflect moral phenomenology in Buddhist contexts since we are not operating in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and so forth. However, his second definition, being "the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life" (1) does reflect some aspects of Buddhist moral phenomenology. The study of our subjective moral experience is of course an aspect of Buddhist moral phenomenology, but what is more important is how this moral experience is

³¹ Tib. *phung po*. This is the fundamental claim of *anātman* or *bdag med*: we feel like we have a Self, but when we analyze the aggregates (*skandhas*) which make up the Self, no Self can be found. The *skandhas* are form, feeling, perception, mental activity, and consciousness. Our sense of self only emerges when all of these are together, but when we analyze each individually, we are unable to locate where the Self is and, hence, our sense of self dissipates.

developed and transformed through a curriculum of philosophical study and meditative practice. Thus, unlike Horgan and Timmons who see moral phenomenology as a tool for interrogate the validity of other ethical systems, Buddhist moral phenomenology finds itself nearer Dreyfus and Dreyfus's articulation of ethical comportment and moral expertise. Ethical comportment reflects a spontaneous appropriate response to situations that, in Dreyfus and Dreyfus's estimation, results in an ethic of care. This present articulation of Buddhist moral phenomenology (drawing from Garfield) fits this picture quite neatly although, unlike ethical comportment, it spotlights the role of perception, concepts, and experience as the areas for moral development.

Further Developments

Aitken on Perception and Buddhist Moral Phenomenology

The first academic work to expand on Garfield's moral phenomenology was Daniel Aitken's 2017 PhD dissertation titled "Experience and Morality: Buddhist Ethics as Moral Phenomenology." The dissertation reads as a detailed unpacking of Garfield's work in its assessment and dismissal of virtue ethics and consequentialism, but includes two key additions to moral phenomenological theory: (1) an account of perception and its role in the ethical project of moral phenomenology, and; (2) a decisive identification of the moral problem and its solution in a moral phenomenological framework. These two points fill out Garfield's work and take it from the realm of speculative interpretation to formal ethical theory with clear problems, methods, mechanisms of action, and results.

The first of these, an account of perception, is integral to the moral phenomenological project. Moral phenomenology is directed at a transformed one's perception or experience of the world, so a precise

understanding of perception and its relationship to ethics is an asset to moral phenomenological theory. Central to Aitken's discussion is how perception is "not a passive process," but is instead "always accompanied by other mental activity, which makes it a part of an active interpretive process" (113). This somewhat contrasts western notions of perception wherein the object perceived presents itself to our senses as raw data. In the Buddhist context, "perception is always accompanied by other mental activities that shape the context of our experience" (117). He grounds this claim in Asaṅga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya* and its classification of mental actions. The first of these groupings are the "Five Constantly Operative Mental Processes"³² which accompany each mental event and are hence integral to all accounts of perception. They are: (1) feeling;³³ (2) ascertainment;³⁴ (3) intention;³⁵ (4) contact,³⁶ and; (5) attention.³⁷ Together, these five factors form the basis of all experience and are therefore the grounds from which action stems. These mental factors are therefore also the realm in which moral phenomenology operates. Aitken writes:

For these Buddhist psychologists, these five mental activities are essential properties of awareness, and without all five, experience would be incomplete . . . An appreciation of how contact, feeling, ascertainment, intention, and attention operate to create our experience of the world reveals how the way we take up the world is central to Buddhist ethical practice. (119-120)

³² Tib. *kun 'gro lnga*.

³³ Tib. *tshor ba*. I follow Aitken's translation of the terms here, but this is also commonly translated as "sensation."

³⁴ Tib. *'du shes*. Also commonly translated as "perception."

³⁵ Tib. *sems pa*.

³⁶ Tib. *reg pa*.

³⁷ Tib. *yid la byed pa*.

He also provides a rough schema for how these mental factors operate in the Buddhist tradition:

The function of contact is not simply to provide the impetus for bare sensory perception, but to provide the ground for feeling. Feeling gives experience an affective dimension. Every moment of experience is colored as pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant, which gives rise to the most basic form of psychological motivations described in Buddhist texts as the movement of the mind to or away from objects. That we are attracted to some things and repulsed by other things has obvious implications for Buddhist action theory and ethics. These feelings are not simply reactions to pre-existing characteristics; they help form and are formed by ascertainment. Ascertainment, the way we think about objects, involves a process of interpretation and classification. The way we think about objects and the way we feel about the contents of our experience affects where we place out intention and attention. (157)

Thus, because of these factors which are involved in each moment of perception, he claims that our perceptual engagement with the world is charged with moral significance.

While Aitken narrows his ethical focus to these five constantly operative mental processes, the way in which these processes are worked with to effect ethical change is still somewhat ambiguous. Contact, as the mechanism for bare sensory perception, leaves little room for manipulation and is hence an unlikely location for enacting moral phenomenological transformation. Similarly, attention is the faculty which directs perception towards particular internal or external objects, and while what we perceive can certainly influence our long-term behavior, neither the proponents of moral phenomenology nor the Mahāyāna writers they

derive their theory from advocate for a change in how one pays attention to internal and external phenomena (outside of practical meditative contexts).³⁸ Thus, we are left with feeling, ascertainment, and intention as the mental factors potentially involved in moral phenomenological transformation.

If we briefly return to Garfield's presentation, we can recall his placement of *bodhicitta* at the apex of the moral phenomenological system and his definition of *bodhicitta* as "a standing motivational state with conative and affective dimensions" which "centrally involves an altruistic aspiration, grounded in compassion, to cultivate oneself as a moral agent for the benefit of all beings" (334-335). Thus, it may seem that the conation of intention and the affect of feeling are viable candidates for moral phenomenology. But is this the case? In Garfield's view, which he constructs from the views of a plurality of Mahāyāna thinkers, compassion is "a direct result of a genuine appreciation of the essencelessness and interdependence of all sentient beings" (341-342). In other words, this conative and affective mode emerges from a particular ontological view. It emerges from the way one *directly understands, labels, conceptualizes, or frames* one's perceptual experience. Thus, while we may certainly make ethical progress by attending to the perceptual processes of intention and feeling, the crux of moral phenomenological transformation lies elsewhere: in ascertainment.

