

*The Consequences of Consequentialism: Reflections on Recent Developments in the Study of Buddhist Ethics.*<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* This paper aims to demonstrate that attempts to categorize early Buddhist moral thought as embodying a form of ethical consequentialism are based on a fundamental misconception with regard to the nature of Buddhist values. This basic error superimposes a western, dualistic conception of fact and value onto an ancient Indian worldview that did not accept this division. In arguing this, I make reference to certain features of the early Buddhist conceptions of knowledge (*ñāṇa*) and wisdom (*paññā*) that I believe must be integrated into any complete account of early Buddhist ethics.

*PART I. Buddhist Ethics and Consequentialism: A mismatch.*

The challenge of providing a theoretical account of early Buddhist ethics is great. As Damien Keown has recently noted, the Buddhist traditions never really developed an explicit ethical theory of their own (Keown 2011). They did of course have their own moral code and teachings -- statements concerning moral conduct (*sīla*) abound in the scriptures. What is absent, however, is a theory in which these statements are linked together into a coherent ethical system -- complete with axioms, definitions and ordered principles for determining the proper course of conduct in specific sets of circumstances.

Why this is so has been the subject of some speculation. In other subfields of philosophy, Buddhism is very highly developed -- for example in the areas of epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind. A number of explanations have been made in this regard.<sup>2</sup> The simplest suggestion is that the lack may be apparent only; in fact, there probably were some ethical writings of the sort we desire, but sadly the manuscripts must have been lost. But this hypothesis seems far-fetched and far too easy; references to such works would almost certainly be found in the texts that have come down to us.

Other explanations adopt a more sociological angle. Monks, who composed the scriptures, were less concerned with the humdrum conundrums of worldly life than lay-people, and thus less concerned with exploring such. Whatever the everyday dilemma, the *sangha* could safely sidestep it on the assumption that individuals could always do the right thing by attempting to follow the path set forth by the Buddha; the moral code is

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<sup>2</sup> Keown lists six possible explanations, including the three mentioned here. See: Keown, D. "It's Ethics Jim, But Not As We Know It." Keynote Address: Contemporary Perspectives on Buddhist Ethics Conference. Columbia University, Oct. 6, 2011, [http://www.cbs.columbia.edu/buddhist\\_ethics/keynote-one.html](http://www.cbs.columbia.edu/buddhist_ethics/keynote-one.html)

clearly set out. The desire to conform, and to maintain the moral authority of the *sangha*, may have had the effect of limiting the extent to which monks would engage in more subtle ethical reflections.

A third kind of explanation, and the one I take up here, is philosophical in character. In this case the suggestion is that other aspects of early Buddhist philosophy tended to preclude the development of an ethical theory -- for example certain of its epistemological or metaphysical views. So, for example, with regard to the Theravāda tradition it has been suggested that the theory of nonself (*anattā*) undermines the concept of moral agency. Given the belief that the moral agent is ultimately unreal, the impulse to develop a theory of ethical decision making for such an agent simply does not arise.

Whatever its true cause or causes, it is on the basis of this apparent lacuna in Buddhist thought that modern authors have attempted to identify the kind of ethical theory implicit in the early scriptures. The assumption is that the Buddha's diverse statements concerning morality and moral conduct are, in general, mutually consistent and when linked together can be seen to form a coherent ethical system. I agree with this assumption. In this short paper, however, my main purpose cannot be to supply a systematic explanation of early Buddhist ethics. My goal here is simply to provide some convincing reasons for rejecting the idea that Buddhist ethics are sufficiently similar to consequentialism to warrant that label. In arguing for this view, I make reference to the work of Charles Goodman, who has recently provided a very forceful set of arguments for a consequentialist reading of Buddhist ethics.<sup>3</sup> In the process of making a case against this position, and especially in the conclusion of this paper, I indicate a few of what I take to be the most essential features of any theory of Buddhist ethics that would hope to remain true to the Buddhist tradition itself.

