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Karma, Moral Responsibility, and Buddhist Ethics

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The Buddha taught that there is no self. He also accepted a version of the doctrine of karmic rebirth, according to which good and bad actions accrue merit and demerit and cause beneficial or harmful events to occur in this life or the next. But how is karmic rebirth possible if there are no selves? The relevant philosophical issues inspired centuries of philosophical reflection and debate. This chapter will contextualize and survey some of the historical and contemporary debates relevant to moral psychology and Buddhist ethics. They include whether the Buddha's teaching of no-self is consistent with the possibility of moral responsibility; the role of retributivism in Buddhist thought; the possibility of a Buddhist account of free will; the scope and viability of recent attempts to naturalize karma to character virtues and vices; and how right action is to be understood within a Buddhist framework.

Buddhism centres on the teachings of the Buddha, who lived and taught somewhere between the sixth and fourth centuries BC. There is some disagreement about what exactly he taught, how to interpret his views, and what they entail. But most agree that the Buddha's early teaching of the Four Noble Truths is central. This teaching analyzes the metaphysical and moral-psychological causes and conditions of suffering. It identifies attachment to self as a central cause of suffering, but claims that this attachment is rooted in ignorance because (amongst other things) there is, in fact, no self.¹

The Buddha also accepted some version of the doctrine of karmic rebirth. Like most scholars in classical India, the Buddha accepted a cosmology of multiple realms of existence

¹ As will become apparent, there is considerable debate about the nature and entailment of this claim.

into which sentient beings are born, die, and are reborn in a continuous cycle.² The process of rebirth is known as *saṃsāra*.³ Where one is reborn is driven by the law of karma, which functions with respect to moral action; good actions generate karmic merit and bad actions generate karmic demerit. An agent's accumulated karmic debt determines the kind of existence they will have in their next life, and causes some auspicious and inauspicious events to occur in that life.⁴ It also partially explains the nature and fact of the agent's present existence as well as some of the auspicious and inauspicious events that occur in this life.

If we broadly define the concept of 'moral responsibility' as the relation by which agents are held to account for their morally evaluable actions, this doctrine offers a transpersonal retributive account of moral responsibility. It is retributive because karmic merit and demerit is a matter of deserved reward and punishment. It is transpersonal because the laws of karma function across lifetimes and modes of existence.

But how is karmic rebirth possible if there are no selves? If there are no selves, it would seem that there are no agents that could be held morally responsible for 'their' actions. If actions are those happenings in the world performed by agents, it would seem that there are no actions. And if there are no agents and no actions, then karmic retribution, and morality more broadly, seem to lose application. Historical opponents argued that the

² The Buddha accepted a cosmology of six realms: two heavenly realms, a human realm, a realm of animals, a realm of hungry ghosts, and a realm of hell beings. The Buddha considered each realm to be impermanent and each mode of being to have its faults and limitations. Those born in the heavenly realms, for example, are considered to experience progressively subtle states of meditative calm, but these experiences are obscured by mental defilements, such as pride. The behavioural expression of these defilements accrues karmic demerit and eventually leads to a lower rebirth. See Harvey (2000: 11–14)

³ The italicised words in this chapter are in Sanskrit. While this chapter will cite concepts discussed in both Pāli and Sanskrit texts, it will only cite Sanskrit terms for the sake of simplicity.

⁴ I say 'some' because Buddhism recognizes other forms of causation and does not explain all possible happenings in terms of karmic causation.

Buddha's teaching of no self was tantamount to moral nihilism.⁵ The Buddha, and later Buddhist philosophers, firmly reject this charge.

Historical and contemporary explanations of how and why Buddhism does, in fact, avoid the charge of moral nihilism spans a vast intellectual terrain, engaging issues in metaphysics, moral psychology, and ethics as well as epistemology, phenomenology, and philosophy of mind. These issues also inspired centuries of philosophical reflection and debate, spanning cultures and continents, and resulted in a complex network of competing philosophical positions and schools. Any attempt to survey the relevant literature will provide, at best, a narrow and selective snapshot of available views. However, since many of these issues are relevant to contemporary discussions of ethics and moral psychology, even a limited snapshot is valuable.

This chapter will contextualize and briefly discuss five historical and contemporary debates that emerge from the apparent tension between the Buddha's teaching of no-self and the possibilities of karmic retribution and morality. These debates concern whether the Buddha's teaching of no-self is consistent with the possibility of moral responsibility; the role of retributivism in Buddhist thought; the possibility of a Buddhist account of free will; the scope and viability of recent attempts to naturalize karma to character virtues and vices; and whether and how right action is to be understood within a Buddhist framework. This 'selective snapshot' of issues covers much philosophical ground. An objective of this chapter is to make explicit the ways in which these issues are intimately related in the Buddhist context.

⁵ Buddhism is accused of nihilism on several grounds. One ground refers to the Buddhist rejection of Brahmanical conceptions of God (See Patil 2009). Another ground refers to a certain understanding of the Madhyamaka Buddhist idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*, see Huntington 1995). This article focuses on moral grounds for this charge.

The chapter will begin by providing an overview of the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths, since this teaching provides both the context and justificatory grounds for various Buddhist positions on the above issues.