What Aitken translates as ascertainment is the Tibetan term *'du shes* which, of course, can be translated a number of ways. Perhaps its most common English translation is *discrimination*, but it also can be used to refer to conception, apprehension, consideration, discernment, recogni-

³⁸ That said, the moral implications of mindfulness and attention's role therein have recently been forwarded by Garfield. Nonetheless, Aitken's presentation of the five constantly operative mental processes comes to this conclusion and hence I will follow his thought in the present discussion. See: Garfield, "Mindfulness and Ethics."

tion, and perception. Each of these describes a particular kind of perception in which things are set apart, labeled, and understood as discrete entities with particular characteristics. It is the faculty which allows us to see the world in particular ways and is the means through which we arrive at the aforementioned “genuine appreciation of the essencelessness and interdependence of all sentient beings” (Garfield, “What is it like” 341-342). Therefore, I claim that it is in our ascertainment or discrimination that we find the ability to enact a moral phenomenology. Through changing the structure of our discriminating awareness, we change our core experience of ourselves and all phenomena. Through changing our ascertainment, we change our conative and affective approaches to the world and, hence, change our entire ethical comportment. Ascertainment is inextricable from contact, attention, feeling, and intention, and changing the way we discriminate between or conceptualize phenomena affects our entire mode of experience. Therefore, it is in discrimination or ascertainment that we find the locus for moral phenomenological transformation.

While Aitken does not single out ascertainment in his presentation of moral phenomenology, the way in which he treats our fundamental ethical problem lends itself to this conclusion. This decisive identification of the primary ethical problem in the moral phenomenological framework is the second major contribution Aitken makes to the project of Buddhist moral phenomenology. He grounds his argument for the utility of moral phenomenology in Āryadeva’s³⁹ *Four Hundred Verses*⁴⁰ in which, as Aitken writes, “Āryadeva maintains that confusion pervades vice, and, conversely, a correct view undermines vice and accords with virtue” (159). For Aitken (and, in his interpretation, for Śāntideva and Āryadeva as well), immorality is rooted in a mistaken perception of reality. To be more precise, Aitken follows Āryadeva in claiming that our perception of

³⁹ Tib. *phags pa lha*.

⁴⁰ Tib. *rnal ‘byor spyod pa bzhi brgya pa*.

phenomena as “permanent, pure, pleasurable, and essentially existent” are the root causes of vices “such as fear, attachment, desire, and pride” (166). These four mistaken characteristics are how phenomena appear to ordinary individuals, but they are the exact opposite of how phenomena actually exist according to the Buddha. They are the inverse of the “marks of existence,” a foundational Buddhist concept which is primarily found in Maitreya’s *The Foundation for Yoga Practitioners* in the Tibetan tradition. This text states that all phenomena are marked by: (1) impermanence; (2) a lack of an independent, pure Self; (3) *duḥkha* or dissatisfaction, and; (4) empty of an independent essence (Kragh 144). Thus, immorality emerges from a misperception of reality and the affects of fear, desire, and so forth that accompany it.

It is perhaps then unsurprising that the solution to this problem is a reorientation of one’s perception or “the elimination of unhealthy mental states through resolving the confusion that pervades them” (Aitken 177). As Aitken writes: “Since confusion is the mental state that pervades and fosters vice, both the epistemological and moral antidote is wisdom, accurate metaphysical knowledge” (160). Rather than perceive phenomena as permanent, pleasurable, and essentially existent, seeing them as impermanent, suffused with *duḥkha*, and empty of inherent existence will guard against desire, fear, anger, and other negative emotions which lend themselves to immoral behavior. Interestingly, on top these obvious antidotes, Āryadeva also points to dependent arising as a view that overcomes mistaken perception. Aitken points to a passage from his *Four Hundred Verses* which states:

Just as touch exists in the skin,
delusion exists in all mental states;
therefore, by overcoming delusion,
all afflictive emotions are also overcome.

If one perceives interdependent origination,
 delusion will not arise.
 Therefore, through all the diligence applied to this,
 that discourse should be explained as it is.⁴¹

This passage tells us the impetus for Āryadeva writing his *Four Hundred Verses* in the first place. An astute understanding of dependent arising or emptiness is necessary for reorienting one's perception to the reality of phenomena and, in turn, of reorienting one's ethical behavior through overcoming afflictive emotions. This emphasis is reinforced later in his work where Aitken quotes him saying: "It is preferable to slip even from ethics than from [proper view] in any way. Through ethics one goes to heaven; through view one goes to the highest state" (180). These kinds of strong statements are what leads Aitken to the conclusion that "Śāntideva's and Āryadeva's Buddhist ethical practice is the development of metaphysical knowledge and epistemic accuracy" (179). Thus, Aitken provides strong support for a moral phenomenological interpretation of Buddhist ethics and a strong case for knowledge acquisition, through its ability to restructure one's ascertainment or discrimination, as the primary means of changing one's perception and, hence, behavior.

Locke on Moral Phenomenology and Lojong

Buddhist moral phenomenology is further developed in Jessica Locke's article "Training Your Mind, Transforming Your World" which seeks to "analyze the pedagogical mechanisms of the Tibetan Buddhist *lojong* ("Mind-

⁴¹ Tib. *lus la lus dbang ji bzhin du / gti mug kun la gnas gyur te / de phyir nyon mongs thams cad kyang / gti mug bcom pas bcom par 'gyur // rten cing 'brel par 'byung ba ni / mthong na gti mug 'byung mi 'gyur / de phyir 'bad pas kun gyis 'dir / gtam de kho na bsnyad par bya*. Sourced from: Aitken 177.

Training”)⁴² tradition as a heuristic for understanding the highly ambitious project of moral-phenomenological training” (251). In doing so, Locke offers a practical addendum to Garfield’s theorization by means of the Tibetan system of *lojong*. In her reading, *lojong* seeks to exploit how our perception, experience, and conduct in the world are dependently arisen and how, by providing different causes and conditions, we can change our experience and our subsequent conduct in a directed, intentional way. She writes: “Because the world ‘speaks to us on the topic of our self-grasping,’ we can actually use appearances and our responses to them to access the self-grasping that underlies those responses” (254). To this end, she conducts a close reading of Atiśa’s⁴³ *Seven Points of Mind Training*⁴⁴ as “a paragon of the *lojong* genre” (252) to demonstrate the utility of this approach to moral phenomenological praxis. This text consists of fifty-nine aphorisms which “give instruction in two related practice of mind training: two aphorisms offer instruction in a meditation practice called *tonglen*, and the rest are pithy ethical instructions meant for contemplation” (Locke 255). Thus, she unpacks these two practices with a particular attention to how they can be used to put moral phenomenology into practice.

Locke writes that in the practice of *tonglen*⁴⁵ we find a direct method for exchanging self and other which she calls “a key antidote to the self-cherishing attitude” that gives rise to unethical behavior (256). To put it briefly, *tonglen* is a meditative practice in which one visualizes breathing in the *duḥkha* of others in the form of thick black smoke and exhaling one’s own good merit to others in the form of a luminous white smoke. One takes upon oneself (*len*) the suffering of others and gives

⁴² Tib. *blo sbyong*.

