

THESIS

A DEFENSE OF BUDDHIST VIRTUE ETHICS

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

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Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2018

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## ABSTRACT

### A DEFENSE OF BUDDHIST VIRTUE ETHICS

In Chapter 1, I describe necessary dimensions of Buddhist ethics. I comment on and argue for the inclusion of the four noble truths, meditation, the four immeasurable virtues, and regulating emotion. In Chapter 2, I establish the viability of virtue ethics. I review virtue ethics from an historical perspective, look at and answer a critique of the virtues, and distinguish my version of virtue ethics from consequentialism and deontology. In Chapter 3, I defend Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics. I argue that a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhism is the most reasonable of the Western interpretations, that a virtue ethical interpretation is compatible with a non-Western approach, and finally implement the necessary dimensions from the first chapter to put forward a plausible account of Buddhist virtue ethics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Matthew MacKenzie, who is one of the most significant influences on my thoughts about Buddhism and the contents of this thesis. I also thank my committee members, Dr. Katie McShane and Dr. Christian Becker, for their time and much needed guidance. I'm particularly grateful to Ralph Hamblin, my uncle, for his indispensable criticism of the first and final draft of this thesis. I thank Dr. Rex Welshon for teaching me the value of thinking well. I often err, but my life is far, far better for pursuing careful and honest thought. I also thank Lydia Tillman, an exemplary human being, whose compassion and optimism gave me the fortitude to work through this project while grieving. Finally, I thank my parents, Dorothy and Ron. I am unendingly lucky, but my greatest fortune will always be having them as parents. Anything worthwhile in this paper is principally owed to the above-named individuals.

## DEDICATION

For my brother, Nathan Hamblin Johnson.

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## INTRODUCTION

Buddhist philosophy is more kaleidoscopic than monolithic. The Buddha is only partly responsible for the tradition's diversity, as he wasn't patently concerned with presenting a uniform philosophical system. More significantly, Buddhism has had roughly 2,500 years to spread out from India and be diversified by the sociohistorical variables of each region in which it has settled. Every culture presents various pressures that redefine the Buddhism that first touched down there. Nevertheless, Buddhism remains a coherent philosophical tradition, and understanding its diversity as interpretive differences about fundamental commitments is one way to recognize it as such.

In many ways, this thesis is an interpretive project. And while I don't resolve interpretive debates among the schools of Buddhism, I do draw on a few of their common elements in order to develop a plausible Buddhist virtue ethics. The nature of Buddhist ethics, and whether Buddhism even has an ethical system, is contested. Not only was the Buddha seemingly uninterested in systematizing his philosophy, but Buddhism doesn't appear to theorize about ethics in ways that Western philosophical traditions do. Make no mistake, moral philosophy is baked into Buddhism. It's a tradition in which the principle concern is reducing suffering for oneself and others, and Buddhist epistemology and metaphysics both participate in the reduction. However, the theory and structure of Buddhist ethics remains obscure.

As I see it, Buddhist moral philosophy is compatible with virtue ethics. Some may be suspicious of such an interpretation, but virtue ethics need not be narrowly understood. Christine Swanton rightly points out that virtue ethics is genus and not a species.<sup>1</sup> Although there is a trend

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 1.

to define virtue ethics with reference to its dominate species, neo-Aristotelianism, there are more varied conceptualizations.<sup>2</sup> The notion of virtue is the fundamental ethical concept in the various theories. However, there is disagreement about the virtues and their natures, as well as what the morally good life is and how the virtues conspire with other factors to bring it about. Understanding Buddhist ethics as a species of virtue ethics, then, is not an attempt to westernize Buddhism, but an effort to comprehend new ways of conceptualizing ourselves and our world.

In Chapter 1, I describe necessary dimensions of Buddhist ethics. Although Buddhism does not contain a unified ethical system, an ethical reconstruction that neglects or excludes certain dimensions would be disfiguring to Buddhist moral philosophy. I comment on and argue for the inclusion of the four noble truths, meditation, the four immeasurable virtues, and regulating emotion. In Chapter 2, I establish the viability of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics has had a resurgence over the last half century, and concurrently critiques of virtue ethics have also multiplied. Virtue ethics is capable of answering its objectors and prevailing as a viable normative ethical approach. I review virtue ethics from an historical perspective, look at and answer a critique of the virtues, and distinguish my version of virtue ethics from consequentialism and deontology. In Chapter 3, I defend Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics. I argue that a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhism is the most reasonable of the Western interpretations, that a virtue ethical interpretation is compatible with a non-Western approach, and finally implement the necessary dimensions from the first chapter to put forward a plausible account of Buddhist virtue ethics.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



# 1. NECESSARY DIMENSIONS OF BUDDHIST ETHICS

Buddhist philosophy does not contain a unified ethical system. Yet a reconstruction of Buddhist ethics that neglects or excludes certain dimensions would be disfiguring to Buddhist moral philosophy. I cover these dimensions in Chapter 1.

In §1.1, I survey the four noble truths. First, I define suffering and then examine its causes. Following that, I walk back the causes of suffering and comment on the path that leads to its cessation. Buddhist moral philosophy telescopes out of the truths, and although their multiple parts seem overwhelming, above all, the parts are working to map out suffering, its origins, and the path to its elimination. I canvass meditation in § 1.2. First, I appraise two types of attention necessary for meditation and then consider two kinds of mediation specific to Buddhism. The kinds of meditation and types of attention they incorporate are integral to developing virtues and regulating emotion. In § 1.3, I introduce four Buddhist virtues. I put forward a distinction for moral appraisal and justification and then evaluate the virtues alongside meditative practices for their cultivation. The virtues are characterized across a handful of domains and fundamentally represent positive traits that are necessary for developing and acting on moral sensibilities and sensitivities. I look at a Buddhist theory of emotion in § 1.4. I describe the factors that constitute a Buddhist theory of emotion, explain the variables that compose disturbing emotions, and finish with an analysis of regulating emotion.

## 1.1 *The Four Noble Truths*

The Buddha's four noble truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*)<sup>3</sup> form the foundation of Buddhist moral philosophy, and their omission from an ethical reconstruction of Buddhism would be

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<sup>3</sup> Pāli forms are cited throughout. Sanskrit (Skt.) and Tibetan (Tib.) are cited where they are more applicable.

perplexing. The truths are: (1) suffering is ubiquitous in human experience; (2) suffering has causes; (3) eliminating the causes ends suffering; and (4) there is a method to end suffering. The first truths explain how suffering is caused by the parallel operation of misunderstanding reality and dysfunctionally engaging phenomena in virtue of that misunderstanding. The final truth offers a way to eliminate suffering by transforming our understanding of the world and undermining our dysfunctional orientation to it. There are then four truths.

The first noble truth is the truth of suffering (*dukkha*). The claim is that suffering is ubiquitous in human experience. The term ‘suffering’ is multi-layered with a wide range of meanings; *dukkha* extends far beyond that scope. We stub toes and have toothaches. Some of us get sick temporarily, and some fall ill indefinitely. These physical pains are obvious types of suffering, and creatures like us frequently encounter them. There are also more subtle types of suffering. Grieving, for instance, feels oppressive, and assimilating a loss, while also yearning for things to be otherwise, is more unpleasant still.

Buddhists are primarily concerned with subtler types of suffering, and these arise from existential confusions about the nature of reality. The confusions are characterized by cognitive distortions or errors. Buddhists maintain that all phenomena are impermanent (*anicca*), ultimately dissatisfactory (*dukkha*), and not the self (*anattā*).<sup>4</sup> These characterizations of phenomena are referred to as the three marks of conditioned existence (*tilakkhaṇa*). Failing to recognize the marks instantiate cognitive distortions that result in suffering.

Phenomena coalesce and sooner or later their bonds come apart. This is the impermanent nature of all phenomena. Some kinds of impermanence, like cracks of lightning, are easily

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<sup>4</sup> *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), SN 22.9-11, 867-868.

perceived, and other kinds of impermanence, like a galaxy's lifespan, are difficult to even comprehend. Yet, whatever the phenomenon, it's changing, and there is no permanence in its form or life.

Phenomena are also constituted in ways that cause dissatisfaction. The world is a cornucopia of physical and emotional stimuli that sometimes provides satisfaction. Yet satisfaction is impermanent because impermanent objects don't bring about permanent satisfaction. Hence, all phenomena are ultimately dissatisfactory. Indeed, we can imagine having some desire satisfied permanently, but those ideas signal a more profound kind of dissatisfaction. We know that the world often leaves us unfulfilled. That it is unmoved despite our desires. We know that we are vulnerable to sickness, old age, and death. Fundamentally, we know that the world is not under our control, that it won't bend to our will, and that our lives are subject to forces greater than our own. The dissatisfaction that comes from knowing these things characterizes the second mark of conditioned existence.

The third mark of conditioned existence is no self. No self is understood in terms of impermanence. Since phenomena are impermanent, nothing retains an absolute identity. The no self doctrine in Buddhism is the denial of anything ontologically or metaphysically distinct among or over and above the factors that comprise a person. According to Buddhists, a person is composed of five aggregates or heaps (*khandhas*) and nothing more.<sup>5</sup> The aggregates are form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), memory and disposition (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

Form refers to all physical phenomena, namely, the body. Sensation designates the basic affective tones that go with each experience, their pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral character.

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<sup>5</sup> SN 22.48, 886-887.

Apperception is the mark of perception. Memory and disposition encompass the conditioned cognitive-affective-conative domains of human experience. Consciousness refers to an awareness that accompanies the other four aggregates or awareness of or about psychophysical states and events. When one experiences a pleasant sensation, for instance, that experience includes both the sensation aggregate and the consciousness aggregate. Likewise, the thought that it is raining outside includes both the memory and disposition aggregate and the consciousness aggregate. Indeed, each aggregate should be seen as containing the others, as they depend on, and are a function of, each other.

Our bodies are examples of form. They are organized out of material elements that continuously die and replenish. Our sensations are ever changing, as are our perceptions. None of these are permanent enough to function as a self. Perhaps memory and disposition functions as the self. Yet, beliefs, desires, feelings, the actions that they motivate, and the dispositions that they condition, are changeable. I am different now than I was as an adolescent, and in many ways I attribute the difference to changes in my memory and disposition. Still, I have some sense that who I was as a child and who I am now share in something fundamental, like a self. Perhaps the self is consciousness. Maybe synchronically form, sensation, perception, and memory and disposition change, but diachronically consciousness secures a self. Yet consciousness depends on these changing factors and only arises in relation to them. Consciousness, then, is ever changing too. Nothing substantial is found among the aggregates. Thus, none of the aggregates function jointly or individually as a self.

There certainly are alternatives to explaining what a self is. Yet Buddhists maintain there is nothing substantial to which the concept 'self' refers. There are, they argue, causally connected psychophysical phenomena, but nothing basic among or over and above these factors that could

function as a self. We act as if we have one, but this is a deep-seated cognitive distortion. Similarly, we act as if phenomena are permanent (which they can never be), and as if impermanent phenomena will bring us lasting satisfaction. However, suffering is pernicious as long as a tendency to reify insubstantial phenomena is present.

The Buddha's second noble truth addresses the causes of suffering. Attachment (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*), and ignorance (*moha*) are the causes of suffering (*samudaya*). These causes are known as the three unwholesome roots (*akusala-mūla*) or the three poisons (Skt. *triviṣa*). Ignorance is characterized by ignorance of the four noble truths.<sup>6</sup> That is, the dissatisfactory nature of all phenomena, the causes and elimination of dissatisfaction, and the way to end dissatisfaction. Attachment and aversion are types of craving (*taṇhā*). Craving is conative, affective, and cognitive. There is craving based on sensual pleasure, craving based on becoming, and craving based on non-becoming.<sup>7</sup> Since all sensual pleasures are temporary, none provides lasting satisfaction. Cravings of becoming and non-becoming are cravings based on a false notion about the status of the self. Thinking, feeling, and being motivated to act as if one has a self to enhance or protect characterize these two types.

The generation and exacerbation of the three unwholesome roots is systematized in the Buddhist theory of dependent origination (*prīccasamuppāda*). Dependent origination is the doctrine that all phenomena originate dependently on other phenomena. The Buddha's simplest expression of the theory is: "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises."<sup>8</sup> As it concerns the causes of suffering, there are twelve factors (*nidānas*) in the chain of

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<sup>6</sup> SN 12.1, 535.

<sup>7</sup> SN 22.31, 876.

<sup>8</sup> *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), MN 38, 355-356.

dependent origination, and each factor represents a causal relationship between cognitive states and conative and affective states.<sup>9</sup> The chain is a recursive feedback feed-forward loop: prior cognitive states condition present conative and affective states, and present conative and affective states condition future cognitive states. The twelve factors do not need individual elaboration. Crucially, ignorance about reality causes craving (attachment and aversion), and craving conditions our mode of engaging reality. This process is perpetual, compounding our ignorance, our craving, and ultimately, our suffering. The vicious cycle is known as *samsāra*, and the Buddha's third truth addresses its cessation.

Eliminating craving is the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering. Thus, if craving is eliminated, suffering is also eliminated. Fire is a metaphor that the Buddha uses to describe human experience.<sup>10</sup> One's experience, one's psychophysical organism, so the Buddha states, is on fire with suffering, and the causes must be eliminated to extinguish the fire. The three unwholesome roots fuel suffering. When the fuel is removed, the fire is extinguished. Furthermore, the three unwholesome roots are recurring factors in the cycle of dependent origination. Ignorance depends on attachment and aversion, and attachment and aversion depend on ignorance. Intervening in this cycle breaks the cycle. Actions conditioned by craving are those that entail suffering. Eliminating craving is therefore necessary for ending suffering.