It may be helpful to begin by reviewing some basic distinctions made in the western philosophical tradition. Ethical theory in the west has been subdivided into a number of sub-fields, of which two seem to be of primary concern to recent writers in the field of Buddhist Studies: meta-ethics and normative ethics. Meta-ethics is concerned with clarification of basic moral concepts, as well as the analysis of metaphysical issues that bear on moral decision making. Examples of meta-ethical questions would be: What is the nature of morality? Is it objectively grounded in the world? What is the good? What is an action? What is an agent? What do we mean by these words and by other basic moral terms? Normative ethics is concerned with how we ought to make moral decisions. What are the considerations and principles one should appeal to in deciding what to do? What is the rationale for morality and what is the rational decision making procedure that ought to be employed? In the western philosophical tradition there are a number of normative ethical theories -- for example deontological theories, utilitarianism and virtue ethics.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Goodman's study is both long and subtle. It is worthy of a much more extensive treatment than I will give here. In this paper I only address his account of Theravāda ethics. Because Goodman takes Theravāda as representative of the early tradition from which the Mahāyāna evolved, the considerations I raise here do cast some doubt on his account of the later tradition. Goodman's account of Theravāda ethics is mainly to be found in Ch. 3, 47-72 and Ch. 10, 183-196.

One of the most helpful ways of understanding the varieties of normative theory is in terms of the place they give to the concept of consequence. We can usefully describe normative ethical theories as either consequentialist or non-consequentialist. A consequentialist theory is one that defines right action in terms of its consequences. Further, the right action is one that produces the best consequences. The goodness of consequences is understood in terms of some basic good or utility, which must simply be assumed to be valuable -- typically pleasure, happiness, or fulfillment of one's preferences. This value is foundational; it is considered an intrinsic good, the ultimate basis or source for moral judgment. Typically consequentialist theories like utilitarianism advise one to try to determine the consequences of the different courses of action open to one, tally up the outcomes, and act in the way that produces or looks like it will produce the greatest net benefit (or amount of the intrinsic good).

A non-consequentialist theory is one that doesn't define right action in terms of consequences, but in terms of some other consideration.

Now if one is asked whether the normative theory implicit in the Buddhist scriptures is a form of consequentialism, one's first impulse might be to think of the doctrine of karma, with its well known rubric of action and consequence (*karma-vipāka*). It is a fact that Buddhists hold that actions produce consequences that correspond to their moral character. Morally good action results in pleasurable, beneficial, happy effects -- including higher rebirths, and ultimately, if combined with meditation and wisdom, *nirvāṇa*. Morally bad action is said to lead one to experience pain, suffering and lower rebirths. So it seems that there is a straight-forward sense in which Buddhist ethics constitute a form of ethical consequentialism.

There are other reasons one might be tempted to think of early Buddhism in this way. Goodman notes that some Buddhist texts seem to explicitly display consequentialist reasoning. Here is a key example he cites from the *Ambalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta*.

When you reflect, if you know: "This action that I wish to do with my body would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results," then you definitely should not do such an action with the body. But when you reflect, if you know: "This action that I wish to do with the body would not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to both; it is a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results," then you may do such an action with the body.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya: The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), i, 416. References to Pali texts are to the volume and page number of the edition of the Pali Text Society.

Goodman comments: "This passage states that actions are to be evaluated in terms of their consequences for both self and others, just as in universalist versions of consequentialism." (Goodman 48) I would make two observations here.

The first is that this passage is extracted from a discourse in which the Buddha advises his son Rahula regarding the value of reflecting upon one's actions. Whatever the action, one should only perform it having first repeatedly reflected (*paccavekkhitvā paccavekkhitvā*) upon it. Nine categories of action are dealt with, namely, actions of the body, speech, and mind, performed in the future, present, and past. Thus the quotation constitutes one ninth of the Buddha's total advice, namely that which concerns bodily action to be performed in the future. As for other future actions -- those of speech and mind -- the advice is identical. Don't perform the action if you know that it is unwholesome and will cause affliction to anyone; feel free to go ahead and act if you know the action is wholesome and will produce pleasant consequences. In all nine categories the Buddha's advice is based on the assumption that the agent possesses the relevant knowledge, rather than mere belief. Each of the hypothetical reflections is premised with the qualification of knowledge on the part of the agent. The verbal root √ *jān* - "to know" is employed rather than a weaker verb such as √ *vic*. "to think".<sup>5</sup>