⁴³ Tib. *a ti sha*, or *jo bo rje*.

⁴⁴ Tib. *theg pa chen po blo sbyong don bdun ma zhugs so*. These were collected and compiled by the 12th century scholar Geshe Chekhawa Yeshe Dorje (Tib. *dge shes ‘chad kha ba ye shes rdo rje*).

⁴⁵ Tib. *gtong len*.

(*gtong*) one's own conditions for happiness to others. According to Locke, this practice is intended to radically undermine our dualistic experience of positive/negative and self/other in order to reorient and reprioritize our experience of the world. She writes:

Tonglen is not framed as a method for accomplishing a temporary feeling state, such as dialing back a stress response or even attaining a state of meditative absorption. The kind of change wrought by *tonglen* practice is meant to unseat the fixed categories of “self” and “other.” That is, it does not treat certain emotional or physiological states but rather engages with the deeper moral-phenomenological structures that give rise to them. (257)

Ordinarily, we are accustomed to wanting happiness for ourselves and pushing unhappiness off onto others. In *tonglen*, however, the practitioner actively inverts this equation to rework their intentions and subsequent behavior. Implicit here is the claim that immoral behavior emerges out of an improperly placed concern for oneself over others. In the Buddhist tradition, our clinging and aversion are the primary means through which we engage the world and are the primary means through which our self-centeredness displays itself. Thus, actively working against our clinging to happiness and aversion to unhappiness restructures our entire experience and reorients our behavior to the wellbeing of others. This is what Locke calls the “the skillful means of the practice” because of how it prompts individuals “to have an affective experience that goes against her existing habituation” (258). She grounds her interpretation in Jamgön Kongtrul's⁴⁶ commentary on the *Seven Points of Mind Training* titled “The Highway to Enlightenment”⁴⁷ about which she writes:

⁴⁶ Tib. *'jam mgon kong sprul*.

⁴⁷ Tib. *byang chub gzhung lam*.

[Jamgön Kongtrul] is saying that we should practice feeling pleased by an experience—or the idea of an experience—that is, by all conventional standards, not enjoyable. The practitioner is tasked with uprooting the way she experiences misfortune, attack, sickness, loss—all the vicissitudes of life that, by conventional logic, she strenuously avoids. (257)

In other words, at the core of *tonglen* is an *experiential* shift. *Tonglen* is not aimed at cultivating particular virtues or momentarily feeling a particular way. Rather, it is about completely altering our experience of ourselves and of others. As we saw earlier, Garfield’s main source for the moral phenomenological argument is Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatārā*—a text which is regarded as one of the first places in which we find a practice of equalizing and exchanging self and other in this particular “giving and taking” way.⁴⁸ It is therefore not surprising that the practice of *tonglen* fits into the framework of moral phenomenology quite neatly.

The other aspect of lojong that Locke unpacks is the contemplation of pithy aphorisms. Outside of the two aphorisms that deal with *tonglen*, the rest of the aphorisms in Seven Points of Mind Training “present pithy ethical teachings intended for intensive contemplation practice” (258). In this context, contemplation is the “meditative repetition of an aphorism until it has ‘mixed with the mind’ of the practitioner (to use a traditional locution), giving it a pre-predictive resonance that becomes a part of the practitioner’s way of thinking without the need to explicitly call forth its instructions” (258). In Locke’s presentation, contemplation or meditation

⁴⁸ For a thorough discussion of this origin, see chapter three of Julia Stenzel’s dissertation titled “Compassion and the Roots of *Tonglen* Meditation in the *Bodhicaryāvatārā* (BCA).” Khensur Jampa Tegchok makes a separate claim and traces *tonglen*’s origins back further to Nāgārjuna’s *Ratnāvalī* (235). Nonetheless, the existence of giving and taking practice in the *Bodhicaryāvatārā* makes its applicability to the project of moral phenomenology quite strong.

thus becomes the principal means of altering our default perceptual mode and actually practicing moral phenomenology. She describes its method of operation as follows:

Contemplation practice brings a teaching—which may have initially seemed inaccessible or foreign for its contrast to our ordinary orientations to the world—into the intimacy of a practitioner’s inner life. By repeatedly returning to a deep, reflective consideration of a pithy teaching, the practitioner stands to develop an intra-personal relationship with a novel view. Eventually, the object of contemplation becomes part of what structures the practitioner’s experience rather than something to which she consciously applies her mind. (259)

To return to the aforementioned “Five Constantly Operative Mental Processes,” we might say that contemplation works to manipulate our discrimination or ascertainment such that the way in which we conceptualize our perceptual experiences (which is itself a part of perceptual process) changes to accord with these repeated aphorisms. Contemplation is the important means by which we turn discursive knowledge (i.e., an intellectual understanding of these aphorisms) into a direct perceptual experience of these aphorisms. As Locke writes:

The practice of memorizing and repeating this aphorism again and again is not a matter of trying to “convince” oneself of a counter-intuitive “truth.” Rather, this kind of contemplation creates a bit of play in the terms of the practitioner’s experience of her world, cultivating an ability to loosen the structures through which she has that world, and unweaving some of the seamlessness of how it appears to her. This is how contemplation practice moves from the discursive level of a thought or idea to a non-discursive

level of experience; it introduces a slightly oblique angle into the “factuality” of one’s experience of the world. (259-260)

Locke limits her discussion here to *lojong* and the aphorisms attributed to Atiśa in particular, and hence does not draw out the implications and applications of this role of meditation beyond this context. However, as we will see, meditation plays a key role in the moral phenomenological project both inside and outside of the *lojong* system. Nonetheless, in the cases of both *tonglen* and the contemplation of aphorisms, Locke provides solid ground for the argument that *lojong* can be read as a practical arm of Buddhist moral phenomenology. In her words, it is “an accessible, clear, down-to-earth guide meant to effect a profound moral-phenomenological transformation of one’s inner life” that is geared towards “ordinary kinds of people, not yogic adepts or people of great scholarly training” (255).