The Four Noble Truths

Most contemporary Buddhist philosophers agree that the Buddha's early teachings of the Four Noble Truths is central to his thought.⁶ The first is the truth or fact of suffering; suffering (*duḥkha*) is a pervasive and unwanted feature of sentient life. In the Buddha's early teachings, the concept of suffering is discussed in terms that range from bodily physical pain to complex psychological states associated with attachment, aversion, and loss.

The second truth diagnoses two main causes of suffering. The first is *craving* (*tṛṣṇā*): craving for pleasure, for continued existence (of oneself and what one loves), and for non-being (of that to which one is averse). On the Buddha's analysis, craving conditions attachment which then causes suffering in the face of change or loss. The second cause of suffering is *ignorance* (*avidyā*). Ignorance, in the Buddhist tradition, is not a lack of knowledge but a confluence of false views, the most significant of which are grounded in a failure to recognize that all things depend on causes and conditions for their existence (dependently arise, *pratītyasamutpāda*); nothing exists independently of all other things. Since a change to the causes and conditions changes their effect, it is thought to follow that all things are impermanent. This extends to oneself and others. The Buddha taught that there is no permanent and continuing self (*ātman*) that persists through time. The basic thought is that if we analyze ourselves into our constituent parts, we will only discover causally related physical and psychological elements (beliefs, desires, memories,

⁶ For a succinct formulation of this teaching, see the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (1995).

dispositions, etc.). Each of these elements are impermanent; none persists unchanging across lifetimes and each depends on some other elements for its existence. Importantly, there is no single constant, unchanging, underlying substance that unifies them as aspects of 'me'. The Buddha taught that a thorough understanding of this fact can help remove the grounds for craving and thus the roots of suffering. It can also motivate psychological change by removing the false belief that we have fixed characters and so cannot change the tendencies that detract from our well-being.

The third truth is the assertion that suffering can end. It is possible to change from a state of pervasive suffering to one of happiness or overall well-being. *Nirvāṇa* is the term for the resulting state or way of life. Why does the Buddha think this is true? Because he thinks that nothing exists permanently: everything depends for its existence on causes and conditions. It follows that if one changes the causes and conditions of some effect, one changes the effect. Psychological change is thus possible if one changes the relevant causes and conditions.

The fourth truth outlines an eightfold path towards achieving this state of overall well-being (or eight constituents of an enlightened way of life).⁷ The elements of this path or way of life are standardly organized under three headings; wisdom (right view, right intention), ethical conduct (right action, right speech, right livelihood), and meditation (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration).

The Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths inspired centuries of philosophical reflection, and led to extensive debates about how best to understand its substantive points. These debates ranged across issues in metaphysics, logic, epistemology, phenomenology, ethics, and philosophy of mind. They reached their scholarly peak in India between the fourth and ninth centuries CE, and the major philosophical trends were later classified into

⁷ This disjunction in thinking of *nirvāṇa* as a resulting state or way of life informs some contemporary debate about whether Buddhist thought is best reconstructed (if at all) as a form of consequentialism or virtue ethics. I will return to this point.

distinct Indian Buddhist schools. The most prominent were Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra.⁸ These debates were also influenced by the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the early centuries CE, which attributed additional teachings to the Buddha that sometimes challenged established Buddhist views and advocated a ‘superior’ path to awakening. Buddhism also spans various cultures, countries, and historical periods, and so has been shaped by these different contexts. There is thus no singular ‘Buddhist’ position on most debated issues by Buddhist philosophers; there are many Buddhist views on many substantive philosophical issues. This is particularly true of the issue concerning whether the Buddha’s teaching of no-self is consistent with the possibility of moral responsibility.

Karma and moral responsibility: historical responses

Historical opponents argued that the Buddha’s teaching of no-self is tantamount to moral nihilism. The Buddha identifies these implications as ‘wrong views’ that can and should be avoided (1995: 618–28). Historical and contemporary Buddhist philosophers offer various explanations of how Buddhism can avoid this charge of moral nihilism. I will begin by considering some historical approaches. A standard strategy of response consists of: (1) elaborating the Buddha’s teaching of no-self in relation to his idea that all existing things dependently arise (*pratītyasamutpāda*); (2) reinterpreting the function of karma in terms that

⁸ Although I will use these doxographical distinctions in this chapter, they are in fact not so neatly drawn and are to be treated as broad heuristics. They are useful because debates amongst proponents of these schools often turned on broadly accepted points of difference. But, as is often the case in Western philosophy, how to characterize these differences was a matter of dispute. Distinct philosophical schools also had different points of emphasis (some metaphysical, some epistemological, some phenomenological) which sometimes led to misattribution and misclassification. Prominent defenders of some schools were also prominent defenders of others. And some attempts to clarify the positions of distinct schools led to subclassifications which themselves were fiercely contested. For a general introduction to the philosophical grounds on which these Buddhist schools tend to be distinguished, see Siderits (2007), Carpenter (2014), and Westerhoff (2018)

fit this explanation; and (3) explaining away talk of agents and their actions in reference to the Buddhist distinction between ‘two truths’.⁹