These considerations make it difficult to accept a consequentialist interpretation of this passage. In the context of past and present actions, it makes clear sense to think of the agent as being in possession of knowledge. When one is performing an action one can be directly aware of it as well as of at least some of its immediate consequences, and when one has performed an action one can remember what one has done and what has resulted. In the case of future bodily, vocal, and mental actions, however, it is less clear how one is to go about assessing one's actions and their results. The action itself has not yet been performed, nor have the results come about. Knowledge would therefore seem to be ruled out.

In point of fact there are other well-known scriptural passages where considerable skepticism is expressed concerning knowledge of the actual consequences of one's actions. Consideration of the karmic results of one's actions is even described as an activity that can drive one mad, and the Buddha advised against it. The topic is said to be one the four unthinkableables (*acinteyya* or *acinnateyyāni*) for anyone save those with the insight of a Buddha.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. We find "When you reflect, if you know...", (*Sace tvam, rāhula, paccavekkhamāno evaṃ jāneyyāsi...*) rather than, "When you reflect, if you think....."

<sup>6</sup> "Monks, there are these four unthinkableables, not to be pondered upon, which if pondered upon, would lead one to insanity and distress. What are these four? The range of a Buddha, O monks, is an unthinkableable, not to be pondered upon, which if pondered upon, would lead to insanity and distress. The range of the meditative absorptions... the results of karma, speculations about the world are unthinkableables, not to be pondered upon, which if pondered upon, would lead one to insanity and distress." *Āṅguttara Nikāya: Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi. (New York: Altamira, 1999), ii, 80.

If Buddhism is skeptical about the possibility of knowledge of future consequences, and if consequences are the sole criterion by which one might conceivably know whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome, we should be led to conclude that Buddhism must adopt a skeptical position regarding the possibility of knowledge of right and wrong, good and evil. Given this lack of knowledge, moral conduct should be impossible. But it would be an obvious mistake to attribute such a view to the Buddha -- who is well-known for denouncing such skepticism.<sup>7</sup>

Although Goodman does not explicitly address this problem, he does focus on a closely related point. Consequentialist theories are, in general, susceptible to the criticism that the moral value of an action will change over time as new consequences of that action arise. If we accept the view that the actual consequences of an action are the sole criterion in virtue of which the action is good or bad, an action that initially appears to be good would retroactively become bad if negative outcomes emerged from it a later time. Thus the apparently good action of providing a meal to a starving child would later have to be deemed bad if that child grew up to be Hitler.<sup>8</sup> While such implications may be acceptable to some, they are clearly unacceptable from a Buddhist perspective -- since moral knowledge would then require precognition, or indeed even the omniscience of a Buddha.

Goodman is not unaware of this area of difficulty and attempts to deal with it by distinguishing between two kinds of consequentialism, only one of which would be susceptible to this kind of criticism.

Objective act-consequentialists say that the right thing for an agent to do in any situation is whatever action will, in fact, have the best consequences in that situation. But... subjective act-consequentialism [holds that] the right thing to do in any situation is whatever action the agent *expects* to have the best consequences, *given the agent's beliefs*. (Goodman 184, *emphasis added*)

I do not, however, think that this maneuver can save the consequentialist interpretation. Even putting aside the fact that Goodman has formulated his response in terms of act-consequentialism rather than the rule-consequentialism he attributes to the Theravāda tradition, we have already seen that the Buddha's advice is not premised on the agent's *beliefs*. The passage Goodman quotes is clear: it is knowledge that is required. As for the idea that it is the *expected* consequences that count, the Buddhist tradition is very much aware that these are often highly uncertain, and may include a large number of envisioned scenarios as possible outcomes (as in cases where one is uncertain whether what one intends to do might end up harming someone). That Buddhist ethics could be based on such an uncertain foundation does not square well with the Buddha's admonition to acquire knowledge through repeated reflection.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example: *Dīgha Nikāya: The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Maurice Walshe. (London: Wisdom Publications, 1995), i, 60.