Further Considerations

Vajrayāna’s Samaya Vows as Moral Phenomenology

There are some further pieces of evidence not touched upon by prior scholars that make the case for a moral phenomenological interpretation of Buddhist ethics even more compelling. Neither Garfield nor Aitken nor Locke touch upon Vajrayāna⁴⁹ Buddhism but instead keep their discussion to Mahāyāna texts and thinkers. However, in the Vajrayāna we have clear evidence that ethics are of the form of a moral phenomenology as well. By looking specifically at the Samaya Vows, we can easily draw this ethical

⁴⁹ Tib. *rdo rje theg pa*.

classification of moral phenomenology across each of the three cycles of Buddhism in Tibetan doxography.⁵⁰

The Samaya⁵¹ Vows are pledges one takes upon receiving initiation into the mandala of a particular tantric deity in Vajrayāna practice. Once given the ritualized empowerment⁵² to practice a particular form of deity⁵³ yoga, one is required to uphold these vows and protect them from deterioration. There are different variations on these vows,⁵⁴ but the majority of the formulations consist of fourteen root downfalls and eight gross downfalls which constitute a breach of one's pledge.⁵⁵ For this discussion, the root downfalls are more relevant than the gross downfalls, so we will limit our discussion to former. In Tibetan systems of highest yoga tantra, the fourteen root downfalls are:

1. Disparaging the lama.
2. Transgressing the words of the sugatas.
3. Speaking ill of one's dharma brothers and sisters.
4. Abandoning love for all sentient beings.
5. Abandoning bodhicitta.

⁵⁰ Being *hīnayāna*, *mahāyāna*, *vajrayāna*. Tib. *theg pa dman pa*, *theg pa chen po*, *rdo rje theg pa*.

⁵¹ Tib. *sa ma ya*.

⁵² Tib. *dbang*.

⁵³ Tib. *yi dam*.

⁵⁴ Such as the unique Kālacakra vows which have their own series of downfalls that constitute breaches in the Kālacakra pledge. Tsongkhapa goes over these in his *Fruit Clusters of Siddhis*, but we will instead focus on the more universal downfalls that are shared amongst the other Highest Yoga Tantra systems. There were also disputes between scholars as to the nature and scope of these vows such as Vibhūticandra's rebuttal to Dragpa Gyaltzen's *Explanation of the Three Codes* (Tib. *rtsa ba'i ltung ba bcu bzhi pa'i 'grel pa*, on which Sakya Pandita based his important *Explanation of the Three Codes*) titled *Light Garland of the Three Codes*. For more about this particular dispute, see: Stearns (127–168).

⁵⁵ Tsongkhapa traces this division between “root downfalls” and “gross downfalls” back to the text *Vajrāvalī of Maṇḍala Rituals*. See: Tsongkhapa (87).

6. Disparaging the doctrine of one's own school or the dharma systems of others.
7. Sharing secret information to the uninitiated.
8. Treating one's aggregates (skandhas) with contempt.
9. Abandoning the view of natural purity and emptiness.
10. To only show affection to the wicked.
11. To conceptualize phenomena as actually existent.⁵⁶
12. Creating doubt in those who have faith.
13. Breaking the vows one has taken.
14. Disparaging women.⁵⁷

These fourteen can be categorized into downfalls of three kinds: body, speech, and mind. To act discordant to the words of the *sugatas*⁵⁸ in the *sūtras*, to treat one's *skandhas* with contempt, to find friendship in those who are unwholesome, and to break vows one has taken (such as the five precepts) can all be seen to be actions of the body. To disparage one's teacher, disparage one's sangha, disparage dharma traditions, disparage women, share secret information to those uninitiated, and to introduce doubt to those who have faith can be seen to be actions of speech. Finally, to abandon love, abandon bodhicitta, abandon the view of emptiness, and see empty phenomena as actually existent are all actions of the mind. For the sake of our discussion on moral phenomenology, it is this last grouping that is the most important.

⁵⁶ This is a difficult point and is formulated differently in different texts. I follow the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra's* exposition which phrases this point as, "False imagination about what is inexorably empty." As quoted in Tsongkhapa (113).

⁵⁷ Phrased in my own words for clarity. Sourced from: *rta byangs "rdo rje theg pa rtsa ba'i ltung ba bsdus pa."* For an alternate translation, see: Aśvaghōṣa "Summary of the Root Downfalls."

⁵⁸ Tib. *bde bar gshegs pa*. An epithet of the Buddha meaning one who has "gone to bliss."

This is the case because it is here that we find moral weight given to particular *views* or *mental states*. Broadly speaking we might characterize consequentialism with actions and virtue ethics with personal qualities, each of which can claim the proscriptions against particular actions of body and speech as their own. However, this moral emphasis on not abandoning particular *views* (actions of mind) eludes both ethical formulations. Where it does fit quite neatly is in a moral phenomenological framework which prioritizes particular experiences or perceptual modes as its ethical emphasis. It deals with *ascertainment*, *discrimination* and the conceptual process that informs our perception of the world. These downfalls concerning the mind involve affective, conative, and cognitive/ perceptual dimensions which compel practitioners to take up and maintain a particular *experience* of the world lest they incur a root downfall.

Further, it would be useful to break down these four downfalls concerning the mind further in terms of the dimensions they address. The proscription against abandoning love for all sentient beings deals with the affect of a practitioner. We can easily make sense of this proscription even without any complex moral phenomenological analysis. Lovingkindness is a moral good found in every formation of Buddhism across time and space, so its inclusion here is unsurprising. The proscription against abandoning *bodhicitta* concerns the conation of a practitioner and similarly makes sense given the emphasis of *bodhicitta* in the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna. The final two proscriptions, however, get quite interesting. The admonition to not abandon the view of emptiness and to not conceptualize phenomena as actually existent concern themselves with how a practitioner understands the world, perceives phenomena, and experiences themselves in relation to others. In effect, these two proscriptions are an ethical appeal to *ontology*. Seeing oneself, others, and all phenomena as empty of inherent existence and not reifying external phenomena or internal experience as ultimately, intrinsically real are given moral weight in these downfalls. We can understand this being the case due to their

ability to guide an individual's experience to relatively sound behavior and ultimately desirable liberation.

At face value, this might not make a great deal of sense. Especially in western contexts, emptiness has a reputation of being nihilistic or world denying due to the connotations of the term in English, but this is largely a misconstrued presentation of the term. Emptiness is the common English translation of the Sanskrit word *śūnyatā* and the Tibetan term *stong pa nyid*. To make lexical sense in English, emptiness requires a qualifier as to what it is empty of. With this in mind, the clearest way to describe emptiness is as the emptiness of independent, intrinsic existence. The term *śūnyatā* and the philosophy surrounding it are some of the most hotly contested elements of Buddhism and a detailed historiography of these debates is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is nonetheless useful to highlight a key element of *śūnyatā* to understand the root downfall of abandoning its view: its commensurability with *pratītyasamutpāda*.