With respect to (1), most historical Buddhists insist that, in denying a self, the Buddha is not asserting that no one and nothing exists. Rather, according to at least one prominent interpretation, he is rejecting a specific conception of self (*ātman*, a permanent, unchanging substance) in favour of a positive analysis of persons as causally related configurations of physical and psychological elements. The Buddha proposes several classifications for these elements. The best-known is his analysis of persons as configurations or aggregates of five types of token elements; the Five Aggregates or *skandhas*. They are standardly characterized as: (1) physical matter (*rūpa*), (2) feeling (*vedanā*), (3) recognition or cognition (*saṃjñā*), (4) dispositional tendencies (*saṃskāra*), and (5) consciousness (*viññāna*).¹⁰ The token elements in these configurations are causally related events or states, and any particular element is conditioned by a complex interaction of other elements. These elements are diachronically related, and have synchronic depth insofar as a token element at a given moment can be conditioned by multiple layers of concurrent token elements. However, the configuration or aggregation, itself, is not considered to be a real substance with causal properties. There is no enduring substantial self that unifies these elements as constituents of ‘me’. It follows that if there is a law of karma, it must operate over these causally related configurations of psycho-physical elements. But which elements in these configurations does it target?

This question relates to strategic move (2); reinterpreting the function of karma in terms that fit the above elaboration of the Buddha’s teaching of no-self. According to the

⁹ I introduce this three-part strategy as an organizing device for the sake of clarity rather than to describe an accepted methodology. Historical Buddhist philosophers did not identify or claim to adhere to this strategy, but many of their arguments can be analyzed in terms of it.

¹⁰ There is scholarly discussion of the precise nature of these token elements. Siderits (1997) and Ganeri (2001) argue that they are best understood as trope-like property particulars. There is also some contemporary debate about how these five types of token elements are best rendered in English. See Davis and Thompson (2014) and Ganeri (2017) for two competing recent accounts.

Buddha, karma functions over intentions, decisions, or will.¹¹ ‘It is volition [*cetanā*], O monks, that I call karma; having willed, one acts through body, speech, or mind’ (2012: 963). Many consider this analysis of karma to be one of the Buddha’s great innovations. It is also broadly consistent with the Five Aggregate analysis of persons. If one accepts this analysis, what then should we make of ordinary talk of agents forming intentions, acting intentionally, and the ubiquitous variety of distinctions between oneself and others? This relates to strategic move (3); explaining away talk of agents and their actions in reference to the Buddhist distinction between ‘two truths’. Many Buddhists respond to the above question by appeal to a distinction between conventional truth (*samvṛtisatya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*). On at least one version of this strategic move, ordinary talk of self and other, agents and their actions, is a matter of social convention and linguistic practice but does not reflect the ultimate nature of reality.

The Simile of the Mango in the *Milindapañha* provides an early example of the first two strategic moves (Rhys-David (trans.) 1965: 72).¹² In the context of a conversation between King Milinda and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena about the operation of karma, King Milinda proposes a simile of someone stealing a mango from another person’s tree to argue that that person could appeal to the Buddha’s doctrine of no-self to justify their behaviour by saying that the mango they stole was not the same mango as that planted by the other person. But Nāgasena replies that the person is responsible on the ground that the stolen mango exists in causal dependence on the one originally planted. It is analogously reasoned that the person could not justifiably appeal to the Buddha’s teaching of no-self to argue that they are not responsible for stealing the mango yesterday because they are not the same person today. This is because there would be a definite causal connection between the elements

¹¹ The interpretative range of the relevant term, *cetanā*, is broad and more inclusive than the notions of intention, decision and will (which are, themselves, importantly distinct). I will return to this.

¹² The Simile of the Chariot (Rhys-David trans. 1965: 34-38) arguably provides an early example of strategic move (3).

that constitute ‘themselves’ yesterday as those that constituted ‘themselves’ today. Gethin (1998) takes the point of this simile to be that, properly understood, ‘the principle of the causal connectedness of phenomena is sufficient [...] to answer critics of the teaching of no-self and redeem Buddhism from the charge of nihilism’ (p. 144)

While historical Buddhist responses to the charge of moral nihilism tend to exhibit the above argumentative strategy, Buddhist philosophers vigorously debated the commitments and entailments of its constituent claims. Many disputes focused on the metaphysics and semantics of personal identity but had broader implications for the metaphysics of reality more generally. Competing positions on these issues often function to differentiate Buddhist schools. Here is a brief sketch of some of the salient philosophical differences.

