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Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration

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A Review of *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*

Amod Lele¹

Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration. By Jay L. Garfield. Buddhist Philosophy for Philosophers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021, xiv + 231 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-090763-1 (hardback), \$99/978-0-19-090764-8 (paperback), \$24.95/978-0-19-090766-2 (e-book), \$16.99.

Jay Garfield's new book is a welcome addition to the growing body of single volume works on Buddhist ethics. It distinguishes itself above all by taking a much-needed constructive approach. Other such works (Gowans, Harvey, Heim, Keown) more or less give readers a "take it or leave it" presentation: they tell us what Buddhist ethics is, descriptively, without any attempt to convince readers to make their own ethical viewpoint more Buddhist. Garfield does not claim to be arguing for the superiority of Buddhist ethics, but he does claim that "it is a voice that yields insight and that cannot be ignored by those who are intellectually responsible and morally committed" (201). Garfield emphasizes that Buddhist ethics is not merely something out there as an object of study, but something that makes a claim upon us as readers.

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Garfield achieves this constructive approach by taking an appropriate middle way between previous approaches on the question of *application*: how does Buddhist ethics apply to us, now? Keown's work effectively presents Buddhist ethics as historical, not applying it to contemporary readers in any significant way. Harvey, by contrast, looks for classical Buddhist answers to the questions—abortion, euthanasia, etc.—that most occupy contemporary ethicists, even though these questions were of marginal concern to the classical thinkers. Garfield's middle way aims to show how Buddhist thinkers' ideas apply to us without trying to shoehorn them into our questions. Instead, he appropriately shows us how we benefit by learning to ask *their* questions: Buddhism brings “a way of asking *different* ethical questions in addition to those asked in the West, and of providing a richer understanding of the good life than we would have were we not to ask those questions” (199, emphasis Garfield's).

Garfield recognizes that this approach requires an explanation beyond the words of the primary texts, an explanation that (in words owing to Imre Lakatos) he calls *rational reconstruction*. That is, since classical Buddhists did not have the concept of “ethics” as a distinct field of inquiry, in order to show that the Buddhist questions are *ethical* questions, he must spell the questions out in terms familiar to the Western discipline of ethics, “to provide a more systematic presentation of Buddhist ethical thought than is provided in the Buddhist canon” (x). Thus, Garfield's claim on p. x that “[t]his presentation is *not* comparative” is only true in a narrow sense of the word “comparative”: it does require a making similar, a comparing, of concepts.

This method of rational reconstruction requires that Garfield treat Buddhist ethics as speaking roughly with a single voice, in order to present it as a coherent system whose internal logic can be spelled out. The diversity of ethical positions within Buddhism is not a focus here. This single voice is not a flaw; it is necessary for such a method to work. A systematic rational reconstruction of Christian, existentialist, or even utilitarian ethics would require the same approach: if one is trying to expound

utilitarianism sympathetically to an audience unfamiliar with it, one would not dwell on the differences between John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer, but rather try to present the best of both. This approach means that Garfield's presentation should be understood as only one take on the content of Buddhist ethics, where others' might be quite different while still legitimate. (For example, I think Garfield has a very Mahāyāna reading of Buddhaghosa, but I can hardly fault him for that, as I know I tend to have a Theravāda reading of Śāntideva.)

Perhaps the most important part of this work is in the last two substantive chapters, on engaged Buddhism and especially on naturalism. These are where Garfield's constructive approach really stands out from similar studies. Garfield makes a case for engaged Buddhism's continuity with previous Buddhist tradition (citing Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī*, which lends itself relatively well to such an approach), while acknowledging with open eyes that it is a new and innovative movement. He rightly objects to the "trope of authenticity" (197) that forbids innovation. In an era that values political activism as highly as ours does, we should expect a living tradition like Buddhism to develop ways of embracing that activism.

Garfield also recognizes that modern science has seen little evidence for rebirth (especially of the ethicized kind found in the classical texts) and significant evidence that consciousness is linked to the body and perishes with it. Therefore, he is at pains to show how Buddhist ethics can work as a system while leaving out rebirth, treating ideas like karma as psychological. Contrast this to Harvey, who presents a rebirth-centered karma as the central Buddhist ethical idea: if that is the foundation on which Buddhist ethics is built, the edifice likely falls. Garfield's approach provides a surer way.