The equation of *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* can be traced back to at least the core text of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism (which focuses on the exposition of emptiness). In his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*,⁵⁹ Nāgārjuna⁶⁰ states:

Whatever arises in dependent origination,
that is explained to be emptiness.
That is a dependent designation,
so that itself is the middle way.

For that reason, there are no existing phenomena
which are not dependently arisen.

Therefore, there are no existent phenomena

⁵⁹ Tib. *dbu ma rtsa ba shes rab*.

⁶⁰ Tib. *klu sgrub*.

which are not empty.⁶¹

In other words, phenomena are empty because they arise in dependence on other phenomena. They are fully relative. They emerge from causes and conditions and are themselves causes and conditions for all other phenomena. Each aspect, quality, particle, and so forth that constitutes a particular phenomenon is entirely interdependent. There is absolutely no essence or individuality that stands apart from cause and condition. Because of this, they are empty of intrinsic, independent existence. This commensurability is such a crucial point that its realization caused the famous Tibetan scholar Tsongkhapa's enlightenment experience. After this experience, he wrote his *Praise for Dependent Relativity* in which he states:

“All of this is empty of essence” and
 “from this arises this effect”—
 these two determinations mutually
 do not obstruct but assist one another.⁶²

Thus, it is only through the emptiness of independent existence that phenomena can dependently arise, and it is because phenomena arise in interdependence that they are fundamentally empty of any intrinsic identity. It is for this reason that we can read the proscription against abandoning the view of emptiness as an ethical maxim. To hold emptiness as one's view is to hold the profound interconnectedness of all phenomena as one's view, and this has important implications on how one acts

⁶¹ Tib. *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba gang / de ni stong pa nyid du bshad / de ni brten nas gdags pa ste / de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin no // gang phyir rten 'byung ma tin pa'i / chos 'gal yod pa ma yin pa / de phyir stong pa ma yin pa'i / chos 'ga' yod pa ma yin no*. Sourced from: Nāgārjuna (159).

⁶² Tib. *'di kun ngo bos stong ba dang / 'di las 'di 'bras 'byung ba yi / nges pa gnyis po phan tshun du / gegs med par ni grogs byed pa*. Excerpted from: *tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa* (1995: 263). For an alternate translation, see: Lobsang Gyatso and Woodhouse (4).

in the world. It is for this reason that we find a proscription against abandoning the view of emptiness in the list of downfalls where it is given moral weight.

The Ethical Implications of Śūnyatā-Karuṇā-Garbhaṃ

This leads to another characteristic commonly ascribed to *śūnyatā* which is especially relevant to our discussion on moral phenomenology: its ability to elicit compassion in those who directly experience the view. Again, if we take emptiness as some sort of nihilistic absence then this claim would require a lot of explanation. However, understanding emptiness as being synonymous with dependent origination helps contextualize the claim and helps posit its validity. The relationship between emptiness and compassion is most clearly made in the poetic Sanskrit phrase *śūnyatā-karuṇā-garbhaṃ*. In Tibetan, this reads as *stong nyid snying rje'i snying po can*, which Robert Thurman says, “may be the most beautiful phrase ever in Tibetan” (111). He translates the phrase as “voidness is the womb of compassion” (111), but a clearer translation of the Tibetan might read “emptiness is endowed with an essence of compassion.” In either case, compassion is seen as the result of a genuine appreciation of emptiness. Thurman sources this phrase back to Nāgārjuna’s *Ratnāvalī*⁶³ which indeed includes this phrase in its discussion of the different kinds of teachings the Buddha taught to different kinds of beings.⁶⁴ In this context, the phrase is typically translated as “having an essence of emptiness and compassion” (Hopkins,

⁶³ Tib. *rin chen phreng ba*.

⁶⁴ For the phrase in context, see: Hopkins *Nāgārjuna’s Precious Garland*, (218). The full Tibetan verse is as follows: *kha cig la ni gnyis mi bten / zab mo khu 'khrig can 'jigs pa / stong nyid snying rje'i snying po can / byang chub bsgrub pa kha cig la'o*.

Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland 147)⁶⁵ but in isolation (as Thurman takes it) it points to a direct relationship between emptiness and compassion. The phrase also appears in Sakya Pandita's *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes* (Tib. *sdom pa gsum gyi rab ru dbye ba*) where, in this context, its meaning is closer to that of Thurman's than in the *Ratnāvalī*.⁶⁶ In Sakya Pandita's text, the phrase *stong nyid snying rje'i snying po* is indeed a phrase unto itself and gets translated by Jared Douglas Rhoton as "emptiness which has as its essence compassion" (40). Again, when we understand the emptiness of phenomena as synonymous with the radical interconnection of all things, it makes sense that it has an essence of compassion. If we were to directly (perceptually) appreciate how our happiness and dissatisfaction is bound in that of others and how every action of body, speech, and mind has profound far-reaching consequences on the wellbeing of others, we would naturally take up a conative mode that places a compassionate concern for others as our central concern.

I would argue that the discourse around this phrase is perhaps the greatest single piece of evidence for a moral phenomenological interpretation of Buddhist ethics. The centrality of emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism and the proscription against giving up its view in the Vajrayāna are inherently ethical because of their ability to reorient an individual to a compassionate affective and conative disposition. As Nāgārjuna and Sakya Pandita write, emptiness has the nature of compassion. Thus, to realize emptiness is to assume a compassionate disposition. This relationship

⁶⁵ Bhikshu Steve Carlier's translation is "its essence is emptiness and compassion" (Khen-sur Jampa Tegchok 323). In either case, the way Thurman and I translate the phrase in isolation differs from how Hopkins and Chodron translate the phrase in context. While I read Hopkins and Carlier's translations as appropriate in the context of the verse, I nonetheless stand by the utility of the phrase in isolation and its applicability to this discussion.

⁶⁶ Tib. *so so'i bslab par bya ba dang / sems bskyed pa yi gnad rnams dang / stong nyid snying rje'i snying po dang / rim pa gnyis kyi gsang tshig dang*. Sourced from: Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen (278).

between emptiness and compassion can also be found in the yogic traditions of India and Tibet. For example, one of Saraha's⁶⁷ texts on Mahāmudrā called the *Spontaneous Song of View, Meditation, Action, and Fruition*⁶⁸ includes the line:

The union of Mahāmudrā which transcends concepts,
bliss, clarity, non-thought, like space,
is vast and all-pervasive, the nature of great compassion.⁶⁹

While this passage does not explicitly reference emptiness, the way in which Saraha portrays the nature of mind as beyond concepts evokes a Prasaṅgika-Madhyamaka approach to phenomena.⁷⁰ This, he claims, is itself the nature of great compassion. When the fundamental state of one's mind is realized (as bliss, clarity, and non-thought), a vast compassion emerges alongside it. We can see a similar thing occurring in Mipham Rinpoche's Dzogchen text *The Essence of Mind*⁷¹. He writes:

Regarding that which is called “the nature of mind,”
it is the original naked face of the unconditioned *rigpa*⁷²
which must be recognized through the blessings and oral

⁶⁷ Tib. *mda' bsnun*.