Abhidharma Buddhism is the earliest attempt by Buddhist thinkers to explicate and systematize the Buddha’s teaching into a unified and comprehensive theory. While the details were debated,¹³ most Abhidharma Buddhists interpreted the Buddha as proposing a mereological reduction of persons and gesturing towards an exhaustive mereological reduction of conscious experience and reality, a project that they respectively attempt to complete. They consider this project to be motivated by the idea that ‘wholes’ (aggregations, collections, kinds and types) are merely linguistic conventions for grouping otherwise discrete entities. While we might *conventionally* talk about persons and other kinds of wholes, what *ultimately* exists, in the Abhidharma view, are simple, causally related, momentary events individuated by essential properties.¹⁴ Madhyamaka and Yogācāra

¹³ According to tradition, the early Buddhist community subdivided into eighteen distinct Abhidharma schools and lineages, partly in response to doctrinal disputes about how best to interpret the Buddha’s teaching (disputes also concerned which rules monks should follow). The most prominent of these Abhidharma schools were the Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Mahāsaṃghika, Pudgalavāda, and Sautrāntika (see Westerhoff 2018). The contemporary category of ‘Abhidharma Buddhism’ encompasses this variety of viewpoints (and brings with it all the tensions involved in combining competing viewpoints). See also Ronkin (2005; 2018).

¹⁴ The most prominent contemporary defender of (at least some aspects of) this reductive analysis of persons is Siderits (2003), who compares it favourably with the reductive analysis of persons defended by Parfit (1984).

Buddhists reject this analysis of persons and ultimate reality.¹⁵ The main point of contention for Mādhyamikas concerns the status of the individuation criterion for ultimately real entities, and whether it is consistent with the Buddha's teachings of dependent arising. Mādhyamikas argue that it is not. The positive upshot of this refutation, however, is unclear (Tillemans 2016, Finnigan 2017a). Contemporary scholars treat Mādhyamikas as holding that there is no ultimate reality, there is no ultimately true reductive base for an analysis of persons, but that 'our conventional or customary standards of rational acceptance are the only game in town' (Siderits 1989: 238).¹⁶ Yogācārins, by contrast, are traditionally read as proposing some form of metaphysical idealism, in terms of which considerations of personal identity are analysed as mere reifications of the structural features of (at least some mode of) consciousness (Finnigan 2017b; 2018b).¹⁷

There is a lot more to be said (and that has been said) about these different analyses of personal identity and reality. If we return to the issue of whether the Buddhist teaching of no-self is consistent with a morality based in karmic retribution, these different analyses of personal identity face distinct challenges when it comes to explaining the operation of karma. An Abhidharma analysis might be able to account for the creation of karmic debt because it admits intentions in its reductive base. But some Buddhists argue that Abhidharma cannot explain how this debt accumulates and is discharged (for better or worse) at some later time. This is because karmic debt would need to persist through time, but prominent forms of Abhidharma reduce persons to an ontology of *momentary* psycho-

¹⁵ While this is abundantly clear in the case of Madhyamaka, it is less so in the case of Yogācāra because the most prominent defenders of Sautrāntika Abhidharma (e.g. Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti) are also the most prominent defenders of Yogācāra. This raises complicated issues about how these views are related; whether their advocates changed their minds, whether the textual evidence combines the views of separate authors, whether they imply a philosophical progression of insights, or whether these views are compatible or continuous in some philosophically interesting way.

¹⁶ See also Cowherds (2011) for a sustained discussion of the Madhyamaka conception of conventional truth.

¹⁷ Some contemporary scholars argue against this traditional reading and insist that Yogācāra is better understood as some form of phenomenology. This is controversial but influential. See Lusthaus (2002) for its most prominent defence.

physical elements in causal relations. How could karmic debt *persist* in such an ontology? Yogācāra Buddhists respond to this challenge by positing an underlying mode of consciousness, called the store-consciousness (*alayavijñāna*), which stores karmic debt as seeds or potentials that ‘sprout’ or generate effects in appropriate circumstances (Schmithausen 1987; Waldron 2003). But some Madhyamaka Buddhists object that this is tantamount to reintroducing an enduring, substantial self.

While Buddhists historically debated how best to account for the operation of karma, they did not question its possibility. There are several reasons for this. One reason is that Buddhist thinkers sought to explain the ‘truth’ of the Buddha’s teachings, and the Buddha strongly rejected doctrines which denied karmic retribution (1995: 618–28). To doubt its possibility was said to be a mental defilement because it demotivates moral agency. This reflects Buddhism’s practical orientation. An overarching goal of Buddhist thought and practice is the cessation of suffering. In his early teachings, the Buddha refused to answer substantive philosophical questions if he thought it would obstruct this goal in a particular dialogical context. In a conversation with Vacchagotta, for instance, the Buddha refused to answer questions about the nature of self for the apparent reason that it would cause Vacchagotta further confusion and thus suffering (2005: 1031–3).¹⁸ Later Buddhist scholastics *did* attempt to answer substantive philosophical questions, but their dialectical context was one of defending the Buddha’s teachings against the sophisticated metaphysical and epistemological systems of their orthodox Hindu rivals. Even in this context, however, the

¹⁸ Some contest the claim that the Buddha denied the existence of self, arguing that this denial was introduced by later Buddhist scholastics. Supposed evidence is derived from the fact that the Buddha used the terms ‘self’ (*ātman*) and action (*karma*) and remains silent in the *Vacchagottasutta* when directly asked whether the self exists. This is a minority view. Most historical and contemporary Buddhist philosophers consider the Buddha’s analysis of persons to be exhaustive, to render meaningless talk of substantial enduring selves, and that a proper understanding of the two-truth doctrine adequately explains the Buddha’s use of these terms. Gethin (1998: 160) also convincingly contextualizes the Buddha’s silence in the *Vacchagottasutta* as relative to his desire not to confuse his interlocutor rather than reflecting a general agnosticism.

possibility of karma and its transpersonal retributive conception of moral responsibility remained unchallenged.