<sup>8</sup> This illustrative example is based upon a question posed to the author by Dr. Arvind Sharma.

Thus rather than talk of the expected consequences of future actions, in the Buddhist context it makes more sense to think of the object of knowledge as the present wish or desire to do the action (*kammaṃ kattukāmo*). The wish to act can be wholesome or unwholesome, and properly conceived includes the intended consequences. The intended consequences are often the clearest indicators of the unwholesomeness or wholesomeness of the action itself (as in cases where, upon reflection, one realizes that what one actually intends is to harm someone). In fact, the right effort component of Buddhist meditation is based on the assumption that one can reflect upon and recognize the nature of one's own mental states, including and especially one's intentions. These considerations seem to suggest that the apparently consequentialist criterion of future consequences may actually be reducible to the factor of present intentions. We will return to the topic on intention in due course.

In any case, it does seem that additional criteria other than future consequences may be required by Buddhists when it comes to determining the morality of an action. But even if we remain unpersuaded of this, and we accept all of Goodman's arguments concerning the Buddha's advice to Rahula, I believe that there are other, deeper reasons to reject the attribution of a consequentialist ethic to Theravāda Buddhism.

In making his case for a consequentialist understanding of Buddhist ethics Goodman attempts to provide some account of the intrinsic good that provides the underlying basis for moral judgment. As already discussed, every consequentialist system must rely on some basic idea of intrinsic goodness that is assumed to have ultimate value. Goodman argues that the assumed intrinsic good in Buddhism is best captured by an umbrella term "the welfare of sentient beings". It is the welfare of sentient beings that is the ultimate and only source of moral norms in Buddhism. This phrase he defines very widely to refer to states of worldly happiness (including pleasure) as well as virtue.<sup>9</sup> The former include "forms of worldly prosperity, such as 'wealth and possessions'" while the latter term includes such characteristics as "faith, morality, learning, renunciation"(Goodman 60). Thus he refers to this conception of the good as an "objective list" theory; all the items on the list are considered "intrinsically valuable" (63). Theravāda Buddhists think that these desirable states are to be maximized, and are best maximized if one bases one's actions on consequentialist type reasoning -- as in the passage quoted. Theravāda Buddhism thus embraces a kind of rule consequentialism, wherein it is thought that the greatest amount of worldly happiness and virtue will result if we follow the moral codes laid down in the scriptures (the *Vinaya* for monks, the *pañca-sīla* for laypeople).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As can be seen, Goodman is not so naive as to suggest that "welfare" for Theravada Buddhists could simply be equated with worldly happiness and pleasure. He also asserts that among the assumed intrinsic goods in Buddhism we also find the idea of *virtue*. Hence he describes Theravada Buddhism as a kind of "character consequentialism" (71). In this way Goodman attempts to include virtue in his account of Buddhist ethics, without committing himself to the view that Buddhist ethics are a form of virtue ethics.

<sup>10</sup> Goodman traces the historical development of Buddhist thought into the Mahāyāna, which he argues embraces act consequentialism, wherein rules may on occasion be broken if by doing so better consequences would result.

While there is a certain plausibility in the assertion that the Theravāda Buddhists tend to regard the rules of moral conduct as inviolable, we would do well to pause on Goodman's conception of the "welfare of beings", which he takes as providing the ultimate grounding for those rules. Why would Buddhists consider temporary experiences of worldly happiness and pleasure intrinsically "good"? Why not then simply the fulfillment of preferences or desires? Buddhists do not deny that transient experiences of these kinds may contingently possess some limited value, but on a deeper level they are all regarded as unsatisfactory. Further, consequentialism itself can provide no explanation as to the basis of whatever positive evaluation such experiences may have. The same holds with regard to the virtues that Goodman adds alongside pleasures on his objective list. They are left ungrounded. Their placement on the objective list seems, in the last analysis, to be arbitrary. From a Buddhist perspective consequentialism is a form of thinking that stops short, one for which the items considered ultimately good are left without any kind of metaphysical foundation. As an ethical system it rings hollow.