⁶⁸ Tib. *lta sgom spyod pa 'bras bu'i do ha'i glu*.

⁶⁹ Tib. *zung 'jug phyag rgya blo 'das chen po ni / bde gsal mi rtog nam mkha lta bu ste / khyab cig rgya chen sying rje chen po'i ngor*. Sourced from: sa ra ha (425).

⁷⁰ Later in this verse Saraha alludes to how the view of Mahāmudrā goes beyond even the claims of Madhyamikas in his statement: “while clear, the fundamental state is free from all extreme and middling designations.” Extreme designations refer to those of eternalists and nihilists which Madhyamikas refute while middling (*dbu*) refers to the views of those Madhyamikas themselves. Thus, Saraha asserts that his view of Mahāmudrā goes beyond even that of the Prasaṅgika-Madhyamaka which is lauded as the highest philosophical position in Tibetan doxography. Tib. *gsal yang tha snyad mtha' dbus kun dang bral*. Sourced from: sa ra ha (425).

⁷¹ Tib. *sems kyi ngo bo*.

⁷² Pure awareness.

instructions of the lama.
 If one were to ask what this is like,
 it is empty of essence, without any fixed frame of refer-
 ence—
 it is naturally luminous, effortlessly established,
 it is all-pervading, unobstructed compassion,
 it is the pure awareness in which the three *kāyas* are in-
 separable.⁷³

In this Dzogchen context, we have a clearer equation of emptiness with compassion than in the verse from Saraha. The nature of one's mind is emptiness, luminosity, and compassion. We might say that, in this case, compassion is not an epiphenomenon of emptiness and instead assert an ontological claim that the nature of mind is itself empty of intrinsic existence and utterly compassionate. The Samaya Vows are more directly related to these yogic traditions than they are the Madhyamaka philosophical system, so it is fitting that in these yogic traditions we also find an equation being made between emptiness and compassion. Both the Mahāmudrā songs of Saraha and the Dzogchen work of Mipham Rinpoche help us understand why the proscription against abandoning the view of emptiness exists and help us make the case for an ethic of moral phenomenology in the Vajrayāna tradition as well.

It is for this very reason that we find contemporary Buddhists like Joanna Macy claiming that a “full recognition of the true nature of the self as interconnected with all life . . . is essential because it can serve *in lieu of* ethics and morality” (445). I would assert that it is not that this recog-

⁷³ Tib. *sems kyi ngo bo zhes bya ba ni / rig pa 'dus ma byas pa'l rang ngo rjen par bla ma'l byin rlabs zhugs shing man ngag gis ngo 'phrad pa la bya ba yin / de'i ngo bo ci lta bu zhe na / ng obo stong pa dmigs su med pa / rang bzhin gsal ba lhun gyis grub pa / thugs rje kun khyab 'gags pa med pa / sku gsum dbyer med kyi rig pa yin te*. Sourced from: mi pham rgya mtsho (369). For an alternate translation, see: Mipham Rinpoche “The Essence of Mind.”

inition serves *in lieu* of ethics and morality but that it itself is an ethic—moral phenomenology. If we were to understand moral phenomenology as it is exclusively articulated by Garfield, Aitken, and Locke, then Macy’s statement might be slightly mysterious. It may be evident that Macy is referring to a kind of moral phenomenology, but the relationship between interconnectedness and morality are not meaningfully spelled out in their formulations. However, when we look at how *śūnyatā* and *pratīyasamutpāda* are related in the Madhyamaka tradition and how these are seen to compel compassionate behavior in the Madhyamaka, Mahāmudrā, and Dzogchen traditions, we are able to paint a clearer picture of why Macy is making the above claim. Through analyzing the Samaya Vows, the phrase *śūnyatā-karuṇā-garbhaṃ*, and by looking at related ideas in the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions, we find the case for a moral phenomenological approach to ethics in the Vajrayāna tradition in addition to the Theravāda and Mahāyāna.

Problems (and Solutions) in Buddhist Moral Phenomenology

The Problem of Reclusion

Finally, there are two major problems that might easily come to mind when we talk about a moral phenomenological approach to ethics. Two of these have fairly straightforward solutions while one is slightly more ambiguous. They are what I term the problem of reclusion and the temporal issue, both of which the Tibetan tradition has resources for addressing. Both of these will be addressed in turn to further develop the argument for moral phenomenology as a legitimate approach to ethics in and out of Buddhist contexts.

To begin, we might look at this problem of reclusion. The problem can be stated thusly: if moral phenomenology centers around cultivating

a particular *experience* of the world, and *study* and *meditation* is required to this end (as per Aitken and Locke's claims), then it follows that an individual is motivated to remove themselves from the world until they are able to cultivate that experience. Of course, this might not be a universal prescription. However, the way in which ethical cultivation appears to be a disengaged process leads to this potential problem. Further, if one looks at the history of Buddhist practice (on which this moral phenomenology is built) one would see recluses, retreatants, and wandering vagabonds being lauded as exemplary practitioners. Obviously, one is unable to actively work to alleviate the *duḥkha* of individuals if they do not actually engage with them in the first place. However, in this moral phenomenological context, one is equally unable to do so if they do not have the sufficient realization to be able to skillfully act in accordance with the needs of others.

This problem comes up directly in the Buddhist literature. The most poignant narrative in which this problem of seclusion emerges is the famous story of Asaṅga⁷⁴ and Maitreya.⁷⁵ Asaṅga wished to meet and receive teachings from the bodhisattva Maitreya, so he entered retreat to meditate on compassion and acquire the requisite merit for Maitreya to appear to him. After twelve years in seclusion with not even an auspicious dream to tell him he was on the right track he became dejected and left his retreat in defeat. Then, as the Padmakara Translation Group relates:

He came across a starving dog, dragging its maggot-infested hind legs behind it. Despite the dog's attempts to bite him, Asaṅga was overwhelmed by compassion, and for want of anything to feed the dog, he cut a piece of flesh from his own leg for it to eat. He then turned his attention to its appalling wounds, but soon realized that all attempts

⁷⁴ Tib. *thogs med*.