Karma naturalized

While historical Buddhists unquestioningly accepted the doctrine of karma, contemporary Buddhist philosophers either (1) ignore it, (2) reject it as inconsistent with a respectably naturalized Buddhist philosophy that fits with a modern scientific point of view, or (3) reinterpret it ‘naturalistically’ by retaining some of its moral psychological features while denying its transcendental commitments, such as rebirth and transpersonal retribution.

The third strategy is increasingly popular. Many naturalize karma to the fairly uncontroversial idea that sentient beings can act intentionally and that their intentional actions have a variety of effects on themselves, others, and their physical and social environment (Flanagan 2011). And most emphasize the intrapersonal effects of action on one’s own character or dispositions to feel, act, and experience a meaningful world (Keown 1996; Wright 2005). These approaches typically naturalize karma to a psychological mechanism of character development, where character development is broadly understood as a process of directed change to a constellation of dispositions (behavioural, affective, reactive, discriminating, evaluative) that are conventionally identified as ‘oneself’. Elements of this idea can be found within the traditional doctrine. Buddhists relate the operation of karma to intention (*cetanā*). Contemporary scholars emphasize that the concept of *cetanā* has a wide interpretive range that extends beyond volition to include one’s orientation or intentional attitudes towards the objects of one’s experiences (Heim 2013). This might look like a conflation of two senses of intentionality; (1) intentions as volitions with *objectives* that motivate action, and (2) intentionality understood as the thesis that conscious experiences are *object* directed. However, contemporary work increasingly emphasizes enactive interpretations of conscious experience according to which interests, values, intentions, and

habituated dispositions inform both what the subject experiences and the ways in which experienced objects solicit behavioural response (Mackenzie 2013; Ganeri 2017). Intentional attitudes such as anger, fear, or jealousy might be said to exemplify this idea if understood as adopted stances which both inform how an object (person or situation) is experienced and implicate modes of behavioural response (Finnigan 2017a; 2019, 2021). Such a view might also help explain why the Buddha and later historical Buddhists considered the (otherwise mere) possession and encouragement of these intentional attitudes to be forms of mental activity that accrue karmic merit or demerit.

I think there is a lot to be said for this extended analysis of Buddhist *cetanā* (pending more detail and argument). However, several problems arise from attempts to use it to ground a naturalized account of karma. For one thing, this extended interpretation of *cetanā* connects to broader themes in Buddhist moral psychology that make no reference to karma. Most Buddhist philosophers maintain that the Buddhist analysis of persons, as causally related psychological and physical elements, provides a rich and deep account of the psychological causes and conditions of suffering and overall well-being. Most also contend that this generalizes to a broader analysis of the way our inner worlds shape our behaviour in ways that do not necessarily involve conscious acts of choice or decision-making. And many consider this to imply that there are intricate feedback mechanisms between our behaviour and our dispositional modes of experience and response. However, these insights are thought to follow from a thorough analysis of the relationship between the Buddhist doctrines of no-self and dependent arising. It is questionable whether the doctrine of karma is required for their expression.

Further problems arise from the fact that naturalized accounts of karma emphasize the way enacting intentional attitudes, expressing them in bodily action, serves to entrench and reinforce them as habituated dispositions or aspects of character. It is not clear that this captures all relevant aspects of the traditional doctrine of karma. One difficulty concerns

how it accommodates the retributive aspect of the traditional doctrine and the sense of agents being held morally responsible by a mechanism of justice that metes out appropriate rewards and punishments (Reichenbach 1990). Many of the historical examples of karmic fruit refer to such goods as fortune, longevity, health, physical appearance, and social influence. While some of these goods might causally relate to character (a conscientious person might, for instance, be disposed to act in ways that positively contribute to their health and longevity), many of these goods relate to character only contingently, at best. A good person is just as susceptible to terminal illness or being severely injured in an accident as anyone else (Wright 2005). Without the doctrine of rebirth to guarantee the proportionality of merit and reward or punishment, these retributive goods have no place in a naturalized conception of karma.

This last objection might not seem to be a problem. A defender of naturalized karma might grant the point but insist that there remains a large and interesting class of intrapersonal and social goods that *can* be causally related to character development to a sufficiently reliable degree, and that these are the only goods it needs to accommodate. But even so, the retributive aspects of the traditional doctrine and the relevant sense of moral responsibility remain unexplained. The traditional doctrine of karma assumes some sense of moral deserts; agents get what they deserve (in this life or the next) and are thereby held accountable for their actions. But while the behavioural expression of compassion might generate certain psychological and social goods for the compassionate agent, it seems odd to describe this in terms of deserts without some transpersonal or cosmic mechanism to ensure these outcomes. A defender of naturalized karma might respond that the notions of retributive justice and moral desert are irretrievably tied to the notions of rebirth and cosmic justice, or to the notion of self that the Buddha rejected, and so should be jettisoned. But if naturalized karma jettisons the retributive aspects of cosmic karma, how might it alternatively ground moral responsibility? Some argue that the notion of moral

responsibility should also be abandoned (Goodman 2002). But this is extreme, and inconsistent with the historical tradition.