But what kind of metaphysical foundation *could* Buddhists hold as grounding our moral judgments? Damien Keown has argued that *nirvāṇa* is the good which Buddhists conceive of as being sought for its own sake, and for the sake of which all other goods are sought.<sup>11</sup> That the highest good in Buddhism is *nirvāṇa*, would, on first blush, appear to be a more natural choice for a single ultimate source of value than welfare (*hita*, *attha*, *subhasiddhi*). In terms of its prominence in the texts, it is certainly more common to find the Buddha describing the holy life as leading to *nirvāṇa* than to the welfare of all beings. Of course, the "welfare of beings" may itself be understood as a reference to *nirvāṇa*, but as we have seen this is not what Goodman intends. "Welfare" itself is a much less specifically Buddhist term than *nirvāṇa*, and it is amenable to western utilitarian discussions of value in a way that *nirvāṇa* is not. By describing the source of moral norms in this way, it becomes much easier to think of Buddhism as embodying some form of consequentialism.

Now one might well think that the concept of *nirvāṇa* itself can be of little use when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of concrete ethical decision-making; *nirvāṇa* is, after all, posited as the ending of all that is familiar to us. How could such a remote "highest good" have any conceivable practical relevance to the everyday realities of moral life? After all, an action's conduciveness to *nirvāṇa* isn't always immediately apparent! Doesn't the Buddhist tradition have anything else to offer? Aside from consequences, what other options are left to us?

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<sup>11</sup> Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. (London: Macmillan, 1992), 197. In my view, it is difficult to deny this important and influential characterization of *nirvāṇa*; as far as I can see, Goodman never addresses it as such. He does, however, expend considerable effort attempting to refute Keown on other points. Most importantly, he explicitly rejects Keown's assertion that *nirvāṇa* is the sole ultimate good for Theravāda Buddhists. In fact Goodman goes further, even questioning the idea that *nirvāṇa* is a good -- "How is the world made better if a saint passes in Nirvana?" (66). The only sense he can make out of this is to note that for Buddhists there is no such thing as a permanent happiness and that the situation will always degenerate; *nirvāṇa* cuts off this possibility forever. In this paper I will not deal with Goodman's specific arguments against Keown.

Peter Harvey lists three factors that Buddhists might consider when deciding on the morality of a particular action. In addition to the consequences of the action and its conduciveness to *nirvāṇa*, a key consideration must always be the motivation for the action.

"The criteria for deciding what action is 'wholesome' (*kusala*) and what is 'unwholesome' (*akusala*)... are of three kinds:  
 1) the motivation of the action;  
 2) the direct effects of the action in terms of causing suffering or happiness;  
 3) the action's contribution to spiritual development, culminating in *nirvāṇa*."<sup>12</sup>

We may note three corresponding ways of reflecting, or epistemic strategies if you will, that can be associated with these three criteria.

a) In the case of assessing one's motivation, mindfulness would seem the natural method: one can look within oneself and examine one's own mental states. Is the motive pure? From a Buddhist perspective this is to ask oneself whether one's intention is free from the unwholesome roots of action, the mental defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. Cognitively, is the aim of one's action to harm someone? Here, the epistemic strategy employed by the agent has a perceptual or quasi-perceptual basis in the direct awareness of his or her own mental states.

b) In the case of examining the actual future consequences, the method would have to involve inference: one has to inductively assess the probable outcome of an action in terms of the suffering and happiness it may produce. As noted above, knowledge of the actual future consequences is regarded as beyond a normal person's abilities; knowledge of consequences is, however, possible if, as we have seen, we mean by this knowledge of the *intended* consequences.

c) In the case of conduciveness to *nirvāṇa*, it is difficult to specify an exact method or strategy to be employed -- presumably there are a number of avenues open here; e.g. relying on scriptural statements or the advice of a member of the *sangha*.