The Buddha's fourth truth identifies a method to eliminate craving. The final truth articulates the path (*magga*) to end suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo aṭṭaṅgiko maggo*) is split up into three basic divisions. Those are wisdom (*paññā*), moral discipline (*sīla*), and concentration (*samādhi*). Wisdom is right view and right intention. Moral discipline is right

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<sup>9</sup> SN 12.1, 533-534.

<sup>10</sup> SN 35.28, 1145.

speech, right conduct, and right livelihood. Concentration is right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The term ‘right’ (*sammā*) qualifies each of the path’s eight domains and refers to living adeptly. The path thus comprises the most adept methods for eliminating suffering.

Right view (*sammā-ditṭhi*) understands the truth of suffering and its causes. Right intention (*sammā-sankappa*) engages the world without cognitive distortions. Right speech (*sammā-vācā*) refrains from false, divisive, malicious, and purposeless speech. Right conduct (*sammā-kammanta*) abstains from harming sentient beings. Right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*) refrains from occupations that cause suffering. Right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*) is a commitment to develop modes of engaging the world that eliminate suffering. Right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*) and right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*) are types of attention that are necessary for developing states, behaviors, and practices that enable or constitute the elimination of suffering.

The Buddha’s four noble truths are foundational to Buddhist moral philosophy. They elucidate the problem of suffering that Buddhist ethics works to solve. The truths, however, are not sufficient for Buddhist ethics. And while Buddhist ethics must at least be committed to the elimination of suffering, the factors that enable or constitute that outcome require elaboration. These other factors and their significance will occupy us for the rest of the chapter.

## 1.2 Meditation

Meditation (*jhāna*) refers to various practices that have distinct purposes and different practical outcomes. Meditation supports the elimination of suffering by disciplining one’s attention and setting up frameworks for developing virtue and regulating emotion. The scope of the term is often imprecise, and since meditation is foundational to Buddhist ethics, we will take care in revealing its meaning and purpose within the tradition.

Effort, mindfulness, and concentration comprise the Eightfold Path's concentration component. The three are trainable cognitive capacities and central to Buddhist meditation. Effort (*vāyāma*) is a resolved state to abandon modes of engaging the world that cause suffering and cultivate modes that reduce or eliminate suffering. The mark of effort is a commitment to dissolving the three unwholesome roots. Mindfulness (*sati*) refers to a cognitive capacity to hold something in attention and keep it there for some duration. Concentration (*samādhi*) refers to a cognitive capacity to stabilize an attentional object or phenomena. Mindfulness and concentration are our interests presently. Attention can be thought of as a cognitive activity that focuses objects of conscious states.<sup>11</sup>

Traditionally mindfulness indicates remembering or retention.<sup>12</sup> Mindfulness as remembering refers to holding something in attention and keeping it there over time. The duration of a mindful episode is determined by how long an object or phenomena is held in attention. If one heats water for tea, keeping that fact sustained in attention is an example of being mindful. Definitions that characterize mindfulness as present-centered and non-judgmental attention fail to

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<sup>11</sup> Rex Welshon's classification of attention is helpful. Following Welshon, attention divides into top-down (voluntary) attention and bottom-up (involuntary) attention, and both types can be internally or externally directed. Top-down attention is endogenously initiated, and bottom-up attention is brought about by some phenomena imposing upon ongoing cognitive activity. Looking for oncoming traffic before one crosses a street is an example of top-down externally directed attention. Failing to look before one crosses the street, and a car's horn alerting one to her mistake, is an example of bottom-up externally directed attention. Attending to the onset of hunger pangs is an example of bottom-up internally directed attention. Shifting attention from the hunger pangs to dinner plans is example of top-down internally directed attention. Lastly, attention is durational. Attentional episodes can be brief or sustained. *Philosophy, Neuroscience and Consciousness* (Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011), 150-151.

<sup>12</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, "What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (May 2011): 23-25; George Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centered and Non-Judgmental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (May 2011): 44-48; Rupert Gethin, "On Some Definitions of Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (May 2011): 269-271.



capture the retentive dimension of mindfulness.<sup>13</sup> Present-centered attention is attention directed at whatever phenomena is arising at present and is intended to limit mental time travel. Mental time travel refers to representing one's past through retrospection or future through prospection. Thinking about one's childhood or one's future are examples of mental time travel. Non-judgmental attention is impartial attention directed at whatever phenomena is arising and is meant to undermine the types of habitual mentation that contribute to suffering. Not rehearsing one's biases during an attentional event is the mark of non-judgmental attention. Both present-centered and non-judgmental attention are elements of mindfulness but insufficient to characterize it entirely. Its retentive dimension is also necessary.

Concentration stabilizes and enhances the presentation of an attentional object or phenomena. When, for instance, you're absorbed in gripping conversation, listening to a favorite piece of music, or engrossed in a difficult task, those phenomena are directed to the foreground of your attention, while other features of the experience withdraw into the background. The more vividly the phenomena appear, the more stable your concentration is. If your attention wanders away from the phenomena, its enhanced presentation diminishes, as it falls in with the rest of the features of the experience. Concentration can be thought of as adjusting the granularity (or scope and level of detail) of experiential features.

One way to distinguish mindfulness from concentration is to consider mindfulness as a meta-attentional or second-order attentional state and concentration as a first-order attentional state. Meta-attentional states take first-order attentional states as their object and so are states about attention. First-order attentional states are directed at internal or external phenomena but not their own operations.

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<sup>13</sup> Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centered," 43-44; Gethin, "On Some Definitions," 270.

Mindful-breathing (*ānāpānasati*) is a meditative practice. A basic type of breath meditation consists of following the inhalations and exhalations of one's breath.<sup>14</sup> The object of concentration is each drawn and expelled breath. Concentration's job is tracking the breaths and stabilizing attention on the breaths. Mindfulness retains in attention the fact that one is practicing breath meditation and consists in bringing concentration back to the breath if it wanders away. Mindfulness is meta-attentional in that it has the content of concentration as its object. In other words, it confirms that concentration is directed at the breath and brings concentration back to the breath if it strays.

Breath meditation is an instance of calm-abiding (*samatha*) meditation. Calm-abiding consists in maintaining attention on some object or phenomenon for a given duration. Concentration enhances the intended phenomenon, such as the breath, and mindfulness monitors concentration, retaining the goal and ensuring that concentration has not lost its object. Instances of calm-abiding train and discipline concentration and the receptiveness of mindfulness. Consequently, calm-abiding is foundational for more involved types of meditation.

Insight (*vipassanā*) meditation is an example of a more involved mediation type. Insight enables practitioners to recognize and undermine cognitive distortions. The most pervasive cognitive distortion is the impression of having a self. The Buddha counsels practitioners to analyze the selfless nature of the five aggregates for insight meditation.<sup>15</sup> Each aggregate should be regarded in the following way: "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self."<sup>16</sup> Suppose that a practitioner analyzes the form aggregate and considers whether the body functions as the self.

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<sup>14</sup> MN 118, 943-944.

<sup>15</sup> MN 22, 229-230; MN 112.5-6, 904.

<sup>16</sup> MN 22, 229-230.

The body (or whichever body part is being evaluated) is the attentional object, and concentration rests on and stabilizes it. Mindfulness consists of assessing whether the body functions as the self. The practitioner can imagine losing a limb and consider how that diminishes a sense of self. The practitioner can contemplate death and the body's impermanence. A variety of activities can prompt the realization that the form aggregate is neither sufficient for nor functioning as the self. The realization is an insight into a cognitive distortion about one's identity and is elicited by concentration and mindfulness operating in concert.

The previous distinctions provide a framework to appraise other types of Buddhist meditative practices. Every type incorporates some combination of concentration and mindfulness. Additionally, calm-abiding and insight meditation are the general structures that other meditative practices populate with their own elements. Their neglect from Buddhist ethics would be problematic because they facilitate the development and maintenance of moral habits, sensibilities, and sensitivities.

### 1.3 *The Four Immeasurables*

The four immeasurables (*appamaññā*) or the four divine-states (*brahāvihāras*) are ubiquitous virtues in Buddhism. The virtues are loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). These virtues encompass cognitive, affective, conative, and behavioral dimensions. Their development yields someone who is more sensitive and responsive to the moral salience of suffering, and their expressions represent a practical understanding of the Buddha's teachings. Each virtue is defined alongside a meditative practice for its development and according to its near and far enemy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I follow Buddhaghosa in using 'near enemy' to indicate a counterfeit trait that masquerades as an immeasurable virtue and 'far enemy' to designate an immeasurable's opposite.

Buddhists distinguish between qualities and activities that are unwholesome or unskillful (*akusala*) and qualities and activities that are wholesome or skillful (*kusala*). Unwholesome qualities reinforce craving and ignorance and thereby perpetuate suffering. Conversely, wholesome qualities weaken the influence of the three unwholesome roots. The distinction between unwholesome and wholesome qualities is especially useful for moral appraisal and justification. Unwholesome qualities ought to be abandoned because they cause suffering. Wholesome qualities ought to be developed and expressed because they promote the elimination of suffering. The four immeasurables are wholesome. Their near and far enemies are unwholesome.

Loving-kindness is an attitude of unconditional good will towards all beings and includes a wish that all beings find happiness and its causes. The *Mettā Sutta* characterizes loving-kindness as a maternal attitude.<sup>18</sup> Human parents have nurturant impulses and are willing to surrender every of their interests to ensure their children's welfare. Loving-kindness consists in cultivating this impulse and extending it to all beings.

Attachment is the near enemy of loving-kindness and manifests as maladaptive behavior towards its object. Predominantly, failing to recognize the three marks of conditioned existence typifies attachment. More generally, however, a misplaced sense of care towards another, such as an overprotective parent, exemplifies attachment. The attitudes of hatred or ill-will are the far enemies of loving-kindness.

One loving-kindness meditation begins by evoking loving-kindness toward oneself. Buddhaghosa, a 5<sup>th</sup> century Theravadan Buddhist, advocates evoking the attitude in the following

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<sup>18</sup> *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta)*, trans. K.R. Norman (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2001), SN 1.8, 19.

way: One should think, “‘May I be happy and free from suffering’ or ‘May I keep myself from enmity, affliction and anxiety and live happily’”.<sup>19</sup> One can imagine the parental impulse while synchronizing the statements with the in-and-out of the breath.

Once a practitioner is adept at generating loving-kindness toward herself, she widens the scope of the attitude. First, she overwhelms herself with loving-kindness, then extends it to a friend, loved one, or someone from whom she has benefited, then a neutral person (or someone from whom she has neither benefited nor been harmed), and ultimately, toward a hostile person, enemy, or someone by whom she has been harmed.<sup>20</sup> The order here is important. One wouldn't want to start with an enemy because hate or ill-will can snuff the beginnings of loving-kindness. Remembering that one is cultivating loving-kindness toward her person or others is the mark of mindfulness. The mark of concentration is stable attention on the object of one's loving-kindness. Buddhagosa's loving-kindness practice is a form of calm-abiding meditation.

Compassion is a sincere wish that all beings be free from suffering and its causes. The wish is most pronounced in Mahāyāna Buddhism, where compassion partly constitutes the *bodhisattva* path. *Bodhisattvas* are defined by their commitments to eliminate the suffering of others before their own. The 8th century Mādhyamika, Śāntideva, elucidates a *bodhisattva's* compassionate aspiration: “As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world. Whatever suffering is in store for the world, may it all ripen

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<sup>19</sup> Buddhaghosa, *The Path to Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), 289.

<sup>20</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, 290.

in me.”<sup>21</sup> Following Śāntideva, a *bodhisattva*’s compassion embraces a willingness to undergo the suffering of others, until all suffering is eliminated.

The near enemy of compassion is pity. Pity recognizes the suffering or misfortunes of others but lacks a wish to relieve their suffering. In its more acute expressions, pity involves condescension from imagining a basic difference between oneself and another.<sup>22</sup> Feeling better off at someone else’s expense, or the idiom ‘better them than me’, captures the way acute pity manifests. Cruelty is the far enemy of compassion.

Śāntideva’s ‘equalizing self and others’ (Skt. *parātmasamatā*) is one form of compassion meditation. Śāntideva recommends that “one should meditate intently on the equality of oneself and others as follows: ‘All equally experience suffering and happiness, I should look after them as I do myself.’”<sup>23</sup> Śāntideva employs the practitioner’s intuition that all beings are alike in their wish to avoid suffering and find happiness. He then presses the intuition:

8.92 Even though suffering in me does not cause distress in the bodies of others, I should nevertheless find their suffering intolerable because of the affection I have for myself,

8.93 In the same way that, though I cannot experience another’s suffering in myself, his suffering is hard for him to bear because of his affection for himself.<sup>24</sup>

Although we don’t undergo the suffering of others, we all find our own suffering intolerable. Recognizing our shared plight with others throws into relief humanity’s prevailing wish to be free from suffering, and compassion is generated through this realization. Śāntideva’s meditation is a

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<sup>21</sup> Śāntideva, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew MacKenzie, “Buddhism and the Virtues,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 159.

<sup>23</sup> Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

kind of insight meditation. Keeping the compassionate wish in mind while squaring oneself with others typifies the reciprocity between mindfulness and concentration.

Sympathetic joy is a propensity to delight in the well-being of others and involves an experience of pleasure from their joy. Matthieu Ricard states that “There are beings in this world who possess immense qualities, others who benefit humanity greatly and are crowned with success, and others who, simply, are more talented than we, or happier, or more successful.”<sup>25</sup> The mark of sympathetic joy is being wonderstruck by these beings, hoping that their qualities don’t diminish, but persist and increase.