A Buddhist account of free will?

Contemporary Buddhist debates about the possibility of moral responsibility are often related to the question of whether Buddhism can admit a theory of free will (Repetti 2017a). Given that the Buddha rejects the existence of a substantial self, it would seem that Buddhists should deny an analysis of free will in terms of agent causation or agents with sui generis causal powers. However, the Buddha also explicitly rejected a version of fatalism or the view that occurrences are inevitably caused (1995: 618–28). This view was thought to be inconsistent with the Four Noble Truths, which collectively assert that it is possible to change one's state or way of life from that of persistent and unwanted suffering to overall well-being. Intentions, volitions, or decisions (*cetanā*) were proposed as relevant causal determinants of action. This proposal is arguably consistent with some contemporary versions of determinism, however, and it is a live question whether they are compatible with the possibility of moral responsibility. What is the best way to characterize the Buddhist position on freedom and determinism, and is there a contemporary analysis that it best approximates?

Contemporary Buddhist philosophers are all over the map on this issue. Buddhism has been variously characterized as assuming 'hard-determinism' (Goodman 2002), 'neo-compatibilism' (Federman 2010) 'paleo-compatibilism' (Siderits 2008), 'semi-compatibilism' (Repetti 2017b), and even a form of libertarianism that assumes agent causation (Griffiths 1982). Some argue that Buddhists are illusionists about the possibility of free will (Harris 2012), and others that it is anachronistic to even raise the issue of freedom and determinism in the Buddhist context (Garfield 2017). Debates on this issue are complicated by the fact that

these various positions are often contextualized to distinct Buddhist philosophical traditions which do not necessarily share the same metaphysical assumptions. And their contemporary defenders do not necessarily share the same assumptions about what moral responsibility means, requires, and entails.

If one thinks that moral responsibility necessarily presupposes the metaphysical possibility of a free will, then a defender of naturalized karma will need to navigate this contested terrain. However, the field is still young and various possibilities have yet to be thoroughly explored. One promising strategy might involve appeal to contemporary instrumentalist theories of moral responsibility and/or versions of the social regulation view of free will, according to which activities of praise, blame, reward, and punishment function to prospectively regulate behaviour rather than as modes of retribution that track deserts.¹⁹ Breyer (2013) defends a version of this approach in the Buddhist context, arguing that the assignment and acceptance of moral responsibility can be justified in relation to its role in motivating agents to act in ways that eliminate suffering and achieve liberation. Breyer thus proposes a psychological regulation view of moral responsibility justified in terms of a certain interpretation of the goals of Buddhist practice outlined in the Four Noble Truths.²⁰ While these practices assume conventional distinctions between intentional agents, this is to be treated as just a psychological technique that is normatively justified in terms of efficacy rather than grounded in a robustly substantial metaphysical analysis of free will. While I think a regulatory approach to the attribution of moral responsibility is promising,

¹⁹ See e.g. Schlick (1939), Dennett (1984), Arneson (2003), McGeer (2013; 2015) and Vargas (2013, this volume). Vargas argues that there are ways to appeal to forward-looking views of assigning and accepting moral responsibility that allow for some backward-looking retributive judgments. If plausible, this might accommodate some of the retributive dimensions of karma that would be otherwise lost in a naturalized karma.

²⁰ Breyer also claims that in order to most effectively enable successful practice, each practitioner should regard herself as fully responsible for her choices, but others as not responsible. Goodman (2017) suggests a modification whereby we (ordinary, unenlightened folk) should hold ourselves but not others responsible for *immoral* actions, and others but not ourselves responsible for *moral* actions. Whether this asymmetry consistently coheres with other socially justified notions of justice is an open question.

Breyer's account seems to exclude the retributive dimension of moral responsibility that is central to the traditional doctrine of karma. While it could be argued that this is the inevitable cost of naturalizing karma, it remains an open question whether some alternative regulatory analysis of Buddhist moral responsibility might admit backward-looking retributive judgments.

Buddhist normative ethics

Discussions of naturalized karma often occur in the context of debates about how best to understand Buddhist ethics. This is not surprising. Since karma operates over moral action, the doctrine of karma must presuppose some view of the moral determinants of action. Those who naturalize karma as a psychological mechanism of character development tend to argue that character, as a relevantly extended sense of *cetanā*, is the morally determining factor for good or bad actions. While good consequences correspond to good actions in the doctrine of karma, these consequences presuppose rather than determine the evaluative worth of the action. From this it has been argued that 'karma, is not a consequentialist ethic but a virtue ethic' (Keown 1996: 346). Others argue, however, that relation to suffering provides a more fundamental evaluative ground, even of intentions and character, and so Buddhist ethics is better understood as some form of consequentialism.