⁷⁵ Tib. *byams pa*.

to remove the maggots might save the dog but would kill the maggots. The only solution he could think of was to use his tongue to coax the maggots out of the stinking flesh. Shutting his eyes, he bent down to do what he could to heal the animal, only to find himself licking the dust by the side of the road. When he opened his eyes, he found the dog had disappeared. In its place, before him stood Maitreya. (*A Feast of the Nectar* 14)

It was only after putting his compassion into *action* that Maitreya appeared, which indicates that compassion must be put into practice in order for it to have any meaningful effect. As related earlier, the mind of enlightened compassion, *bodhicitta*, is often presented as having two parts: aspiration and application. While in retreat Asaṅga was cultivating a *bodhicitta* of aspiration, but it is clear that this was not enough for Maitreya to validate his practice. It was only when aspiration was married with application that the initial aspiration had any meaningful effect. If *bodhicitta* is the desired end result of Buddhist moral phenomenology (as Garfield makes the case for), one must therefore go beyond mere aspiration and actually cultivate the applied side of *bodhicitta* else it remain undeveloped.

Interestingly, this suggests that a mental experience of compassion alone is ethically (and, in the Buddhist context, soteriologically) insufficient. Moral experience on this account must be reified through concrete actions of the body in order to establish its ethical validity and efficacy. At face value, this might be obvious. There is a clear difference between feeling compassion for a beggar as you pass them on the street and taking concrete actions to alleviate their poverty, whether that means giving them some subsistence directly or donating to a local shelter. However, a moral phenomenological account places more importance on experience than consequences or actions themselves. Thus, we might arrive at the conclusion that, in fact, the experience of compassion supersedes

the concrete action. Asaṅga's story, however, demonstrates how this experience must be enacted materially in order to be deemed ethical. Even if particular experiences are the focus of a moral phenomenological approach to ethics, they are only moral insofar as they inform, direct, and compel action. Rather than remain purely idealistic and portray the experience of compassion in a retreat setting as ethically sufficient, this story shows how moral experience must be one that is involved in the affairs of the world. One can only develop a full experience of bodhicitta if one develops both its aspiration and application, and one's phenomenological experience can only be deemed ethical insofar as it compels action. Thus, while short-term study and meditation retreats may be encouraged for developing an ethically sound experience of the world (as Aitken and Locke gesture towards), total long-term reclusion does not follow from a moral phenomenological approach to ethics and, actually, is advised against.

The Temporal Problem

A similar problem that arises in moral phenomenology is what I term the temporal issue. It can be articulated thusly: if moral phenomenology calls for the cultivation of a particular experience, and that experience takes time to accurately establish as one's default perceptual mode, then what is one to do prior to its establishment? Moral phenomenology is built from the claim that our behavior stems from our experience of the world and that if one establishes a particular experience with appropriate conative and affective dimensions, then ethical action will necessarily follow. However, this also means that, until we establish a perceptual/affective/conative mode akin to *bodhicitta*, if we simply allow our actions to naturally follow our deluded experience of the world, then we run the risk of acting in morally inappropriate ways. Even if one subscribes to this sort of ethic and is in the process of putting it into practice, their behavior will not yet

fully accord with the intellectual view (such as interdependence) that they are working to realize perceptually. Therefore, how is one supposed to guard against this unethical behavior en route to the actualization of a moral phenomenology?

Perhaps this limitation arises in other kinds of ethical formulations such as virtue ethics, wherein prior to perfecting a virtue such as generosity, an individual may still act out of greed. There is, however, a difference here. In virtue ethics, one develops their moral character through their *actions* and gradually acclimates to whatever is regarded as proper moral character (defined by particular virtues). In moral phenomenology, however, *action* is secondary to *view*. Thus, until one actually *experiences* the world in the right way one does not necessarily *conduct* themselves morally (and does not necessarily try to) at all. This is because the spontaneous compassionate conduct which moral phenomenology aspires to comes from the perceptual realization of a particular view. Therefore, installing that view as one's perceptual mode through study or meditation takes precedent to acting in specific ways and developing moral character.

If we look for Buddhist resources to address this limitation, we can find a useful response in Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī*. In the second section of the text, which addresses the causes of higher rebirth and enlightenment he writes:

Therefore, as long as one does not understand
this teaching which clears away clinging to the self,
Until then, devote oneself to the practice
of generosity, moral discipline, and patience.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Tib. *de phyir ji srid ngar 'dzin pa / sel ba'i chos 'di ma shes pa / de srid sbyin dang tshul khriims dang / bzod pa'i chos la gus par mdzod*. Sourced from: Hopkins Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland*, 183. For an alternate translation, see: Hopkins Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland*, 112.

This passage can be read in two ways. First, it can be read through the lens of soteriology whereby one must perform good deeds (generosity, patience, and so forth) if they have not yet realized emptiness in order to generate the requisite merit to actually eliminate grasping to the selfhood of persons and phenomena and achieve liberation. Second, and more pertinent to this discussion, it can also be read with moral phenomenology in mind. Ultimately, Buddhist moral phenomenology aims to reorient an individual to ethical behavior through the perceptual recognition of concepts like *anātman*, *pratīyasamutpāda*, and *śūnyatā*. However, Nāgārjuna here says that the development of generosity, discipline, and patience is necessary *until* these concepts experienced directly and one is able to appropriately carry themselves in the world with their resultant spontaneous and natural compassion. Essentially, Nāgārjuna is suggesting that one provisionally relies upon virtue ethics until they directly see the selflessness of phenomena which may serve in lieu of ethics these more specific, prescriptive ethics. Thus, following Nāgārjuna's quote, we may claim that these are *provisional* insofar as they are only relied upon up until one installs the correct view as their default mode of perceiving the world.

This idea of “provisional ethics” is not foreign to the Tibetan tradition but can be found in its understanding of the *three vows*.⁷⁷ The three vows are the monastic Prātimokṣa Vows,⁷⁸ the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Vows,⁷⁹ and Vajrayāna Samaya Vows,⁸⁰ respectively. As one progresses down the path of practice, one reprioritizes their ethical commitments such that Bodhisattva Vows take precedent over Prātimokṣa Vows, and

⁷⁷ Tib. *sdom gsum*.

⁷⁸ Tib. *so thar gyi sdom pa*.

⁷⁹ Tib. *byan chub sems dpa'i sdom pa*. A typical formulation of these vows are: “Sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to save them. The afflictive emotions are inexhaustible, I vow to extinguish them. The *dharma* is immeasurable, I vow to master it. Buddhahood is incomparable, I vow to attain it.”