Needless to say, these strategies can be employed individually or in combination. The very fact that there are three criteria can be taken as a further argument in support of the view that Theravāda ethics cannot be accurately portrayed as a form of consequentialism, since consequentialism takes it as a given that consequences alone are to be employed when deciding on the moral value of an action. It is interesting to note that the three criteria of motivation, consequences, and conduciveness to *nirvāṇa* correspond with a well-known early Buddhist schema of three forms of wisdom: those consisting of meditation, thinking, and study or hearing (*bhāvanāmaya paññā*, *cintāmaya paññā*, and

<sup>12</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46.



*sutamaya paññā*).<sup>13</sup> This paradigm is generally interpreted hierarchically with the wisdom of meditation (*bhāvanā*) considered the highest form of wisdom.<sup>14</sup>

At one point Goodman (59) actually seems to recognize that the Theravāda tradition advocates a variety of modes of moral evaluation -- only to reject this as a theoretical basis for Buddhist ethics on the grounds that there would then be no way to adjudicate among the different strategies in cases where the criteria conflict. To accept such "insouciant pluralism", he says, would be to give up hope that Theravāda ethics could have any kind of theoretical unity. Thus he chooses to center his interpretation on the single criterion of consequences. While this strategy does initially appear to result in a more unified, manageable account of Theravāda ethics, it comes at a high intellectual price. By minimizing the importance of motivation and *nirvāṇa* as ethical terms, Goodman's account fails to accurately convey the tradition's own understanding. His portrayal is far too calculative, too outward looking to accurately reflect either the Buddhist scriptures themselves or the self-understanding of the living Buddhist tradition. It offers an account of Buddhist ethics that sidelines meditation, which most Buddhists would regard as the heart of their faith.

I would argue that consideration of consequences is considered a less reliable approach, at best a back-up; introspective examination of one's intentions is taken as the principal guide. As it is generally more difficult to correctly infer the consequences of one's actions, the default position is to look at one's intentions. One's intentions, of course, have a cognitive element -- they are aimed towards the completion of some particular act and state of affairs that the agent can describe -- the intended consequences. But they also contain an affective component, which is essential. However "objectively good" the intended state of affairs may be judged to be, Buddhists would temper such judgment upon learning that the agent was partly motivated by a negative emotion such as greed or jealousy.

In general, the Buddhist ethos inclines towards playing it safe in an uncertain world, recommending that the moral agent bases his or her decisions upon knowledge gained in the area of greatest confidence and certainty -- one's own mental states. Buddhists operate on the assumption that if one clarifies one's mind and follows one's own lights, things

<sup>13</sup> This paradigm is one of India's most fundamental ways of conceiving the process of acquiring spiritual knowledge. See, for examples: *Dīgha Nikāya* iii, 219; *Vissudhimagga: The Path of Purification*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), reprint, XIV, 14: 438. For a recent treatment, see S. N. Balagangadhara, "How to Speak for the Indian Traditions: An Agenda for the Future," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2005) 73/4: 987–1013. It is interesting to note that these three kinds of wisdom roughly correspond to three means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) explicitly discussed in later Indian philosophy: perception, inference and scripture.

<sup>14</sup> Now here it might be noticed that depending on which of these three modes of wisdom one takes to be primary for ethical decision-making, one is likely to think of Buddhist ethics in quite different ways. If one considers motivation to be primary, one might tend to think of Buddhist ethics as some form of deontological ethics (or possibly virtue ethics) wherein it is the good will that is considered of utmost importance. If one focuses on projected consequences, one will of course tend to view Buddhist ethics as consequentialist in nature. And if one focuses on conduciveness to *nirvāṇa*, one might be inclined toward a teleological account wherein good actions are considered to be autotelic, containing their own ultimate end.

will work out as they should -- in the best possible way. This, in my view, is a point of faith as well as practical intelligence. Beneficial results come from good action. So the advice is: recognize the positive, healthy inclinations within yourself, develop them and act upon them. Recognize the negative, unhealthy tendencies within, overcome them, and avoid acting upon them. In this way, one will gradually move toward *nirvāṇa*. In fact, correctly or not, the Theravāda Buddhist position is that the three criteria listed above cannot ever be in a real conflict. There is a logic here. All positively motivated action is thought to lead to happy consequences, and to incline one toward *nirvāṇa*. Hence, *contra* Goodman, there *is* a theoretical unity here. The criteria for assessing the morality of action can never be in real conflict.