Joys that are biased by attachment are the near enemies of sympathetic joy.<sup>26</sup> Experiencing joy only for those whom we care about or at the expense of another’s welfare represents biased joys. Sympathetic joy should not be bounded by one’s attachments but born from the understanding that all beings are equal in their dislike of suffering and desire for happiness. When we care equally for the welfare of others, we rejoice in their happiness unconditionally, and never take joy in someone doing well at the expense of another’s welfare. Envy is the far enemy of sympathetic joy.

Sympathetic joy can be cultivated by adopting another’s point of view. Following Ricard, the practice can be termed ‘putting oneself in the other’s place’.<sup>27</sup> The practice is intended for strengthening empathy but can be co-opted for producing sympathetic joy. To practice, one reflects on the positive qualities of others and appreciates them as if they were her own. Concentration consists of holding attention on another’s experience and imagining what the experience is like.

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<sup>25</sup> Matthieu Ricard, *Altruism* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2015), 264.

<sup>26</sup> MacKenzie, “Buddhism and the Virtues,” 159.

<sup>27</sup> Ricard, *Altruism*, 43-46

Ensuring that one adopts the other's viewpoint and doesn't slip into mere comparison characterizes mindfulness. Realizing how it would feel to undergo the other's experience produces sympathetic joy. The practice is an example of insight meditation.

Equanimity is cognitive and affective stability and unbiased treatment toward all beings. The *Dhātuvihaṅga Sutta* names someone who has cultivated equanimity 'the sage at peace,' and describes her phenomenology as neither clinging to, nor grasping at, nor delighting in, sensorial experiences.<sup>28</sup> On this account, if one is equanimous, she neither yearns nor is disturbed. When she undergoes pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensations, she recognizes that they are marked by impermanence and dissatisfaction, and none fundamentally enhances or diminishes her *self*. Essentially, her psychological life doesn't bowl her over.

The near enemy of equanimity is indifference. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, observes that humans segregate others into three groups, "those to whom we feel close, those for whom we feel aversion, and those to whom we are indifferent."<sup>29</sup> When we bias our attitudes, wishes, and dispositions, we hold some close, others at a distance, and neglect some altogether. Through meditative training, however, humans can identify everyone's welfare as significant. As Ricard puts it, the sun shines over all beings, distributing heat and light in all directions, and just as some receive more heat or light due to various factors, so in our relationships some naturally receive more attention.<sup>30</sup> Yet practical attention does not logically entail exclusion of or

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<sup>28</sup> MN 140, 1087-1096.

<sup>29</sup> Dalai Lama, *Stages of Meditation*, trans. Geshe Lobsang Jordhen, Losang Choephel Ganchenpa, and Jeremy Russell (New York: Snow Lion, 2003), 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ricard, *Altruism*, 27-28.



indifference to others. The sun does not neglect trash heaps in favor of beaches.<sup>31</sup> The far enemy of equanimity is greed, which manifests as an excessive penchant toward its object.

The Tibetan Buddhist, Tsongkapa, elucidates a number of meditative practices for training equanimity.<sup>32</sup> Establishing unbiased treatment toward other beings is our interest presently.

Tsongkapa recommends that:

Since you can easily be impartial to a person toward whom you have neutral feelings, first take as the object of your meditation such a person, someone who has neither helped nor harmed you. Achieve an even mindedness toward this person, removing your attachment or [aversion].

Once you have attained this, then cultivate even-mindedness toward a friend. Your lack of even-mindedness toward this friend is either because of the degree of your attachment for him or her or because of the bias from your attachment and [aversion].

After you achieve an even-mindedness toward this friend, cultivate it toward an enemy. Your lack of even-mindedness toward this person is due to your [aversion], viewing him or her as totally disagreeable. After you are even-minded toward this person, finally cultivate it toward all living beings.<sup>33</sup>

Everyone is affected by the three unwholesome roots. One's enemies feel as helpless to attachment and aversion as oneself, and one's friends and family are not immune to the unwholesome roots either. Yet, one's thoughts, wishes, and emotional tendencies can change, and just as it is possible for one's psychological set to change, so in others lies that same potential, however latent. One does not cultivate equanimity for malevolent actions but for the possibility that their causes will be eliminated in others. Concentration sustains others in attention, while mindfulness verifies and safeguards even-handedness towards them. The outcome of this insight mediation is a perception that there is minimal difference among friends, enemies, and neutral persons in their potential to be free from conditions that cause suffering.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Tsongkhapa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, trans. The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee (Boston: Snow Lion, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Tsongkhapa, *Lamrim*, 36-37.

Evoking equanimity is not proprietary to the last-mentioned meditation. Each of the meditations in this section have the benefit of engendering psychological stability. If, however, psychological stability is what one wants to train, then breath meditation is ideal.

The foregoing meditations for developing the four immeasurables are but smattering of meditative practices. Buddhism abounds with meditations that riff on the same themes. Ultimately, cultivating the immeasurables manages the development of moral habits by drawing on and strengthening cognitive and affective capacities to identify the moral salience of suffering, and shaping motivational dispositions to want, and behavioral dispositions to act for, its elimination. Their presence is therefore necessary in Buddhist ethics.

#### 1.4 *The Role of Emotion*

Regulating emotion is a cornerstone in Buddhist moral philosophy. Unwholesome emotions like anger are intrinsically unpleasant, cognitively distorting, and cause us to act imprudently. They can thus cause considerable suffering. This last section considers a Buddhist theory of emotion and the elimination of suffering through regulating emotion.<sup>34</sup>

Emotion is understood as arising within the complex of variables that make up a person, specifically, the five aggregates. Emotions, then, are dynamic states or events that incorporate cognitive and bodily elements. Something like amusement, for instance, is characterized by a lightened feeling which is reinforced by laughter. The bodily sensation and object of amusement are appraised as pleasant, and that appraisal is cognitively loaded, based on ideas, beliefs, or expectations. The coupling of affect and cognition in the generation of amusement is a feature of

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<sup>34</sup> Although there is not an equivalent term for ‘emotion’ in Pāli, Sanskrit, or Tibetan, Buddhists have exhaustive descriptions of states that correspond to the term and ideal frameworks for mapping and appreciating emotions.

every emotion on the Buddhist account. Consequently, emotions are not reducible to either affect or cognition but feature both affective and cognitive components.

The relationship between affect and cognition is further explained using the formula of dependent origination. Sensation is one factor in the twelve-member series. Sensations emerge whenever one of the six sense organs meets its object.<sup>35</sup> This process is called contact (*phassa*).<sup>36</sup> Vision, audition, olfaction, gustation, and touch compose five of the sense organs; the sixth is the mind, with cognition as its object. Buddhists argue that just as the eye has visible form as its object, so the mind has cognitive operations as its.

In the twelve-member series of dependent origination, contact conditions sensation; sensation conditions craving; and craving conditions grasping or clinging.<sup>37</sup> Imagine receiving praise. The perception of praise is contact. A pleasant sensation arises concurrently with the perception. Craving emerges when one persists in prolonging the sensation. Thus, when being praised, the mark of craving is yearning for further approval in virtue of earlier praise. Grasping (*upādāna*) refers to seeking some phenomena to inflate one's sense of self or sidestepping it in order to avoid diminishing one's sense of self. Thinking, feeling, and being motivated to act in ways that safeguard approval signals grasping. Grasping typifies reification of the self and therefore a failure to recognize the three marks of conditioned existence.

The link between contact and grasping is a function of the underlying tendencies (*anusaya*). Following the Buddha: “the underlying tendency to [attachment] underlies pleasant [sensations]. The underlying tendency to aversion underlies [unpleasant sensations]. The underlying tendency

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<sup>35</sup> MN 9, 139.

<sup>36</sup> MN 9, 139-140.

<sup>37</sup> SN 12.44, 581-582.

to ignorance underlies [neutral sensations].”<sup>38</sup> Our sensations, in other words, prime us to respond to the world in basic ways. If the underlying tendencies are not managed, we habituate craving and ignorance through ongoing engagements. Additionally, the three unwholesome roots are embodied in the underlying tendencies, and therefore their elimination is necessary for overcoming suffering.

As the Buddha puts it:

that one shall here and now make an end of suffering without abandoning the underlying tendencies to [attachment towards] pleasant [sensations], without abolishing the underlying tendency to aversion towards [unpleasant sensations], without extirpating the underlying tendency to ignorance in regard to [neutral sensations], without abandoning ignorance and arousing true knowledge—this is impossible.<sup>39</sup>

The Buddha’s claim is that understanding the truth of suffering is insufficient for eliminating its causes. One must practically engage and eradicate the underlying tendencies to the three unwholesome roots. Emotions are instrumental in either provoking the underlying tendencies or extinguishing them.

Emotions such as lust, hatred, and conceit are unwholesome. Foremost, they signal the three unwholesome roots. What’s more, they disturb or suppress wholesome emotions. Emotions like generosity and love are wholesome. They contrast the underlying tendencies to attachment, aversion, and ignorance, and accordingly, they express non-attachment (*alobha*), non-aversion (*adosa*), and non-ignorance (*amoha*). Crucially, the absence of the three unwholesome roots does not guarantee the generation of wholesome emotions because emotions are composed of other variables. However, emotions that have attachment, aversion, and ignorance as a variable are unwholesome. Conversely, emotions that have non-attachment, non-aversion, and non-ignorance as a variable are wholesome.

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<sup>38</sup> MN 44, 401.

<sup>39</sup> MN 148, 1134-1135.

With a basic structural analysis of emotion in place, let's turn our attention to regulating emotion. Intentionally intervening in emotional experience is one way to think about regulating emotion. I follow Emily McRae in considering this approach.<sup>40</sup> McRae conceives of intentional intervention as an ability to choose our emotional experiences.<sup>41</sup> She defines choice as "a general sense of having control of or facility with our emotional experiences as well as the capacity to directly, intentionally and through our own power influence our emotional dispositions."<sup>42</sup>

McRae distinguishes between objects and causes of emotion.<sup>43</sup> Objects are what our emotions are directed at (or what they are about). We often explain the occurrence of emotion with reference to its object, but objects are not the sole causes of emotion. For instance, I may be disappointed with the local grocer's cereal selection, but the grocer's feeble selection is neither the sole nor significant cause of my disappointment. Rather, my unfulfilled penchant for a certain cereal is. McRae sees space to intervene in emotion by addressing these other causes, which are often less distinct than their objects.<sup>44</sup>

McRae, following Tsongkapa, considers three main causes of emotion. The first is the intentional 'object' or "who or what the emotion is about,"<sup>45</sup> the second is the 'subject' or "the being who is experiencing the emotion,"<sup>46</sup> and the third is 'the basis' or "the basic predispositions

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<sup>40</sup> Emily McRae, "Emotions, Ethics, and Choice: Lessons from Tsongkapa," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 19 (2012).

<sup>41</sup> McRae, "Emotions, Ethics, and Choice," 346.

<sup>42</sup> McRae, "Emotions, Ethics, and Choice," 347.

<sup>43</sup> McRae, "Emotions, Ethics, and Choice," 348.

<sup>44</sup> McRae, "Emotions, Ethics, and Choice," 349-350.

<sup>45</sup> McRae, "Emotions, Ethics, and Choice," 350.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

toward certain emotional responses and against others.”<sup>47</sup> McRae argues that successful intervention in one’s emotional experience engages these three causes.<sup>48</sup>

McRae imagines a ‘harmdoer’ and a ‘meditator.’<sup>49</sup> The harmdoer is possessed by anger and lashes out at the meditator, and even though the meditator feels anger toward the harmdoer, she doesn’t act on it. We can imagine, McRae thinks, three advantages the meditator has for intervening in emotion that the harmdoer lacks.<sup>50</sup> First, the meditator has some meditative prowess which allows her to be attentive to the onset of unwholesome emotions. Second, her attentiveness makes possible addressing disturbing emotions before they are too strong. Finally, the meditator has methods for practically intervening in unwholesome emotions when they threaten to overwhelm.

The meditator’s practical interventions rely on her awareness of the complex causal ancestry of an emotional experience. When, for example, we fail to acknowledge certain bases of an emotion, and mistakenly think that some object is its sole cause, we’re prevented from successfully intervening in the emotion because the actual nature of our emotional experience is distorted by misperceptions. The meditator, however, looks past an emotion’s object and reflects on the predispositions or moods that set her up to experience the emotion. This ability makes inroads into practically engaging emotional experience. Rather than retaliating in anger against the harmdoer, the meditator recognizes that the harmdoer’s anger is the result of numerous causes and conditions, and that just as the harmdoer’s anger is misguided, so also is her own if she responds

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> McRae, “Emotions, Ethics, and Choice,” 361.

<sup>49</sup> McRae, “Emotions, Ethics, and Choice,” 363.

<sup>50</sup> McRae, “Emotions, Ethics, and Choice,” 346.

in kind. The meditator therefore regulates emotions by intervening in them when they are forming, whereas the harmdoer fails to regulate her emotions because either she doesn't intervene prior to lashing out, or she tries, but is unsuccessful.<sup>51</sup>

### 1.5 *Summary*

The four noble truths are the heart of Buddhist moral philosophy. They elucidate the problem of suffering that Buddhist ethics works to solve. Its solution, as I have presented it, involves disciplining one's attention through specific meditative practices, developing and expressing certain virtues, and regulating emotion. These factors manage the formation of moral habits that correspond to the Buddha's teachings, and shape moral sensibilities and sensitivities that facilitate one's ability to first recognize the moral salience suffering and then act to eliminate it. These factors, with the four noble truths at their center, are necessary dimensions of Buddhist ethics. Its moral program of eliminating suffering succeeds with them and fails without them.