⁸⁰ Tib. *gsang sngags kyi sdom pa*.

Samaya takes precedent over both. This reprioritization is most clearly seen in the Mahāyāna concept of *upāya* or skillful means which explicitly calls for the breaking of certain rules if done with a compassionate mind-set and is for the benefit of others. Passages in both Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatārā* and *Śikṣāsamuccaya* make this clear. Respectively, they state:

Having understood in that way,
a bodhisattva must continuously exert themselves for the
benefit of others.
The bodhisattva who sees this extensively and possesses
compassion
is granted the ability to do even what is prohibited.⁸¹

and

Deliberately transforming into sex workers
for the purpose of attracting the lustful,
having drawn them with the hook of desire,
the bodhisattva establishes them in the Buddha's primor-
dial wisdom.⁸²

Thus, both of these passages indicate how the necessity of liberating others from *duḥkha* takes precedent over abstaining from sexual conduct, alcohol, lying, and so forth as long as one has a compassionate motivation behind one's actions. One who has committed themselves to the bodhisattva path may break some of the conventional rules Buddhists follow if, in doing so, they contribute to the liberation of other beings.

⁸¹ Tib. *de ltar rig byas gzhan don la / rtak tu brtson par gnas par bya / thugs rje mnga' ba ring gzigs pas / bkag pa rnam kyang de la gnang*. Sourced from: *Bodhicaryāvatārā* of Śāntideva (73).

⁸² Tib. *sams bzhin smad 'tshong rnam su sgyur / skyes pa rnam ni bsdu ba'i phyir / 'dod chags lcags kyus drangs nas su / de dag sangs rgyas ye shes 'god*. Sourced from: zhi ba lha (419).

Moreover, as one progresses from the Prātimokṣa Vows through the Samaya Vows, the *moral theory* captured by the vows change as well. We might call Prātimokṣa Vows deontological (or, in Goodman's formulation, rule-consequentialist) since they give clear rules one must follow and are more concerned with the rules themselves than the consequences of these actions or the virtues they develop. Bodhisattva Vows work directly on one's conative mode and comportment to practice and are directly related to the *pāramitās* and *upāya* which can easily be characterized as dealing with virtue ethics and consequentialism respectively. Finally, Samaya Vows deal with actions of body, speech, and mind, but are also uniquely concerned with *experience*. The proscription against abandoning emptiness is an admonition against straying from a particular *experience* of the world which motivates one to act in a particular (compassionate) manner.

Thus, in the case of the three vows, we might say that, throughout the course of their study and practice, individuals in the monastic Tibetan (Vajrayāna) tradition move from a deontological approach to ethics to a virtue ethics or consequentialist approach before establishing a moral phenomenological approach to ethics. We saw a similar formulation in Dreyfus and Dreyfus's description of "moral expertise," wherein an individual begins by adhering to maxims such as "do not lie" before subsequently progressing past the necessity of consciously adhering to them as they refine their ethical experience of the world. This movement from conscious, deliberate attention to a natural, spontaneous ethical conduct (and the precedence of the latter over the former) is precisely what can be seen in the Buddhist tradition.

Of course, it would be foolish to claim that once one achieves a realization of emptiness one abandons their earlier Prātimokṣa and Bodhisattva Vows. In fact, Tibetan philosophers were constantly guarding against a nihilistic view of emptiness which would negate the validity of

the Four Noble Truths and ethics en masse. There is also evidence that, despite their low doxographical position, those who aspired to uphold their Prātimokṣa Vows (despite being involved in Vajrayāna practice) were regarded as exemplary practitioners.⁸³ The above interpretation is not suggesting that if one takes the Bodhisattva Vows, one is given license to wholly abandon the Prātimokṣa Vows and conventional deontological approaches to ethics (although exceptional cases like Drukpa Kunley⁸⁴ might paint this picture). Rather, what I am suggesting is that, as one progresses down the Buddhist path, one relies less and less on ethical formalities and more and more on one's natural ethical comportment to the world. The affective states that the Bodhisattva Vows elicit supersede the rationalized abstentions of the Prātimokṣa Vows and the direct phenomenological orientation of the Samaya Vows (in its call for maintaining a view of emptiness) supersede both. Thus, to respond to the temporal issue, it seems as though our solution is to be found right in the structure of the three vows themselves. Until one has installed a view of emptiness-interdependence one must provisionally rely upon other ethical forms (explicit rules, virtue ethical formulations, or consequentialist calculi) to structure one's ethical world. Thus, I describe these interlocking sets of vows as *provisional* because of how they systematically supersede one another and seem to all work towards the ultimate goal of a moral phenomenological approach to ethics.

⁸³ Geoffrey Barstow addresses this in the context of vegetarianism in monastic settings and quotes Tülku Ugyen saying: "The reason I didn't take ordination at that time or any time after was simply that I didn't trust that I could keep the vows. Not only did Samten Gyatso never touch women, he never even touched meat or liquor. Uncle Sangngak was not different. If you take monk's vows, you should keep them pure, like my uncles or like Karmé Khenpo. I have great respect for anyone who does so, but not for the half-hearted renunciate so common nowadays. Maybe it was my lack of pure perception, but I didn't see that many pure monks even then." See: Barstow (65). For its original context, see: Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche (198).

⁸⁴ Tib. 'brug pa kun legs.

Conclusion

To conclude, moral phenomenology is not unique to the Buddhist tradition. We have looked at how thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition have articulated an experiential approach to morality and have seen how Horgan and Timmons's notion of ethical comportment closely parallels Garfield's articulation of moral phenomenology. However, it is only the Buddhist tradition that we find moral phenomenology constituting an ethical project involving a clear path for moral cultivation, a desired outcome, and an ability to make prescriptive claims. In the Buddhist tradition, moral phenomenology is a theory centered on the *experience* of an individual and rests on the assertion that actions stem from an individual's immediate experience of the world. It involves reorienting one's default perceptual mode and its associated conceptual and affective states to influence how one spontaneously responds to the situations one is presented with. As earlier scholars have pointed out, this approach to approach to ethics can be found in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, but we have also seen compelling evidence that a moral phenomenological approach to ethics is consistent with Vajrayāna Buddhism. Further, we have seen how Buddhism might respond to the problem of reclusion and the temporal problem that emerge when thinking through a moral phenomenological approach to ethics. As this ethical formulation becomes more well-known both inside and outside of Buddhist communities, I anticipate scholars will continue to contribute to its theoretical and practical development and will begin investigating how it might inform a novel approach to immanent ethical issues like our climate emergency.

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