I wish, though, that Garfield had responded to the clearest philosophical objection to such a naturalized Buddhism, as made, for example, by Jan Westerhoff:

The central goal of the Buddhist path is the complete and permanent eradication of suffering (*duḥkha*). If there is no continuity of mind after the decay of this physical body, and if the existence of our mind depends on the existence of our body, the third Noble Truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering, would be to put an end to the existence of this body, and the fourth Noble Truth, the way to this cessation, would be suicide. (149)

A Mahāyāna view fares even worse in response to this objection, since altruism then would recommend not merely suicide but murder. I think there are good responses available to this suicide objection—I have made one myself (Lele)—but their absence weakens the rational reconstruction that Garfield attempts.

Another weakness of this book is its relative dryness. The book is mercifully free of the obscurantism that often plagues “continental” philosophy, where new coinages and wordplay are added to break down language and confuse the reader. Nevertheless, the book’s style will still be rough going for beginning students, in a way that makes it, unfortunately, hard to recommend for introductory courses. Sentences are often long, passive, and/or technical. Garfield often throws in jargon, analytic and continental, without explanation. (What is the “informative supervenience model”? What is “isotropy”?) The ideal audience for the work is a graduate student or professor trained in Western philosophy and seeking to understand Buddhist tradition; undergrads might still benefit but will find it rough going.

The dryness of the book’s style is perhaps connected to a more surprising dryness of content. In rejecting the usual comparisons to virtue ethics and utilitarianism, Garfield proclaims that Buddhist ethics is best viewed as “moral phenomenology”: “an approach to ethics in which the principal object of concern and of moral evaluation is the way one experiences the world, including oneself, other moral agents, and especially other moral patients” (22). I think this presentation of Buddhist ethics is

not wrong as it stands, but throughout the book Garfield takes “experience” to be primarily about our way of *seeing* the world—and only secondarily about our way of *feeling* it. The approach is highly cognitivist, about views and understanding rather than emotion, in a way that can at times seem colder and more detached than the source material calls for.

Thus, while Garfield is right to say that Śāntideva’s *kṣānti* (translated as “patience”) “is not an action or a disposition to act,” he misdirects our attention when he says, “Instead, it is a way of seeing ourselves and others” (128). It is true that Śāntideva sees anger, *kṣānti*’s foe, as involving cognitive error, especially in the metaphysical section of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA) VI.22-32, but it is more than that. Anger attacks us (BCA VI.7), arising involuntarily (VI.23); our minds burn with its fire (VI.71). It is a problem of feeling as well as cognition, as is craving; both craving and anger fill our lives with great pain and sorrow. Garfield’s translations of *rāga* and *dveṣa* as “attraction” and “aversion,” rather than as stronger terms like “craving” and “anger,” make them seem milder, less able to exert a power over us that contributes to or even constitutes our suffering. Garfield does not ignore the affective side, but it is always presented as subordinate to seeing and understanding, in a way that I think fails to show us the *urgency* found in the works of Śāntideva or the *suttas*. What is wrong with our normal way of being is not just that we see wrongly but that we suffer greatly.

Some of the book’s arguments can also fail to persuade, especially regarding altruism. Garfield proclaims that “I am about to ruin your next holiday by the sea,” by requesting: “As you sip that Margarita, ask yourself: Are you aware that people are starving in South Sudan? That children are being sold into slavery?” (73-74). One might reasonably reply that ruining one’s holiday by dwelling on the world’s miseries simply increases that misery by adding oneself to the ranks of the miserable. Garfield will have none of it, saying “you can’t rationally endorse that callous attitude” (74). But why not? Garfield rightly notes that a purely egoistic hedonist is not likely to be happy, since we are an “ultra-social species”; “our greatest

and deepest satisfaction arises from our positive interactions with others” (75). But those satisfying others are our families and friends and neighbors and coworkers, not people in South Sudan whom we will never meet. Our social nature is no reason to immiserate ourselves with the misery of unseen others. (Śāntideva’s argument for altruism in BCA VIII, which Garfield quotes on pp. 36-38, leads much more naturally to such a universal concern—because that argument has nothing to do with our sociality, but with deconstructing the self’s very existence. Elsewhere in that chapter, after all, Śāntideva urges us to *reject* taking joy in the company of others.)

Despite these concerns, the book fills an important gap among presentations of Buddhist ethics. It presents Buddhist ethics as a live option, inviting readers to consider turning their attention away from the traditional questions of Western ethics and toward Buddhist questions. It is a book particularly well suited to Western ethicists and other Western philosophers with an advanced background in those fields but no previous background in Buddhism. Undergraduates will need more handholding but can still benefit from a book that rightly aims to show them what Buddhist ethics has to offer them.

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