The issue of how best to understand Buddhist moral thought in mainstream normative ethical terms dominates contemporary Buddhist moral philosophy. Some insist that Buddhist ethics is best construed in consequentialist terms (Siderits 2003; 2015, Goodman 2009; 2015). Others that it is a form of virtue ethics (Keown 2001; Cooper and James 2005). Some argue that no version of virtue ethics can provide a viable reconstruction of Buddhist ethics (Kalupahana 1976; Goodman 2009; 2015; Siderits 2015). Others argue that Buddhist ethics 'cannot be utilitarian' (Keown 2001: 177). Some argue for an integration of

these theories into a form of virtue consequentialism (Clayton 2006). Others maintain that Buddhist moral thought is such a complex and messy affair that it resists systematization into a singular ethical theory (Hallisey 1996). And yet others argue that attempting to systematize Buddhist moral thought in terms of Western philosophical categories is moribund because it structurally overlooks what is distinctive of Buddhist moral thought (Garfield 2010–11).

Most participants in these debates accept the observation that Buddhist moral thought is a complex and messy affair. If we take Buddhism in its widest possible sense, spanning countries, cultures, historical periods, and distinct philosophical traditions, we find much agreement in moral views but also different points of moral emphasis, distinct modes of moral reasoning, and disagreements about what the Buddha's teachings practically entail.

Recall the Four Noble Truths. The fourth truth outlines an eightfold path or way of living. One of its constituents is 'right action'. In response to queries about what this practically entails, the Buddha provided a set of precepts for his disciples to follow in a monastic setting. This is known as the *vinaya*. The earliest schisms amongst Buddhist communities after the Buddha's death (or *parinirvāṇa*) concerned the legitimacy and priority of these precepts. There are now several bodies of *vinaya* precepts accepted by distinct Buddhist communities around the world.²¹ The Buddha also did not initially admit the ordination of women. When he did, he provided a more extensive set of *vinaya* precepts to regulate their behaviour than that of monks. There are contemporary debates about the legitimacy of some of these gender-specific precepts, particularly those that require nuns to

²¹ They include the Vinaya Piṭaka of the *Theravāda* (followed in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), the *Dharmaguptaka* (followed in China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam), and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* (followed in Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal, and Ladakh). Historically, they also included the *Mahāsaṃghika*, *Mahīśāsaka*, and *Sarvāstivāda* Piṭakas. See Keown (2004).

demean themselves before monks, such as the requirement that nuns sit below or behind monks regardless of their respective spiritual or hierarchical status (Banks Findley 2000).

Further complexity in Buddhist moral thought relates to the emergence of Mahāyāna in the early centuries CE. Mahāyāna Buddhism distinctively recognizes certain additional teachings of the Buddha (or *sūtras*) that are not accepted by all Buddhists. Some of these *sūtras* make claims that contradict or are in tension with those made in the early teachings. A controversial case concerns vegetarianism. The first precept taught by the Buddha was that of *ahiṃsā* or non-violence. *Ahiṃsā* was a common precept or virtue in classical India, and is the center-piece of Jainism. Buddhists often explicate it as the prescription to neither kill nor harm others, where this refers to all sentient beings including animals. The Jains took *ahiṃsā* to entail vegetarianism. But the Buddha did not prohibit eating meat in his early teachings and there is even some evidence that he may himself have eaten meat.²² This was historically controversial. However, at least three of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* (*Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, and *Angulimālasūtra*) present the Buddha as explicitly arguing that Buddhists should be vegetarian. And while these *sūtras* explicitly acknowledge the inconsistency, they explain it away by arguing that the earlier teaching was a mere provisional step towards complete prohibition. These Mahāyāna *sūtras* were highly influential in China, and vegetarianism is virtually definitive of Chinese Buddhism (Kieschnick 2005; Chuan 2014). This was arguably not the case in India, Tibet, or many South East Asian Buddhist countries. While all Buddhists agree that one may not intentionally harm or kill animals, there was (and still is) a lot of disagreement about whether Buddhists should be vegetarian (Finnigan 2017c).

The Mahāyāna *sūtras* also emphasize and champion the bodhisattva ideal. A bodhisattva is a person who has committed to remain in the cycle of rebirth to relieve the

²² The Buddha did, however, place some constraints on the practice. See Finnigan (2017c: 8)

suffering of all sentient beings. This commitment is called *bodhicitta*. The motivation for this commitment is said to be their great compassion (*mahakarūṇā*) for the sufferings of the world. And the enactment or expression of this commitment in action is said to be informed by other moral virtues or perfections, such as loving-kindness (*maitrī*), equanimity (*upekkhā*), and sympathetic joy (*muditā*). There is some debate about whether these ideas constitute a genuine Mahāyāna innovation or just elaborate ideas already contained in the Buddha's early teachings. They are nevertheless distinctively central to Mahāyāna Buddhist thought, and inform distinct modes of moral emphasis and reasoning. In the context of Mahāyāna, these ideas are bound up with the traditional doctrine of karma in interesting ways. For instance, the typical method by which bodhisattvas assist others is by performing good deeds that only indirectly involved others (if at all) and then dedicating the karmic merit to the benefit of others rather than themselves (Clayton 2009). This practice of 'dedicating merit' is replicated in the Chinese Buddhist ritual of animal release whereby Buddhists purchase an animal (typically a small fish or turtle) from a temple, release it into a pond or waterway, and dedicate the karmic merit to the benefit of others.