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<sup>51</sup> McRae, "Emotions, Ethics, and Choice," 364.

## 2. THE VIABILITY OF VIRTUE ETHICS

Whereas deontological theories give priority to principles or duties, and consequentialist ones give priority to the consequences of actions, virtue ethics are chiefly concerned with the notion of virtue and the character of agents. This chapter is an examination of the viability of virtue ethics.

I explain virtue ethics via Aristotle and Nietzsche in § 2.1. First, I define virtue for both Aristotle and Nietzsche and then look at the justification for Aristotelian and Nietzschean virtues. Second, I explain why Aristotle and Nietzsche have misgivings about principle-based ethics. Third, I consider how Aristotelian and Nietzschean virtues are habituated. In § 2.2, I look at findings in social psychology that some philosophers use to cast doubt on the philosophical status and possibility of virtue. I argue that a more nuanced account of the virtues wouldn't face the problems they notice. First, I survey the findings and then summarize the claims against the virtues. Next, I show that the experiments have a flawed account of the virtues and then briefly review a better account. In § 2.3, I draw from John Dewey to distinguish my version of virtue ethics from consequentialism and deontology. First, I reject a clear distinction between means and ends, and after that I describe a necessary connection between means and habit. Second, I understand habit as integral to reason. Finally, I explain the value of prioritizing habit.

### *2.1 Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Virtue Ethics*

Aristotle's virtue ethics is a benchmark, and Nietzsche can be seen as continuing Aristotle's project of appraising our best and worst qualities and recommending virtues that enable or constitute our highest good. Where their thinking diverges, the contrast proves helpful, and where they meet, they complement each other. This section is neither a defense nor an endorsement of



their respective approaches, and while it's a lean sketch, a better look at virtue ethics is gained by engaging them both.

Aristotle distinguishes between intellectual and moral virtues. His conception of moral virtue is our concern presently. Nancy Sherman defines moral virtues for Aristotle as “character states that dispose us to respond well to the conditions of human life through both wisely chosen action and appropriate emotions.”<sup>52</sup> Virtues on this account are dispositions to experience particular feelings in, and have fitting responses to, specific situations.

Nietzsche follows Aristotle in thinking that virtues are states or traits of character that properly dispose us to certain states of affairs. He claims that virtues are “refined passions and enhanced states,”<sup>53</sup> and that a virtue is “a way of thinking and behaving that, once it has become a habit, instinct, and passion, will dominate.”<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche's definition, like Aristotle's, cuts across cognitive and affective system. Nietzsche's use of instinct, however, suggests goal directedness and purposiveness. Hence, for Nietzsche, virtues also involve conative systems.

*Eudaimonia* refers to a flourishing life, and it justifies Aristotelian virtues as right or good. Each Aristotelian virtue promotes its own value and enables or constitutes *eudaimonia*. Courage and temperance, two Aristotelian virtues, are demonstrative of this. The mark of courage is confidently putting oneself in danger for the well-being of others, and temperance is exhibited in acting for one's psychophysical welfare. Since courageous actions may bring about harm or death, the aims of courage and temperance are distinct.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, they represent different values. Yet

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<sup>52</sup> Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 148.

<sup>54</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 93.

<sup>55</sup> Although the aims of Aristotelian virtues are distinct, Aristotle maintains that the virtues are compatible with one another, i.e. Aristotle's thesis of the unity of virtues. According to Aristotle's thesis, the mature

courage hardly seems compatible with *eudaimonia*. Trauma will impair one's ability to flourish, and death will surely undermine it. Yet courage requires possibly suffering trauma or death because if one chooses cowardice instead of courage, that choice will spoil subsequent possibilities for a flourishing life. In all, courage and temperance, like other Aristotelian virtues, make separate demands on an agent, and these demands are distinct in value.

Nietzschean health consists in the acquisition and enhancement of power, and that justifies Nietzschean virtues. Nietzsche does not universalize every virtue because not all expressions enable Nietzschean health.<sup>56</sup> There are virtues exemplified in every healthy life, but some virtues are only consistent with certain kinds of healthy lives. Virtues such as discipline and solitude are found in every healthy life.<sup>57</sup> They help their possessor augment power. Yet virtues such as chastity, humility, and poverty are specific to particular kinds of healthy lives.<sup>58</sup> For philosophers, these ascetic virtues are means to Nietzschean health. They help the philosopher develop discipline and become and overcome who she is. In nobility, however, chastity, humility, and poverty are not embraced. Nobility take pleasure in sexual activities, are prideful, and abhor poverty (for themselves).<sup>59</sup> Being in opposition to the herd brings about their discipline and solitude, and fundamentally, Nietzschean health. Consequently, Nietzschean virtues are justified insofar as their expressions enable the acquisition and enhancement of power.

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moral agent possesses all the virtues and cannot truly possess courage unless she is also temperate, just, truthful, and so on. Certain virtues will be preeminent in different individuals, but for Aristotle the fully virtuous agent will also possess every other virtue. Susan Wolf provides a plausible account of Aristotle's thesis in her "Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues."

<sup>56</sup> Rex Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press, 2004), 197.

<sup>57</sup> Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, 198.

<sup>58</sup> Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, 198-199.

<sup>59</sup> Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, 199.

Principles can be drawn out of Aristotelian and Nietzschean virtues, but neither Aristotle nor Nietzsche proceed in this way. Aristotle recognizes the limitations of principles in matters of morality.<sup>60</sup> Its landscapes are particulars that continuously shift, and even rules of thumb admit exceptions.<sup>61</sup> For Nietzsche, there are too many people, populating different stations with idiosyncratic psychologies, to spell out which activities are appropriate for everyone at all times.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, ethics that emphasize deontic considerations deemphasize affect and the complex of motivations that shape our ethical behaviors.<sup>63</sup>

Aristotle's and Nietzsche's impressions of morality reflect the idea that moral behavior is a function of an individual's psychological and behavioral dispositions and local features of her situation. People have quirky psychologies and occupy a variety of different social groups and systems. Moral behavior is therefore dynamic and not solely a matter of conforming to principles, as they don't properly account for the manifold social-psychological combinations. Since spelling out principles to act on is a non-starter for both Aristotle and Nietzsche, the most suitable way to shape and direct moral behavior is by adjusting our psychological and behavioral habits by developing virtues that correspond to one's and others' highest good.

Aristotle reasons that practice is the author of habit.<sup>64</sup> If we want to acquire or habituate virtues, we do so by practicing or expressing them. Aristotle likens this process to the development of any skill.<sup>65</sup> Musicians, tradespeople, and athletes alike become proficient in their occupation by

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<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Barlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1142a12-29, 125.

<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b15-24, 124.

<sup>62</sup> Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, 196.

<sup>63</sup> Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, 195.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1-3, 26-31.

<sup>65</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a33-b3, 26-27.

continuously practicing. Likewise, humans become virtuous by practicing virtuous activities. A few things here are worth noting about Aristotle's model. First, training and developing virtues is an active and ongoing process.<sup>66</sup> If inclined, one can develop virtues, relying on the same techniques by which other skills are acquired. If disinclined, however, the virtues will fizzle out or not materialize at all. Second, the amount of time spent developing a virtue means little if one's practice is unfitting of that virtue. We don't, in other words, become skilled in something by repetition alone. We develop a skill by practicing in ways that are appropriate to the activity.

Nietzsche's reflections on virtuous and vicious exemplars and their distinct kinds of lives find purchase in talking about how we habituate Nietzschean virtues. The exemplars model the kinds of conduct that one in a similar position should possess or be rid of, as well as what practices are suited or not suited to that lifestyle. They point out social institutions that should be disengaged from and chastised, as well as institutions that should be engaged with and supported. That said, since certain Nietzschean virtues are particular to distinct kinds of lives, and being that virtues include cognitive, affective, and conative elements, imitating exemplars is itself not sufficient to habituate the virtues. Deliberation on the values or flaws of Nietzsche's discussions is also necessary, as is coordinating and modifying one's lot in life for the sake of realizing a virtue appropriate to it.

Having sketched Aristotle's and Nietzsche's respective virtue ethical approaches, it's worth recasting a few points. For them, virtues are particularly good traits of character that properly dispose one to certain states of affairs. Their respective virtue ethics emphasize the development and expression of certain virtues over following principles and insist on their centrality in moral development and behavior. Whether virtues are inculcated in the same way as other skills, and the

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<sup>66</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b25, 27.

extent to which imitation will meaningfully contribute to developing a virtue, is open to question. It's likely that certain skill acquisition processes, such as imitation, are only necessary for developing virtue. Explicating the sufficiency conditions will therefore make for a more viable virtue ethical approach.

## 2.2 *The Social Psychological Critique*

Certain findings in social psychology seem to cast doubt on the philosophical status and possibility of virtue. If the findings bear scrutiny, then virtue ethics are not practical. I review the relevant social psychological experiments and their findings that some philosophers use to problematize virtues. I critique the experiments' methodologies for operationalizing traits to show that they are employing a flawed account of the virtues and then briefly look at a more plausible account.

Virtues are conceived of as a species of character traits. Empirical findings in social psychology indicate that character traits are deficient in influencing behavior and that situational variables determine behavior to a greater degree. In casting doubt on character traits, the status of virtue is also called into question. The findings specifically problematize the cross-situational consistency of character traits. A trait is cross-situationally consistent if someone possessing the trait exhibits trait-relevant behaviors across a variety of different situations that are relevant to the appraisal of that trait. Take honesty as our trait. Honesty is cross-situationally consistent if one exhibits honesty across a number of different situations in which being dishonest is possible.

Hartshorne and May's *Studies in the Nature of Character* (1928) were the first to raise doubts about the cross-situational consistency of traits.<sup>67</sup> Three situations were deployed to test

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<sup>67</sup> Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May, *Studies in the Nature of Character, Vol. 1: Studies in Deceit* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

honesty in school children: a stealing situation, in which there is an opportunity to steal money that is left on a desk; a lying situation, in which there is an opportunity to prevent another child from getting in trouble by lying; and a cheating situation, in which there is an opportunity to cheat by changing one's test answers.

Owen Flanagan discusses Hartshorne and May's initial findings:

[They] had expected to find that there really were honest persons and dishonest persons, distributed bimodally on an honesty-dishonesty scale. Instead, they found that most children are dishonest to a moderate degree, and that scrupulous honesty in one context, such as a testing situation, failed to predict behavior in a different context, such as a stealing situation.<sup>68</sup>

We intuitively think that someone disposed to honesty would exhibit honest behavior across a number of different situations. Yet, according to Hartshorne and May's findings, this is not the case, and possessing honesty in one situation fails to predict and produce honest behavior in other situations. Hartshorne and May conclude that honesty is not a trait but a function of situational variables.

Philosophers that are sympathetic to Hartshorne and May's findings often draw on Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments (1963)<sup>69</sup> and Darley and Batson's Good Samaritan experiments (1973)<sup>70</sup> to dispute efficacy of traits in behavior.

Milgram's experiments tasked a test subject or 'teacher' with asking questions and administering shocks to a person or 'learner' in a neighboring room whenever that person gave a wrong answer. Every time the learner gave a wrong answer, the teacher administered a shock and then increased the voltage. Unbeknownst to the teacher, the learner was in league with the

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<sup>68</sup> Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 290-291.

<sup>69</sup> Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1963): 371-378.

<sup>70</sup> John M. Darley and Daniel Batson, "'From Jerusalem to Jericho': Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27, no. 1 (1973): 100-108.

experimenters, and the shocks were a ruse. The learners were instructed to answer questions incorrectly, express agony for each shock, and ultimately, if the experiment carried on to its end, feign unconsciousness by making no sounds at all. If a teacher voiced concerns about continuing, an experimenter prodded the teacher to continue with a series of firm replies. All of the teachers increased the shocks to 300 volts, and 65 percent of the teachers increased the shock voltage to its maximum, 450 volts.

Darley and Batson's experiments commissioned some test subjects from the Princeton Theological Seminary with preparing a talk on the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan and others with a talk on job opportunities for seminary graduates. Once the subjects were prepared, they were sent to another building on campus to give their talk. The experimenters told some subjects that they were running very late, others that they were going to be just on time, and others that they'd have time to spare. When the subjects were crossing to the other building, a collaborator of the experimenters was slumped over in a doorway, coughing and groaning in pain. 63 percent of the subjects with time to spare stopped to help. 45 percent of the subjects who were going to be just on time stopped to help. And only 10 percent of the subjects running very late stopped to help.

Philosophers like John Doris and Gilbert Harman argue that these experiments show that people do not in fact possess the kinds of traits virtue ethical theories suppose they do.<sup>71</sup> The core of their argument is that situational variables determine behavior more than traits.<sup>72</sup> Milgram's experiments are indicative of the power of exogenous influences on behavior, and likewise, the situational variable of running late impacted behavior to the greatest degree in Darley and Batson's

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<sup>71</sup> John M. Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," *Nous* 32, no. 4 (Dec. 1998): 508; Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, vol. 99 (1999): 316.