## *PART II. Conclusions.*

We have seen a number of reasons for doubting that consequentialism is an appropriate label for the ethical system implicit in the Buddha's teachings. First of all, Buddhist ethics contain a number of criteria for moral evaluation, not just one. In addition, consequentialist interpretations favor a criterion that is at best secondary (consideration of consequences) over one that is considered primary by the tradition itself (awareness of one's intentions). Finally and perhaps most importantly, consequentialist theory fails to provide a solid metaphysical foundation for moral judgment. These reasons are not unrelated. In the remaining portion of this paper I will attempt to clarify the connection between them.

Significantly, Buddhist theory does provide a sufficient metaphysical grounding for the items it considers ultimate goods (*eo ipso* this provides us with a good reason to reject the possibility that Buddhism can be considered a form of consequentialism). To understand this, our enquiry must turn away from normative ethics and towards the domain of meta-ethics. I believe that the investigation of Buddhist ethical theory is best begun by investigating some very basic meta-ethical questions. I will here mention two of the most fundamental.

First, what does the Buddhist tradition understand by the word "action"? Second, what, in the Buddhist context, is to be understood by the word "good"? With regard to the first question, many writers have called attention to the following statement of the Buddha -- which may be taken as axiomatic:

"It is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call action (*karma*); having formed an intention one performs acts of body, speech and mind." (*Āṅguttara Nikāya* iii, 415)

The defining feature of action is intentionality. It is the fact of being done on purpose that distinguishes action from mere behavior. The specific intention with which an action is performed can either be unwholesome (*akusala*) or wholesome (*kusala*). The

unwholesome and wholesome roots of action are summarized as greed, hatred and delusion on the one hand and generosity, love, and wisdom on the other.<sup>15</sup>

These are the qualities in virtue of which an action is either morally positive or negative in Buddhism. Nothing else. The confusion about karma and consequence, mentioned at the outset of this paper, arises because Buddhists also hold that good actions cause happy and pleasurable experiences to arise in the future. Such transitory experiences can be called "good" if they are grounded in wholesome mental states, but they are not considered good *per se*. And such experiences are certainly not what make the actions that lead to them wholesome. This is the key point. **Actions are good or bad in themselves, not on account of the consequences they have. To take the latter view would be to place the effect before the cause.** Although this observation is quite simple, the implications are profound. Goodman himself acknowledges that this way of understanding the nature of Buddhist values presents severe problems for any consequentialist reading of Theravāda ethics. However, he seems to regard this understanding as a highly debatable matter of interpretation. Here is how he puts it:

Several writers have advanced a further objection to the consequentialist understanding of Theravāda ethics that, if sound, would be very powerful. This objection begins by noting that, according to many Buddhist texts, performing morally wrong actions will indeed have bad consequences. But, it is argued, the wrongness of the actions is what *explains* the fact that their consequences are bad. This *order of explanation* is the reverse of that found in consequentialist theories, which take bad consequences as the basis for the judgment that the action was wrong... However, the authors who present this objection do not cite any texts that directly support their view. Moreover, I am not aware of any Buddhist text that explicitly speaks to the issue of *explanatory priority*.... (Goodman 188, *emphasis added*)

As I am one of the authors being referred to here (Goodman 236, note 16), I would reply to this. The first point I would note is that Goodman reads the problem presented to consequentialist interpretations of Buddhist ethics in a very particular way. He refers of it as an issue of *explanatory priority*. But here the notion of explanation is ambiguous; we can, first of all, think of explanation as that which provides pertinent information or reasons relevant to determining the morality of an action. This is Goodman's understanding. But we can also think of explanation as that which provides an account of the origin or causal determinants of an action. This is the most important sense for Buddhists (Adam, 68-69). **Early Buddhists, as we have seen, were not very interested in rationally theorizing the considerations by which one might decide whether a particular action is good or bad.** The theoretical issues for them concerned *causal priority*.