Given the evident plurality in Buddhist moral concepts and modes of moral reasoning, there is good reason to be skeptical that all Buddhist moral thought can be easily unified into a single normative ethical theory. To some extent, defenders of first-order reconstructions of Buddhist ethics acknowledge this fact by contextualizing their accounts to some Buddhist text taken to be authoritative by some Buddhist tradition.²³ But even so, they anticipate that these contextualized studies will reveal a single evaluative thread that spans Buddhism as a whole and is sufficiently similar to mainstream theories to warrant comparison. If plausible, this has several potential benefits. It might provide grounds for adjudicating intra-Buddhist disagreements about precepts and implications. It might also

²³ Good examples are Clayton (2006) and Goodman (2009), who reconstruct the moral thought of Śāntideva.

serve as an informative conversational bridge with mainstream ethics that goes beyond simply asserting, 'You say this, and Buddhists say this too', to reveal new justificatory grounds, new modes of reasoning, and new implications for shared evaluative assumptions.

Debates remain as to whether consequentialism or virtue ethics best articulates this general evaluative thread. What might justify one or other of these competing theories as a plausible reconstruction of Buddhist moral thought? Finnigan (2017a) engages this question and identifies three necessary conditions. The first is that the account needs to be consistent with the Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths. The second is that the account needs to be metaethically consistent with some Buddhist metaphysical or epistemological theory (which will exclude some options and render the final verdict on those included dependent on the outcomes of the metaphysical and epistemological disputes at their justificatory base). And the third is that the account needs to plausibly reconstruct the moral thought or reasoning contained in some Buddhist canonical text.

The first condition is the most important, given that the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths is the closest to a central tenet of Buddhism accepted by all Buddhists. If some version of Buddhist normative ethics is inconsistent with this teaching, then it should be rejected as an implausible reconstruction. Finnigan (2017a) provides reasons to think that some version of Buddhist consequentialism and some version of Buddhist virtue ethics can meet this condition. Stated briefly, the Four Noble Truths can justify some version of Buddhist consequentialism if one emphasizes the first noble truth and accepts a specific interpretation of the third. On this reading of the Four Noble Truths, the overarching goal of Buddhist practice is to eliminate suffering and produce *nirvāṇa*, where *nirvāṇa* is understood as a state of overall well-being. Actions (intentions, dispositions) are justified as good relative to their role in causing these outcomes. But the Four Noble Truths can also justify some version of Buddhist virtue ethics if one accepts a different interpretation of the third noble truth and emphasizes the fourth. On this alternative reading, the eightfold path

characterizes the constituents of *nirvāṇa*, understood as an enlightened way of life. Actions (intentions, dispositions) are justified as good to the extent that they are mutually dependent and reinforcing constituents of such a way of life and are collectively inconsistent with pervasive and unwanted suffering. Both accounts involve consequences of a sort insofar as they both posit conditional relations between their various constituents. But in one case the evaluative relation is instrumental and assumes an *external* relation between the evaluated item (means) and the basis of evaluation (effect). And in the other, the evaluative relation is constitutive and assumes an *internal* regulative relation between the evaluated item and other aspects of the relevant system or way of life.

There is a lot to be said about this distinction. Versions of it are widely employed in contemporary Buddhist scholarship, and are respectively related to utilitarianism and virtue ethics. They do not readily map onto what contemporary Buddhist philosophers defend in their name, however. The Buddhist consequentialism of Goodman (2009), for instance, looks an awful lot like the version of Buddhist virtue ethics outlined above. There is also reason to think that both reconstructions of Buddhist ethics can satisfy the remaining two conditions Finnigan (2017a) identifies as necessary to count as a justified reconstruction of Buddhist moral thought. This raises important questions about whether we should embrace a genuine pluralism about Buddhist ethics. Leaving this question open, there are several positive and less controversial conclusions one could draw. A potentially positive outcome is that Buddhist consequentialism and Buddhist virtue ethics provide two distinct routes for a defender of naturalized karma to justify practices of ascribing moral responsibility and the various evaluative components of their proposed mechanism for character development. These practices or components can be justified relative to their instrumental role in eliminating suffering and producing overall well-being, or to their constitutive role in reinforcing and regulating an overall good way of living (both

individually and socially) that is inconsistent with pervasive suffering. As a result, they provide more grounds for potentially fruitful cross-cultural exchange.

Conclusion

The Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths contain several distinctive ideas that are relevant to contemporary discussions of moral psychology. This chapter has focused on debates concerning whether the Buddha's teaching of no-self is consistent with the possibility of moral responsibility; the role of retributivism in Buddhist thought; the possibility of a Buddhist account of free will; the scope and viability of recent attempts to naturalize karma to character virtues and vices; and whether and how right action is to be understood within a Buddhist framework. The discussion was not exhaustive; Buddhism contains many more themes that are relevant to moral psychology than discussed here, and there is more to be said about those that were discussed. This chapter had a more focused aim: to introduce and explore some of the more distinctive features of Buddhist moral philosophy, in the hope of inspiring further inquiry.

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