<sup>72</sup> Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," 519; Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," 321-325.

experiments. Harman concludes that traits have little to do with influencing behavior, and there is no empirical evidence to support the existence of traits.<sup>73</sup> Doris's concludes that we should give up on characterological assessments of moral behavior because it is not likely that most people have the kinds of traits we ascribe, nor is it likely that traits are developable to the degree that virtue ethics requires.<sup>74</sup>

The foregoing experiments demonstrate the potential for situational variables to greatly influence behavior. I agree with Doris and Harmon on this point. However, Doris and Harmon are arguing against a flawed account of the virtues. Critiquing the experiments' methodologies for operationalizing traits throws this problem into relief. I follow Gopal Sreenivansan in addressing this issue.<sup>75</sup>

First, Hartshorne and May overlook what counts as honest behavior for the test subjects. This objection problematizes which responses count as trait-relevant responses. In the stealing situation, for example, not taking the change is what Hartshorne and May count as the honest response.<sup>76</sup> We can imagine, however, that one of the children accepts 'finders-keepers' and believes that by finding change, she is entitled to keep it.<sup>77</sup> This child would regard taking loose change as consistent with honest behavior in the lying and cheating situations. Thus, Hartshorne and May's specifications for what counts as honest behavior are not sufficient evidence for inconsistent behavior.

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<sup>73</sup> Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," 329.

<sup>74</sup> Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," 513-514.

<sup>75</sup> Gopal Sreenivansan, "Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution," *Mind* 111, no. 441 (Jan. 2002).

<sup>76</sup> Sreenivansan, "Errors about Errors," 58.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*



Next, it's not clear that Hartshorne and May's situations are actually paradigmatic situations for eliciting honest behaviors. This issue problematizes whether the situations are adequate to elicit trait-relevant responses. For example, whereas shoplifting is a clear case of stealing, taking loose change from a desk is not.<sup>78</sup> Taking loose change from a desk is opportunistic, and shoplifting is calculated. Further, supposing that one of the students does believe in 'finders keepers,' then for that student, taking loose change from a desk is not a paradigmatic case for eliciting honesty. Assuming, however, that every test subject does think that taking loose change from a desk is stealing, it still does not appear to be a clear case of stealing. If the situations are not sufficient to elicit trait-relevant responses, then they are not adequate for picking out a trait's cross-situational inconsistency.

Lastly, Hartshorne and May don't account for features of a situation that can defeat reasons for behaving honestly. This criticism problematizes which responses count as trait-relevant responses and whether the situations are adequate to elicit trait-relevant responses. In the lying situation, for instance, lying will prevent another child from getting into trouble. As such, the act of lying functions to bring about something good.<sup>79</sup> So even if the situation is sufficient to elicit an honesty-relevant response, and even if a test subject concedes to her dishonesty in the situation, what follows is that reasons for expressing traits may be defeated by other significant situational variables, not that a trait like honesty doesn't exist.

Sreenivansan's objections to Hartshorne and May's methodology shows that tying an account of the virtues too closely to a situation's objective features neglects how individuals interpret situations. Objective features are aspects of situations that are characterized

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<sup>78</sup> Sreenivansan, "Errors about Errors," 59.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

independently of test subjects by experimenters.<sup>80</sup> The experiments of Milgram and of Darley and Batson also neglect the meanings situations have for individuals.

In Milgram's obedience experiments the question under investigation is: "If an experimenter tells a subject to hurt another person, under what conditions will the subject go along with the instruction, and under what conditions will he refuse to obey."<sup>81</sup> Let us grant that a 'refusal to obey' represents a trait-relevant behavior for courage. It would not follow that compliance is incompatible with courage. First, the Milgram experiments are directed at eliciting compliance and neutralizing non-compliant behaviors. The experiments thus are not paradigmatic situations for eliciting trait relevant behaviors, such as acting courageously.

Next, significant situational variables in the Milgram experiments can defeat reasons for exhibiting trait-relevant behaviors. The likeliest point for a test subject to quit would be when a learner withdraws consent. Yet the learners will not withdraw consent to stop the shocks because they are collaborating with the experimenters. A learner's refusal to withdraw consent, and a teacher's understanding this refusal as grounds to continue, serves as one significant situational variable that can defeat reasons for expressing a trait like courage. Supposing that a test subject still wished to quit, despite a learner's refusal to withdraw consent, the experimenters responded with a series of firmly worded prods, starting with 'please continue,' and working to, 'you have no other choice, you must go on.'<sup>82</sup> The prods, and a teacher's recognition of, or submission to, authority figures, serves as another significant situational variable that can defeat reasons for

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<sup>80</sup> John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>81</sup> Stanley Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1977), 102.

<sup>82</sup> Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," 374.

expressing a trait like courage. While a refusal to obey may represent a trait-relevant behavior for courage, in the Milgram experiments, the reasons for expressing the relevant behavior is contingent on a test subject's courage not being defeated by other significant situational variables.

Darley and Batson's Good Samaritan experiments examined the influence of situational and personality variables on helping behavior. Let's agree that 'helping someone in distress' constitutes a trait-relevant behavior for benevolence and that 'an opportunity to help someone in distress' serves as a paradigmatic trait-eliciting situation for benevolence. It wouldn't follow from this that failing to help someone in distress is inconsistent with benevolence because the significance of other situational variables can defeat reasons for expressing benevolence.

Indeed, what one is hurrying for can impact whether someone's distress is even detected as significant. In later experiments by Batson et al., 70 percent of the subjects who were in a hurry to give a talk of little importance stopped to help someone in distress, compared to 10 percent of subjects who were in a hurry to give a talk of the utmost importance.<sup>83</sup> The expression then of trait-relevant behaviors for something like benevolence in Darley and Batson's Good Samaritan experiments is contingent on the reasons for expressing that trait not being defeated by other significant situational variables. A desire to be punctual, in a society where punctuality is valued, is a significant situational variable that can defeat (or suppress) reasons for expressing benevolence.

The foregoing critiques demonstrate a problem with the account of the virtues being operationalized. Specifically, the experiments tie the virtues too closely to the objective features of situations and neglect how individuals interpret them. My critiques go in the opposite direction

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<sup>83</sup> Daniel C. Batson, Pamela J. Cochran, Marshall F. Biederman, James L. Blosser, Maurice J. Ryan, and Bruce Vogt, "Failure to Help When in a Hurry: Callousness or Conflict?," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (1978): 97-101.

and tie the virtues to the internal states or processes of individuals. Admittedly, I don't think that endogenous activities alone are doing the causal and explanatory work in human behavior. However, I do think that there is more to human behavior than situations. Consequently, a more nuanced account of the virtues, one that includes how individuals interpret situations, wouldn't face the problems that these experiments reveal.

Nancy Snow offers one plausible account.<sup>84</sup> She conceives of virtues as a subset of Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda's CAPS traits.<sup>85</sup> CAPS is an acronym for 'cognitive-affective processing system' and refers to the "beliefs, desires, feelings, goals, expectations, values, and self-regulatory plans, which can be activated either in response to external situational features, or to stimuli internal to the agent, such as her imaginings or practical reasoning."<sup>86</sup> Traits on this account are indexed to "the meanings of situations as interpreted by their subjects and not solely to the objective features of situations."<sup>87</sup>

Mischel and Shoda hypothesized that cross-situationally consistent behaviors occur when situations have similar psychological meanings for subjects and found behavioral consistency across objectively different situations when their meanings were similar for a subject.<sup>88</sup> Snow uses these findings to support an account of the virtues that are cross-situationally consistent and therefore regularly manifested in behavior across objectively different situations.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Nancy Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>85</sup> Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 13.

<sup>86</sup> Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 17.

<sup>88</sup> Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 23-25.

<sup>89</sup> Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 38.

The findings explicated here suggest that people act in response to objective features of situations more than on the basis of traits. Philosophers like Doris and Harmon conclude that it's unlikely people have the type of traits that virtue ethics presuppose. I argue that Doris and Harmon are reasoning from experiments that employ a flawed account of the virtues and offer a different account from Snow. Snow relies on a social cognitivist approach to traits. The social cognitivists emphasize the meanings that situations have for individuals as compared to their objective features. Although much more needs to be said, an account of the virtues that focuses on those meanings provides a promising alternative to the bleak outlook that social psychology advances.

### *2.3 Prioritizing Habit*

John Dewey is not a virtue ethicist. For Dewey, consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethical concerns represent distinct and irreducible domains of morality.<sup>90</sup> Although Dewey would not endorse a view in which virtue ethical considerations are central, I draw from Dewey to advance such a view here. I distinguish my version of virtue ethics from consequentialism and deontology by prioritizing habit.

Consequentialist theories maintain that the moral rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the value of its consequences. Yet, if a clear distinction between means and ends is rejected, then valuable consequences cannot meaningfully be separated from the activities that bring them about. John Dewey frames the issue: "It is self-contradictory to suppose that when a fulfillment possesses immediate value, its means of attainment do not...For fulfillment is a relative to means as means are to realization. Means-consequences constitute a single undivided

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<sup>90</sup> John Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," trans. Jo Ann Boydston *Educational Theory* 16, no. 3 (1966): 197-209.

situation.”<sup>91</sup> Dewey’s point is that consequences are the closing of a process wherefrom every prior step enters into them. Valuable consequences in this view are constituted by valuable means.

Consequentialism sets up certain values as ends at which right actions terminate. These ends are like targets on which we train our sights. They give meaning, shape, and direction to our activities. They keep us from acting randomly or haphazardly. They don’t lie outside of activity, but are brought about by activity, when overt action for them is possible. Ends are, in every sense, “means in present action.”<sup>92</sup> Dewey’s consideration is that ends and means are not a division in reality, but a pragmatic distinction. Thus, Dewey states, “‘End’ is a name for a series of acts taken collectively—like the term army. ‘Means’ is a name for a series take distributively—like this soldier, that officer.”<sup>93</sup>

Granting and making use of Dewey’s consideration, ends like happiness or pleasure are nothing over and above valuable means, and valuable consequences are not endpoints with value, but continuous systems of value. Following Dewey, ends are no longer terminal points, “external to the conditions that have led up to [them]; [they are] the continually developing meaning of present tendencies.”<sup>94</sup> Every action’s effects are fed back to the actor, enlarging her horizon for further action, further consequences, and new purposes. Dewey concludes, “Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> John Dewey, “Existence, Value and Criticism” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 328.

<sup>92</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 226.

<sup>93</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 36.

<sup>94</sup> Dewey, “Existence, Value and Criticism,” 313.

<sup>95</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 232.

Crucially, for Dewey, means are not distinct from working capacities and environing forces. They are the joint adaptation of human powers and present conditions. Dewey argues: “neither external materials nor bodily and mental organs are in themselves means. They have to be employed in coordinated conjunction with one another to be actual means.”<sup>96</sup> People are prone to supposing that if the right ‘end’ is pointed out, all that is needed to occasion that end is will or desire on the actor’s part, but Dewey likens this to magical thinking and contends that thinking this way implies “that the means or effective conditions of the realization of a purpose exist independently of established habit and even that they may be set in motion in opposition to habit.”<sup>97</sup>

For Dewey, habits cover “the formation of attitudes, attitudes that are emotional and intellectual; [they cover] our basic sensitivities and ways of meeting and responding to all the conditions which we meet in living.”<sup>98</sup> Dewey argues that habits are the means closest to us.<sup>99</sup>

They are:

demands for certain kinds of activity....They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities. They rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity....They are active means, means that project themselves, energetic and dominating ways of acting.<sup>100</sup>

Habits, so described, cut across psychological and behavioral systems, and every activity affects their constitution. To this point, Dewey states:

If a person decides to become a teacher, lawyer, physician, or stockbroker, when he executes his intention he thereby necessarily determines to some extent the environment in which he will act in the future. He has rendered himself more sensitive and responsive to certain conditions, and

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<sup>96</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 26.

<sup>97</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 28.

<sup>98</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 35.

<sup>99</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 37.

<sup>100</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 25.

relatively immune to those things about him that would have been stimuli if he has made another choice.<sup>101</sup>

A difference in career influences the conditions under which future experiences are to be had and sets up states of affairs to which one will be reactive or unresponsive. Ultimately, choosing one occupation over another brings about differences in psychological and behavioral habits, and those habits direct conduct fitting to the occupation. Dewey's example is of course not restricted to career choices but paradigmatic of every choice.

Having rejected a clear distinction between means and ends, consequences cannot be the sole determinate for the rightness or wrongness of actions because their value is not patently separable from valuable means. Having explained a necessary connection between means and habit, means should not be understood as something over and above certain habits and enviroing conditions. Consequently, habits represent a morally salient factor for moral evaluation, and governing them should be prioritized because they manage what we are sensitive to and our ability to respond when the force of circumstance demands action.

Let me now turn to deontology. Deontological theories hold that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on its conformities to certain principles. Theories that derive principles from reason are our concern. Reasoning presupposes certain habits and should not be understood separately from these habits. Reason is, Dewey maintains, "the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires...the happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions...."<sup>102</sup> Habits comprise the 'multitude of dispositions' for Dewey, and consequently rational activity does not precede habit. Rather, it is a resultant combination of psychological and behavioral habits operating in concert.

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<sup>101</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 37.

<sup>102</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 196.



Emotional habits are particularly significant for reason. Dewey, paraphrasing William James, explains the role of affect in reason: “The cue of passion, [James] says in effect, is to keep imagination dwelling upon those objects which are congenial to it, which feed it, and which by feeding it intensify its force, until it crowds out all thought of other objects.”<sup>103</sup> Dewey, following James, recognizes that emotions augment attention and reduce extraneous feedback. This attentional shift increases sensitivities to relevant stimuli and renders individuals or states of affairs significant and others unimportant or irrelevant thereby. Ultimately, emotions reinforce bonds between cognition and its object and conation and its object. Dewey concludes that the emotional component of moral deliberation and action cannot be “eliminated in behalf of bloodless reason. More ‘passions,’ not fewer is the answer.”<sup>104</sup>

Calling for fewer emotions in moral deliberation and action is symptomatic of understanding reason as distinct from habit and then deploying it as a force against habit. Reason, so described, is understood as active and purposeful, whereas habits, somewhat differently, are understood as passive, subrational pushes that override thoughtful resolutions. Yet, as Dewey and James rightly point out, emotional responses can sharpen our attention and make us more responsive to significant features of situations. These attentional shifts open up possible courses of action that, were it not for emotion, would go unnoticed.