Thus, as noted at the outset of this paper, there is a paucity of Buddhist texts that speak to the issues of normative ethics. On the other hand, there is a veritable treasure trove of

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<sup>15</sup> Martin T. Adam, "Groundwork for a Metaphysic of Buddhist Morals: a New Analysis of *puñña* and *kusala*, in light of *sukka*," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 12 (2005), <http://www.buddhistethics.org/12/adam-article.pdf>

material telling us that unwholesome and wholesome actions are what respectively cause unhappy and happy results, and that the roots of the unwholesome and the wholesome are what provide the causal basis for unwholesome and wholesome actions (e.g. *Majjhima Nikāya*, i, 47; i, 389).<sup>16</sup> It would be quite mistaken to think that the unwholesomeness or wholesomeness of these roots and the actions based upon them could be caused by the agent's personal beliefs and expectations concerning future events. I think even Goodman would agree that this, in Buddhist terms, would be an absurdity.

This manner of understanding Buddhist values as objective realities provides a solid basis for morality. As Keown puts it:

[V]irtues and vices -- since they are *dharmas* -- are objective and real. They are not part of the realm of mental construction (*prajñapti*), but are actually 'found' in the psyche. This means that Buddhist ethics is naturalistic: good and bad are not abstractions to be apprehended by observers according to their various intuitions and sensibilities. Nor can morals be reduced to questions of taste or personal preference... (1992: 64)

Thus actions are good or bad in virtue of the *dharmas* that constitute them; in the Buddhist analysis these *dharmas* are real qualities of one's intentions. Not only are these *dharmas* moral qualities, they are epistemic qualities (Adam 2005: 67, 69). Wholesome qualities are those that do not obscure the mind; unwholesome actions do obscure the mind. Wholesome *dharmas* are also autotelic -- they contain their own end, *nirvāṇa*. The fact that they should be acted upon is "built into" their very nature. The opposite is true of unwholesome *dharmas*. In this way, Buddhist ethical theory justifies its intrinsic goods by grounding them in facts, in the way things are, which is say in *dharmas* and the law that governs these realities -- the Dharma. Since human fulfillment and freedom (*nirvāṇa*) requires knowing reality as it is, knowing one's own mind can be seen to be a profoundly moral activity; indeed, from a Buddhist perspective one might even venture to say that it is one's highest duty.

The fact that the early Buddhist outlook involves this kind of moral realism, wherein values are regarded as facts, provides us with an important reason as to why "Ethics" in the western sense of "normative ethics" was never really developed as an area of study in the Buddhist tradition. I would suggest that this aspect of the early Buddhist meta-ethical outlook may have precluded the kind of speculative reflection and thought experimentation that would lead to formulations of rational principles governing moral conduct. The important concern for early Buddhists would simply have been to experientially recognize *kusala* and *akusala* qualities within themselves, and to

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<sup>16</sup> Martin T. Adam, "Classes of Agent and the Moral Logic of the Pali Canon," *Argumentation: Special Volume: Buddhist Logic and Argumentation* (2008) 22, 115-124. For the most recent and detailed treatment of the causality of moral conduct as described in the Pāli Canon, see Peter Harvey, "An analysis of factors related to the *kusala/akusala* quality of actions in the Pāli tradition," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Special Volume: Indian Buddhist Metaethics, Contributions to a panel at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 23–28 June 2008, Guest ed., Martin T. Adam, 33, No. 1–2 2010 (2011), 175-209.

respectively cultivate or discourage them. Given this conceptual framework the Buddhist response would not have been to speculate or reason, but to practice. In such a context the impulse to engage in the activity of normative ethical reflection would not arise.

Before attempting to categorize Buddhist ethics in terms of western intellectual traditions we need to carefully map out the original conceptual territory. Key conceptual schemas exist in the texts; the material is there. In this paper we have noted that the early epistemological schema of three kinds of wisdom may be particularly relevant. The highest wisdom is based on meditation and direct experience. It is this way of knowing that is thought of as providing the most secure basis for moral conduct.