Supposing, then, that one has principles on which to act, her ability to act on them presupposes certain habits. In other words, knowing whether a principle is appropriate in a given situation is contingent on having certain habitual responses, such as settled emotional sensitivities. If one is not emotionally primed or equipped with an adequate emotional set, the relevant

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<sup>103</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 195.

<sup>104</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 195.

situational variables that one can act for or against according to her principles will be missed. Therefore, consistently acting on principles is a function of certain habits.

With those considerations on board, I can focus my prioritization of habit in virtue ethics. On my interpretation, reliable moral behavior is continuous with habit. Thus, I prioritize habits and recognize their centrality in moral behavior. I understand virtues as especially good sets of cognitive, affective, conative, or behavioral habits that properly dispose one to certain envioning conditions. Possessing virtues (and their attendant habits) enables a greater sensitivity to the morally significant features of situations. These sensitivities signal to an individual what actions are viable or required, as well as whether acting for some end is possible, or whether acting on some principle is appropriate. Consequently, on my account, the ends for which we can act, and the principles by which we can act, are constrained by particular habits. Presuming that envioning factors are sufficient to act for some end, but that one does not have the appropriate habits, she will fall short of that end, and supposing that one attempts to apply or act on some principle without the relevant habits, either she won't recognize the applicability of the principle or her action will be unsuccessful. My approach is thus fundamentally concerned with habituating virtues that are dependable sources of reaction and response because those virtues principally determine what we are sensitive to and our ability to respond when envioning forces require action.

#### *2.4 Summary*

This chapter worked to show that virtue ethics is viable. Virtue ethical approaches are concerned with the character of agents and endorse the development of virtues that enable or constitute certain ends and consistently guide moral behavior by making possible a variety of morally pertinent sensitivities and responses. Virtue ethics should understand how individuals interpret situations and the situational variables that can defeat expressions of virtue, as doing so

will provide a better account of the virtues, and a better understanding of how to organize society in ways which fortify virtuous behavior. I argued for an account of the virtues that encompass especially good sets of cognitive, affective, conative, or behavioral habits, and a version of virtue ethics that prioritizes the intentional management and modification of habit.

### 3. BUDDHIST MORAL PHILOSOPHY AS VIRTUE ETHICS

I defend Buddhist virtue ethics in this final chapter. I posit that a virtue ethical program offers a solution to the problem of suffering which Buddhism aims to solve and is primary for moral development and behavior. Acknowledging one's suffering, and wanting to be free from it, initiates the program and sees it to successful fruition.

In § 3.1, I survey classical ethical interpretations of Buddhism. First, I review and then argue against deontological and consequentialist readings. Following that, I consider virtue ethical reconstructions. I argue that those are the most reasonable of the classical interpretations. In § 3.2, I look at Jay Garfield's non-classical interpretation of Buddhist moral philosophy. I argue that a virtue ethical approach is compatible with his reading. Garfield rejects classical ethical interpretations of Buddhism and instead argues for Buddhism as a type of moral phenomenology. I summarize his construal and then explain how a virtue ethical approach is compatible with it. In § 3.3, I develop and defend a plausible account of Buddhist virtue ethics. First, I argue for an exemplarist conception of Buddhist virtue ethics and for the centrality of the four immeasurables. Second, I comment on the structure of the virtue ethical program. Lastly, I describe the moral significance of the four immeasurables in contemporary society.

#### *3.1 Classical Interpretations of Buddhist Ethics*

Classical ethical interpretations dominate reconstructions of Buddhist moral philosophy. These readings contend that Buddhist ethics represent either a type of deontology, consequentialism, or virtue ethics. I survey these interpretations and argue that if Buddhism is couched in classical terms, virtue ethics is its best explication.

There are a few defenses of Buddhist deontology.<sup>105</sup> These defenses consider precepts to be primary in Buddhist ethics. The main rules for conduct are set out in the five precepts (*pañcasīlāni*) and the Eightfold Path's moral discipline component. The five precepts comprise abstentions from killing, thieving, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicating substances.<sup>106</sup> The moral discipline component includes elaborations on the five precepts. These preclude divisive, malicious, and purposeless speech, harming sentient beings, and occupations that cause suffering. Altogether the precepts make up the basic rules that facilitate a lay follower's (*upāsikā*) practice. Monastics take vows and observe a myriad of additional more detailed and demanding precepts.

It's arguable whether the precepts are absolute or provisional. Some contexts suggest that they are absolute. For instance, *arhats* (Skt.) are said to be incapable of deliberately breaking the five precepts.<sup>107</sup> *Arhats* have overcome suffering and are ethical exemplars in Theravada Buddhism. If their conduct is observed, then at least some of the precepts are absolute. Other contexts, however, suggest a less demanding approach to the precepts. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, advanced *bodhisattvas* may be justified in breaking with certain rules if doing so ultimately reduces more suffering.<sup>108</sup> If the conduct of *bodhisattvas* is observed, then some of the precepts are provisional.

Answering whether precepts are absolute or provisional is evidence against deontological readings of Buddhist ethics. Both *arhats* and *bodhisattvas* are moral exemplars in Buddhism, and

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<sup>105</sup> See Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy*, 122-129.

<sup>106</sup> AN 8.39, 1174-1175.

<sup>107</sup> *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), DN 33 2.1 (10), 495.

<sup>108</sup> *Asanga's Chapter on Ethics, with the Commentary of Tsong-Kha-pa: The Basic Path to Awakening, The Complete Bodhisattva*, trans. Mark Tatz (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 74.

they relate differently to precepts than lay followers of Buddhism. *Arhats* have undergone radical psychological transformations, and it's not clear that their experience can be adequately characterized. Countless suffer from cognitive distortions, and the few who don't, have an utterly different experience, whatever their experience is like. Bronwyn Finnigan considers one significant difference.<sup>109</sup> According to orthodox accounts, buddhas (beings who have overcome suffering) don't engage in conceptual thought.<sup>110</sup> Buddhas like *arhats*, in other words, don't deliberate on actions through counterfactual representations. Consequently, whether *arhats* choose actions that accord with precepts is doubtful. *Bodhisattvas*, on the other hand, know when it's fitting to break with certain precepts because they have perfected various virtues.<sup>111</sup> As such, they are sensitive to contexts wherein breaking from some precept is appropriate. *Arhats* and *bodhisattvas* have developed themselves in ways that go beyond what following precepts enables. Their progressions are a function of a larger ethical program, in which precepts are valuable components, but not primary.

As for a lay follower, precepts reinforce commitments to the Buddha's teachings and establish adherence to certain virtues. As one progresses along the Buddhist path, however, the precepts may become provisional. For instance, if one embodies certain virtues, she may be incapable of acting contrary to specific precepts, or alternatively she may be capable of acting contrary to them, and doing so would be permissible, if she believed she was reducing more suffering. Yet the function and rigidity of the precepts is only understood in terms of the larger

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<sup>109</sup> Bronwyn Finnigan, "How Can a Buddha Come to Act? The Possibility of a Buddhist Account of Ethical Agency," *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 1 (January 2011).

<sup>110</sup> Finnigan, "How Can a Buddha Come to Act?" 135.

<sup>111</sup> Gareth Sparham, "Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi*: The Morality Chapter," in *Buddhist Essential Readings*, ed. William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 405-408.

program in which Buddhism is engaged. Once understood, however, they reveal their insufficiency to establish their centrality in Buddhist ethics. Deontological interpretations of Buddhist ethics are thus untenable.

Consequentialist interpretations of Buddhist ethics are more widespread.<sup>112</sup> These readings have gained traction because Buddhism is fundamentally engaged in bringing about the elimination of suffering, and this orientation is consequentialist in nature: right actions can be seen as reducing or ending suffering.

The *bodhisattva* path is taken to support a consequentialist reading of Buddhist ethics. A *bodhisattva's* focus is on actions that eliminate suffering. As such, consequences are crucial for evaluating both the efficacy and moral value of a *bodhisattva's* activity. Additionally, if *bodhisattvas* are justified in breaking precepts, or causing some suffering to prevent greater suffering, a *bodhisattva* path seems committed to some form of consequentialism.

The path of a *bodhisattva* can also justify moral demandingness. Moral demandingness arises when an ethical theory requires extraordinary sacrifices on behalf of its agents for the benefits of others. Objectors to consequentialism often cite demandingness as grounds to reject it.<sup>113</sup> They argue that if consequentialism requires one to continuously act in ways that promote optimistic consequences, then no room is left for self-interested activities, and that is too demanding.

The central feature of the *bodhisattva* path is promoting the welfare of others. *Bodhisattvas* identify the suffering of others as being equal to their own. Their recognition is logically based in the metaphysics of no self. If identity is nothing over and above psychophysical continuity over

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<sup>112</sup> See Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*; see also Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 78-84.

<sup>113</sup> See Williams, "Person, Character, and Morality"; see also Conly, "Utilitarianism and Integrity."

time, differences among people admit only in degree and not in kind. One's own suffering in this view isn't given priority. *Bodhisattvas* are therefore impartial to their own suffering when measured against the suffering of others.

Impartiality diminishes worries about moral demandingness because demandingness objections rely on self-other asymmetries. Yet, once one's own welfare is proportional to the welfare of others, then self-sacrifices appear to be less demanding because they are less remarkable. Indeed, moral behavior remains practically demanding even if the no self doctrine is accepted. Buddhism on whole, however, is sympathetic (and possibly even committed) to the conclusion that *bodhisattvas* reach. Therefore, if Buddhism is right about the metaphysics of no self, and moral behavior is extremely demanding, then its ability to justify moral demandingness may be viewed as a positive feature of its ethical theory.

One objection that can be made against consequentialist interpretations of Buddhist ethics is that precepts are more primary for moral evaluation than consequences. However, this sort of objection should be rejected. As argued, precepts feature in Buddhist moral philosophy, but they are not its central concern.

Rejecting a clear distinction between means and ends is a better objection. According to this objection, the means of eliminating suffering are intrinsic to the goal of eliminating suffering. Therefore, their value is not reducible to the consequences they produce because they partly constitute the goal itself. Expressions of immeasurables such as compassion and loving-kindness demonstrate this point. Each represents genuine concern for the welfare of others, and each expression involves a necessary abating of the suffering that is caused by specious self-concern. Thus, it is seemingly impossible to be truly compassionate or kind if one is consumed by



selfishness. The moral value of means, such as the expressions of virtue, are not therefore solely a function of outcomes, but something that is also intrinsic to them.

The role of intention (*cetanā*) bolsters this last-mentioned point. Intention in Buddhism is multifaceted but connotes both motivation and volition. The Buddha's identification of intention with karma (Skt.) evidences the moral significance of intentional actions.<sup>114</sup> Karma means 'action'.<sup>115</sup> Maria Heim's gloss of karma as "action that is both the result of previous conditions and brings about future effects for the agent"<sup>116</sup> rightly locates karma as both cause and effect. On this account, intentional actions that have wholesome causes have corresponding effects for the agent, and likewise intentional actions with unwholesome causes have unwholesome effects. Basically, wholesome or unwholesome consequences don't come apart from the quality of the action that produces them. Indeed, human action is scarcely transparent. Its originations are morally complex and many. Buddhism is clear, however, that there is a causal regularity between the moral quality of the variables motivating an agent's action and the moral quality of the consequences inherited by the agent. Therefore, the intentions of agents are salient factors for moral evaluation in Buddhism, and their salience is not easily squared with a consequentialist approach.

Another way to interpret Buddhist ethics is as a virtue ethics. A handful of reasons can explain the popularity of these readings, but two are readily apparent. First, virtues such as the four immeasurables figure prominently both in exemplary moral behavior and in eliminating suffering.

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<sup>114</sup> AN 6.63, 959.

<sup>115</sup> Karma and rebirth are associated but logically independent. Endorsing karma does not entail accepting rebirth. Our concern is with karma that takes place over a lifetime.

<sup>116</sup> Maria Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3n2.

Second, virtue ethics maintain that living well is fundamentally a matter of managing and modifying psychological and behavioral orientations to the world. Likewise, in Buddhism, living well consists in psychological and behavioral reorientation.

Damien Keown's virtue ethical reconstruction is the most prevalent.<sup>117</sup> Keown's interpretation is guided by Aristotelian ethics.<sup>118</sup> Accordingly, Keown argues that just as *eudaimonia* is the *summum bonum* or dominate end in Aristotle, so *nirvāṇa* is the *summum bonum* in Buddhism.<sup>119</sup> *Nirvāṇa* (Skt.) means 'to extinguish.' Thus, attaining *nirvāṇa* signifies extinguishing the fire (or craving) that causes suffering. According to Keown, *nirvāṇa* is constituted by the perfection of certain moral and intellectual virtues.<sup>120</sup> The wholesome roots of non-attachment, non-aversion, and non-ignorance are compatible with Western notions of virtue, and their opposites, the three unwholesome roots, are compatible with Western notions of vice.<sup>121</sup> Eradicating qualities that proliferate from the unwholesome roots and developing and perfecting qualities that are embedded in the wholesome roots is necessary to attain *nirvāṇa*.

When pressed beyond basic structural similarities, Aristotelian ethics is a poor analogue for Buddhism. Significantly, there are certain epistemic constraints on *nirvāṇa* which *eudaimonia* does not face. Whereas Aristotle looks to human nature to define what a flourishing life is, in Buddhism it's human nature (or evolved ways of being) that causes suffering. Buddhists don't therefore explain a flourishing life with reference to human nature, but instead with reference to

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<sup>117</sup> Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>118</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 21.

<sup>119</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 199.

<sup>120</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 22-23.

<sup>121</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 62-63.

something that lies beyond it. Specifically, they look to the experience of the Buddha or buddhas as a practical way of life.

Keown rejects the idea that the elimination of suffering is with discontinuous human nature and contends that the difference between a buddha and a lay-Buddhist is in degree and not in kind.<sup>122</sup> Keown's position is problematic, however, because the element of choice is key in his characterization of virtue. Following Finnigan:

A Buddhist virtue ethical theory, on Keown's view, is thus concerned with 'virtuous choices'...virtues are dispositions to 'choose rightly'....by the end of Keown's argument it is no longer the case that the early Buddhist treatises describe the Buddha's conduct; rather, they contain a record of the Buddha's 'important moral choices'....<sup>123</sup>

To be sure, lay followers choose virtuous activities so as to accord with the teachings of the Buddha. Yet, it's unresolved how the absences of the three unwholesome roots effects moral deliberation. Supposing, as Finnigan points out, and orthodoxy suggests, that buddhas don't engage in conceptual thinking, it's arguable that buddhas don't choose virtuous activities. Consequently, it's questionable to hold the position that *nirvāṇa* is constituted by the perfection of certain moral and intellectual virtues, while also maintaining that the moral behaviors of lay followers are continuous with buddhas. Although lay followers choose certain virtuous activities, it's not evident that buddhas do the same.

I agree with Keown that certain virtues are constitutive of *nirvāṇa*, and also that buddhas exemplify the perfected forms of these virtues. I do not, however, think that choice is a necessary condition of their expression. Therefore, in their perfected forms, different factors are (or are not) operative in the expression of virtue. For example, we can imagine that lay followers choose

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<sup>122</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 113.

<sup>123</sup> Bronwyn Finnigan, "Buddhist metaethics," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, no. 1-2 (2010/11): 277.

virtuous activities, like being compassionate, and in the course of their activity, they come to live compassionately.

Virtue ethical reconstructions like Keown's are the most reasonable of the classical ethical interpretations. Indeed, if Buddhism is a type virtue ethics, it is distinct from classical forms. Moreover, it's arguable whether a virtue ethical reading is the right way to situate Buddhist ethics. Yet, if Buddhist moral philosophy is explained in classical terms, then virtue ethics is its best expression. Foremost, even though precepts are aspects of morality in Buddhism, they are less emphasized than the development and expression of certain virtues, and further, precepts are not sufficiently transformative for eliminating suffering. Additionally, even though the basic orientation of Buddhist moral philosophy seems consequentialist, the means that enable the elimination of suffering partly constitute that end, and further, the moral salience of intention does not patently square with a consequentialist approach.

### *3.2 Buddhist Ethics in its Own Terms*

Some philosophers argue that reconstructing Buddhist moral philosophy according to traditional Western ethical systems is misguided. They claim that doing so fails to capture what is unique about Buddhist thought. Jay Garfield's interpretation of Buddhist moral philosophy follows this reasoning. I develop his view and go on to argue that a virtue ethical reading is compatible with it.

Garfield argues that Buddhist moral philosophy is primarily concerned with solving the problem of suffering, and that understanding our place within the complex of dependent origination is essential to solving this problem.<sup>124</sup> When we understand that our attachments and

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<sup>124</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 280-281.

aversions cause suffering, and that these types of craving are caused and conditioned by our ignorance, we are capable of bringing about an end to suffering. Yet our place within the nexus of dependent origination, in addition to our deep-rooted and pernicious tendencies not to take up with reality as it is, makes the solution to the problem of suffering complex.<sup>125</sup> Consequently, for Buddhism there just is a broad and involved solution to the problem of suffering and neither a comprehensive nor consistent system of ethics.<sup>126</sup> Following Garfield, “we find very little direct attention to the articulation of sets principles that determine which actions, states of character or motives are virtuous or vicious, and no articulation of obligations or rights.”<sup>127</sup> Rather, Garfield argues, the principal concern in Buddhism is with our phenomenological orientation to the world.<sup>128</sup>

Garfield sees the Buddhist approach as a type of moral phenomenology, which is fundamentally concerned with transforming our comportment to the world.<sup>129</sup> On his account, Buddhist moral philosophy emphasizes and appraises various moral experiences. Specifically, there are experiences characterized “by terror and unreason”<sup>130</sup> and experiences “conditioned by confidence and clarity.”<sup>131</sup> Laity undergo the former experiences, while *arhats* and *bodhisattvas* embody the latter type. Transitioning from a lay person’s experience to a buddha’s involves taking into account, and developing appropriate sensibilities for, actions and their consequences, virtues

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<sup>125</sup> Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 286.

<sup>126</sup> Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 283-284.

<sup>127</sup> Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 278-279.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 279.

<sup>130</sup> Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 304.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

and motives, and various precepts. None of these domains is favored over the other, and each is justified, according to Garfield, because of the experience in which they are embedded, namely, one which reflects the elimination of suffering.<sup>132</sup>

Phenomenological concerns certainly are significant in Buddhist moral philosophy. Yet to the extent that moral phenomenology figures into Buddhist moral philosophy, its contribution shouldn't be seen as primary. Most notably, moral experience is primarily shaped by character. A lay follower's moral experiences as compared to a *bodhisattva*'s are markedly different, and while there are important phenomenological differences, those are largely contingent on distinct psychological and behavioral factors. Appreciating how these psychological and behavioral factors combine to bring about different orientations to the world is basic for comprehending differences among moral experiences.

Identifying an agent's psychological and behavioral orientation to the world as primary for understanding moral experience, and framing her comportment in virtue ethical terms, is compatible with Garfield's reconstruction. Importantly, it organizes moral experience around a central feature: an agent's character. On this account, the exhaustive phenomenological taxonomies on offer from Buddhism furnish nuanced descriptions of various wholesome or unwholesome qualities that can be expressed in characterological terms and wholesome or unwholesome activities that contribute to the development of character. For example, *arhats* and *bodhisattvas* embody certain perfected qualities that define their orientations to the world and others. A virtue ethical interpretation can maintain that the perfected virtues they possess are central in moral behavior and constitutive of the elimination of suffering. Moral evaluation of any given experience is then reducible to the characterological factors that color and shape it.

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<sup>132</sup> Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 316.

### 3.3 *The Theory and Structure of Buddhist Virtue Ethics*

Buddhist virtue ethics is not teleological like Aristotelian or Nietzschean virtue ethics. Despite *nirvāṇa* seeming like clear analogue for *eudaimonia* or Nietzschean health, evidential support for its nature is both lacking and contentious. Therefore, its practical import as a dominate end is questionable. Considering this, I don't find Keown's reading of Buddhist virtue ethics persuasive. Doubtless, *nirvāṇa* plays a role in Buddhist virtue ethics. However, I don't think it's doing significant causal work. Proximate ends like understanding the four noble truths and perfecting the four immeasurables are.

Recall that, in Chapter 2, I rejected a clear distinction between ends and means and followed John Dewey in arguing that ends are not fixed and final but fall on a continuum alongside means. I analyze proximate ends in Buddhist virtue ethics as means of eliminating suffering. They represent ongoing processes of improving present tendencies. They are not abandoned as one progresses along the Buddhist path but continually reinforced by more skillful practices and improved understanding. In Chapter 2, I also identified a causal relationship between means and habit and agreed with Dewey that habits are our most reliable means. I argued that intentionally modifying and managing habits for dependable moral behavior should be a priority. I understand proximate ends in Buddhist virtue ethics as the causal mechanisms by which dependable moral habits are modified and managed.

*Nirvāṇa*, on the account I'm advancing, is an organizing ideal for proximate ends rather than a practical terminus. I understand an organizing ideal in Buddhist virtue ethics as a way of life that corresponds to the proper understanding and perfection of proximate ends. Buddhas exemplify such an organizing ideal. The proximate ends are brought together and realized in their way of life and justified as good or right because they are embedded in that way of life. Minimally,

*nirvāṇa* is constituted by proximate ends like the proper understanding of the four noble truths, skillful meditation and emotional regulation, and the perfection of four immeasurables. Whatever else it's like, *nirvāṇa* involves those.

With the foregoing considerations on deck, I understand Buddhist virtue ethics as a type of exemplarist virtue ethics. Linda Zagzebski's 'exemplarism' can provide a promising treatment for Buddhist virtue ethics.<sup>133</sup> Zagzebski's account is constructed around moral exemplars who anchor all the concepts of the moral theory.<sup>134</sup> For Zagzebski, exemplars are individuals who are most admirable.<sup>135</sup> Consequently, we identify them through emotional experiences of admiration.<sup>136</sup> Although admiration is generally trustworthy, Zagzebski grants that exemplars are both contingent and revisable.<sup>137</sup> Admiration is also conative, as it carries with it a desire to imitate its object.<sup>138</sup> An exemplar's admirability and imitability are used to define and index moral concepts.<sup>139</sup> Thus, Zagzebski states:

...a virtue is a trait we admire in *that* person and in persons like that. A good state of affairs is a state of affairs at which persons like that aim. A good life is a life desired by persons like that. A right act is an act a person like that would take to be favored by the balance of reasons. A duty is an act a person like that would feel compelled to do....<sup>140</sup>

I submit that Buddhist virtue ethics can be read as an exemplarist virtue ethics. Its moral concepts are anchored in paradigmatically good individuals who are both admirable and imitable.

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<sup>133</sup> Linda Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 41 (2010): 41-57.

<sup>134</sup> Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," 51.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," 52.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," 55.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.



These exemplars act as organizing ideals for understanding what factors make for a desirable way of life. The factors that I put forward represent proximate ends which act as the primary causal forces in bringing about an exemplary way of life. Although the specific virtues that exemplars possess in Buddhism don't need to be primary, on my account the four immeasurables are primary. I justify their centrality in relation to the Eightfold Path. They are expressed in its moral discipline component (right speech, conduct, and livelihood), restricted and guided by its wisdom component (right view and intention), and encouraged and supported by its concentration component (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration).

Structurally, the beginnings of the virtue ethical program are defined by understanding the Buddha's four noble truths. Meditation makes up its middle, and its closure is organized around regulating emotion and developing and expressing the four immeasurables. The program's factors are constitutive of each other's development. The four noble truths inform the contents of meditation, and meditation establishes frameworks for regulating emotion, as well as sensibilities and sensitivities that find their expressions in the four immeasurables.

Understanding the four noble truths is a practice of memorization and process of internalization. Memorization establishes the truths as heuristics for further learning and investigation. Internalization makes their contents implicit in one's cognitive activities. Memorizing the Buddha's four noble truths means assimilating knowledge about the existential confusions that give rise to and reinforce suffering, as well as the metaphysics underlying the conditioning and reinforcement of suffering. Certainly memorization is insufficient to undermine entrenched cognitive distortions. However, memorization is necessary to internalize the truths and integrate them into one's ways of conceptualizing herself, others, and the world. If, for instance, one is confused about the scope of suffering or its causes, her confusion will misinform her

practices and moral deliberations. Internalizing the truths weaves them into one's cognitive processes. It then requires less effort to recognize and investigate how the truths hang together with other teachings, and also prepares one for the practical dimensions of the truths.

Meditation makes up the middle phase of the virtue ethical program. It bridges an intellectual training in the four noble truths to their practical dimensions. Meditation starts reorienting one's ways of conceptualizing herself and reconditioning her dysfunctional modes of engaging others and the world. Meditation alone, however, is insufficient to bring about the right kinds of ethical behavior. It must be informed by Buddhist commitments. Regularly practicing mindful-breathing can induce cognitive and affective stability, but the ethical dispositions and tendencies that mindful-breathing instills are a function of the social, cultural, and doctrinal backgrounds that individuals bring to bear in their meditative practices.

David McMahan provides a lens through which this point can be viewed.<sup>141</sup> He imagines an ancient monk and a modern professional. Both individuals practice meditation. The monk is a renunciate, who has left behind the emotional comforts of his family, the physical comforts of his belongings, and the financial security of his social position. He spends many hours each day meditating and striving to overcome suffering. The modern professional has a family, is comfortable financially, and is working to integrate mindfulness into her routines. She meditates most days and hopes to realize the claims to psychological and physical well-being made on behalf of the contemporary mindfulness movement.

When the monk sits down to meditate, he brushes off the memories of his pre-monastic life. As his attention settles on his breathing, he begins examining the five aggregates, and tries to

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<sup>141</sup> David L. McMahan, "How Meditation Works: Theorizing the Role of Cultural Context in Buddhist Contemplative Practices," in *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*, ed. David L. McMahan and Erik Braun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 21-23.

distinguish each one with care. When thoughts of returning to his family arise, and restlessness charges through his body, he recalls his aspiration to eliminate suffering, and returns attention to his inhalations and exhalations.

When the modern professional sits down to meditate, she tries to remain in the present moment, impartial to the thoughts and feelings that arise, not mulling over the past or concerning about the future. When pangs of anger emerge at thoughts about a difficult colleague or family member, she refocuses attention on the breath or tries to kindle loving-kindness or compassion.

Meditation in both instances reorients and reconditions dysfunctional ways of living in the world and engaging others. The monk recognizes aspects of his experience as cognitively distorting and reframes them according to his knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. He attends to the constitution of the aggregates, attempting to undermine perceptions that lead him to think that he is something more substantial than their configurations. The modern professional endeavors to be present-centered and neutral when negative thoughts and feelings surface. She aspires to eliminate the causes of negative attitudes and instead evoke positive ones.

McMahan's consideration rightly illustrates that different social, cultural, and doctrinal backgrounds cultivate distinct ways of viewing oneself and engaging the world and others.<sup>142</sup> The monk's meditation practice is situated within the larger context of the Buddha's teachings. He knows the metaphysics of the three marks of conditioned existence, appreciates their place in causing his and others' suffering, and works to dismantle the processes that ground his cognitive distortions. Meditation for the modern professional is directed at making her a more patient coworker, as well as a more attentive parent and spouse—two relationships the monk isn't allowed to enjoy. Moreover, the monk aspires for the dissolution of self and the elimination of suffering,

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<sup>142</sup> McMahan, "How Meditation Works," 42.

and he interprets his meditation and measures its outcomes according to these goals and other Buddhist teachings. The modern professional strives for security in her relationships, and meditation for her is a means to realizing behaviors that conduce to that security.

Ultimately, the constellations of values which inform meditation cultivate different psychological and behavioral habits. As such, meditative practices that are devoid of certain Buddhist commitments will fail to instill the ethical habits to which Buddhism aspires and sees as necessary for living morally. Admittedly, mirroring a monastic's meditative dedication is not necessary for realizing Buddhist virtue ethics. However, commitments explicated in the four noble truths are necessarily reflected in meditation for Buddhist virtue ethics. Meditation that is not informed and motivated by these commitments may indeed discipline attention and produce other psychological benefits. Yet it won't cultivate an individual who is oriented toward the moral salience of suffering, and it won't provide the necessary frameworks for regulating emotion and developing certain virtues.

One significant way that meditation feeds into regulating emotion is through establishing enduring happiness (*sukha*). Matthieu Ricard et al. define a Buddhist theory of happiness as “a state of flourishing that arises from mental balance and insight into the nature of reality.”<sup>143</sup> Flourishing here refers to psychological well-being, and feelings of contentment and calmness are signs of flourishing. Mental balance includes both cognitive and affective stability, and jointly these reinforce flourishing. The ability to distinguish distortions in one's cognitive processes, and thereby being less vulnerable to the suffering that is caused by misapprehending reality, is the

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<sup>143</sup> Paul Ekman, Richard Davidson, Matthieu Ricard, and Alan Wallace, “Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives on Emotion and Well-Being,” *American Psychological Society* 14, no. 2 (2005): 60.

mark of insight. Buddhists think that meditation or sustained attentional training is necessary for achieving happiness so described.<sup>144</sup>

Crucially, meditation strengthens one's ability to monitor tonal shifts in emotion across her phenomenal field. Monitoring can be thought of as a form of mindfulness which consists of ongoing and vigilant introspection. The reciprocity of concentration and mindfulness in meditation trains monitoring. Monitoring grants one greater access to the textures of emotional experience and helps her discern the escalation of disruptive emotions and intervene in them before they become too intense to address. Hence, meditation promotes psychological stability that prevents unwholesome emotions, and also helps one navigate disturbing emotions when they arise. These twin processes promote happiness and reduce suffering. Thus, in addition to supporting emotional regulation, pursuing a Buddhist conception of happiness is pursuant with the goal of eliminating suffering.

Continual meditative training is one way to bring about happiness. Yet another way is gratitude meditation. Gratitude (*kataññutā*) arises from acknowledging one's benefits or advantages. Few *suttas* focus on gratitude directly. The Buddha does however distinguish that "two kinds of persons are rare in the world...One who takes the initiative in helping others and one who is grateful and thankful."<sup>145</sup> The first kind of person possesses and expresses loving-kindness and compassion. The second kind of person understands that life is precious. The Buddha imagines the world totally covered with water and a blind sea turtle roaming the endless seabed.<sup>146</sup> A yoke floats on the water's surface, and once every hundred years the sea turtle surfaces. By

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> AN 2.119, 177.

<sup>146</sup> SN 56.48, 1871-1872.

chance, the sea turtle sticks its head through the yoke. A human birth is more rare, so the Buddha says, than this.

Without question, life forms are abundant, but the human embodiment has its benefits. Humans often have an ability to improve their conditions in ways that other animals do not. Cultivating gratitude is a practice of attending to, and then looking after, the benefits of being human. Contemplating the likelihood of your existence, in consideration of all the things that could have derailed it, is one way to evoke gratitude. Imagining your faculties intact or the factors that allow for peace, such as eyesight or mobility, is another. One can reflect on friendly interactions and be grateful for the kindnesses of others or reflect on hostile interactions and be grateful for the opportunity to express good wishes toward them.<sup>147</sup>

Whatever form gratitude meditation takes, concentration enhances the attentional phenomena, such as an interaction, and mindfulness ensures that concentration does not turn from its object, while remembering that one is drumming up gratitude. Although happiness is a downstream effect of ongoing gratitude meditation, practicing gratitude is also an effective technique for regulating emotion, as it can reframe or reappraise seemingly negative aspects of experience in more positive ways.

Developing one's capacity to regulate emotion is favorable for cultivating the four immeasurables. When, for instance, one reflects on hostile interactions, her quickness to unwholesome emotions, and ability to recognize possibly being overcome by them, largely determines whether expressing loving-kindness in place of hatred or compassion in place of cruelty

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<sup>147</sup> To not be equally hostile in the face of hostility certainly involves much conscious effort and considerable restraint.

is possible. Furthermore, one's foundation in regulating emotion fosters equanimity by encouraging both cognitive and affective stability.

While the four immeasurables are committed to the elimination of suffering, their applications are largely contingent on the sociohistorical contexts in which they are expressed. Context-dependency doesn't mean that all responses are unclear. Each immeasurable proceeds from the fundamental value that all beings wish to be free from suffering, and that therefore none is excluded from a moral community whose principle concern is its elimination. Yet, moral deliberation and action must also take particular situations into account. It shouldn't blindly act on some precept or for some end. Combating social injustice in contemporary society is one way expressions of the immeasurables can be understood.

Equanimity is a moral perspective which is free of unwholesome bias or prejudice. Specifically, the perspective is free of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. These unwholesome roots can manifest harmful and fallacious preconceptions and prejudgments about others. Emily McRae likens an equanimous perspective to moral impartiality in Western ethics.<sup>148</sup> She reasons that "both are cultivated (or taken up) in order to eliminate morally objectionable biases, including the bias toward oneself, one's loved ones, and the groups with which one identifies, and against those with whom one does not identify."<sup>149</sup> Moreover, practicing equanimity or impartiality strengthens our capacity "to see (or at least act in accordance with) the fullness and complexity of other beings rather than relating to others simply in terms of one's own desires and interests."<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Emily McRae, "Equanimity and Intimacy: A Buddhist Feminist Approach to the Elimination of Bias," *Sophia*, 52 (2013): 455.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

Moral perspectives like equanimity are morally significant because they consider and treat all members of the moral community equally. Equal consideration recognizes the complex causes and conditions which shape the motivations and behaviors of other beings. It is sensitive to individual situations and challenges and attends to individual values and needs appropriately. Equal treatment removes, guards against, or makes one more aware of her morally objectionable biases or prejudices. Its proper expression ought to preclude racism, sexism or gender discrimination, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, classism, and body shaming.<sup>151</sup>

It's arguable that equal consideration and treatment are not psychologically possible, that some kinds of partiality are both morally permissible and laudable. Equanimity, however, does not prohibit partiality. We are, as McRae argues, "particularly well suited and positioned to care for [friends and family], given our love, concern, history, and proximity."<sup>152</sup> What equanimity precludes is "partiality that arises from reactionary habit patterns of [attachment] and aversion that tend to pit 'me and mine' against 'you and yours.'"<sup>153</sup>

Sympathetic joy is an empathic expression which identifies and shares in another's joy as if it were one's own. Empathy is linked to moral perception and responsiveness. Julinna Oxley describes this link as empathy's 'salience effect.'<sup>154</sup> Following Oxley:

*empathy makes salient another's particular emotions, concerns, reasons, interests, and considerations in such a way that they are relevant and important to the empathizer, so that she is motivated to respond to these concerns. When, for instance, Zach expresses frustration, pain, and anger because he has been bullied due to his sexual orientation, and Amy empathizes, his concerns,*

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<sup>151</sup> There are numerous and varied psychological obstacles to overcome for developing an equanimous perspective. Different forms of oppression, and the privileges that accompany not being oppressed, set up different challenges in individuals. Equanimity's psychological realizability will therefore fall on a continuum.

<sup>152</sup> McRae, "Equanimity and Intimacy," 460.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Julinna C. Oxley, *The Moral Dimensions of Empathy: Limits and Applications in Ethical Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 78.



situation, and feelings become salient to her. When one becomes aware of other's point of view, reasons, feelings, desires, and values, it is possible for her to see his reasons and emotions as *prima facie* valid concerns. (Her particular moral commitments will determine whether she actually takes them to be valid concerns.)<sup>155</sup>

Essentially, we more readily discern positive or negative signals from others when we are empathic, and the appropriateness of our responses to others is determined by our understanding of their needs and values. Where, then, empathy is morally significant, it alone is insufficient to guide ethical behavior because one may fail to notice, take seriously, or respond appropriately to the concerns of others if she lacks certain commitments.

Sympathetic joy fits into this picture by cultivating sensitivities to the factors that contribute to the well-being of others and a sensibility that rejoices in their well-being. Jointly these qualities produce genuine care and concern for others, as well as a motivation to look after or work to bring about their well-being. Essentially, sympathetic joy proportions one's wish for lasting well-being to that of others. When, then, one recognizes something like another's good fortune, she appreciates that, were she in the other's situation, she would feel as the other does, and just as the other wants his good fortune to last, so too would she, if she were in his situation. Consequently, sympathetic joy gives rise to a shared sense of value around well-being and strengthens fellow feeling among members of a moral community based on this shared value.

Compassion and loving kindness are primary modes of moral responsiveness. Compassion answers to the suffering of others and takes measures to ameliorate or remove it, and loving-kindness warmly embraces others and works for their happiness. Both virtues precipitate prosocial behaviors. Prosociality covers actions that are intended to benefit others and represents a capability to care greatly for individuals other than ourselves. Helping, volunteering, comforting, donating,

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<sup>155</sup> Oxley, *The Moral Dimensions of Empathy*, 78-79.

sharing, and cooperating are all examples of prosocial behavior. Compassionate responses include comforting a grieving friend with a hug or helping when you are first upon an accident. Sharing your lunch with a friend who forgot theirs or giving your leftovers to a person who is homeless are examples of loving-kindness.

Compassion and loving-kindness help construct a moral community that revolves around solicitude and altruism. Nancy Snow, for instance, recognizes that a compassion-based civil and political society is more reasonable than a self-interested one.<sup>156</sup> Foremost, compassionate people are more likely to view others as equals in being prey to unforeseen distress and inevitable misfortune.<sup>157</sup> They know that they, like others, are susceptible to, and relatively powerless against, these types of suffering.<sup>158</sup> Instead of viewing others as “possible oppressors”<sup>159</sup> or as “potential victims of self-interested aggression,”<sup>160</sup> in a society where individuals recognize their shared vulnerabilities, others are viewed as “possible helpers”<sup>161</sup> who can provide aid.

Likewise, Heim acknowledges that, while Buddhaghosa doesn’t construct an ethic of social equity and justice around loving-kindness, these implications can be read out of his interpretation.<sup>162</sup> Something as simple as being courteous to a grocer is demonstrative of this. Although quick service is often preferable, if that condition isn’t met, loving-kindness supports a forbearing and friendly interpersonal style and appreciates that being rancorous at a grocer

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<sup>156</sup> Nancy E. Snow, “Compassion,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1991): 195.

<sup>157</sup> Snow, “Compassion,” 202.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Maria Heim, “Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 181.

produces more suffering than it prevents. The grocer surely has frustrations of her own. Becoming discomposed will compound her troubles and also have a ruinous effect on one's presence of mind. Acknowledging that others are likely suffering and expressing loving-kindness keeps us from acting as if we are exceptional in our suffering while treating others as doormats.

### 3.4 *Summary*

I've argued for a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhism. Despite the diversity of Buddhist thought, and ethical reconstructions being far from univocal on how (or whether) Buddhist moral philosophy should be systemized, virtue ethics is flexible and can accommodate what makes Buddhism unique without imposing on it. The moral path, as I have presented it, consists of taking practical steps to eliminate suffering for oneself and others by correcting one's dysfunctional modes of engaging reality. I've argued that the four immeasurables are central to this project. They encompass wholesome qualities and activities that reduce suffering and promote the well-being of oneself and others.

## CONCLUSION

Covering so many topics and arguments is sure to be fatiguing. Rather than trotting out and rehashing my defense of Buddhist virtue ethics, I'd like to look back on and address something that I noted in the Introduction. I described this project as an effort to comprehend new ways of conceptualizing ourselves and our world. Buddhism is a live philosophical tradition with a unique perspective on the human condition and numerous resources for understanding and improving it. Even though I'd like to believe that Buddhism has a monopoly on what makes for a life well-lived, it surely does not. Yet, neither does Western philosophy. Thus, seriously engaging Buddhism presents as many new possibilities and challenges for Buddhist philosophy as it does for Western philosophy. If there is a takeaway, then, it should be that a cross-cultural dialogue with Buddhism is enriching for all sides. Undoubtedly, objections can be made refuting my interpretation of Buddhist ethics. I wrote at the limits of my knowledge on the subjects herein. Despite my limitations, I am confident the foundations I put down are well founded and capable of supporting and furthering a cross-cultural dialogue.

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