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Theravāda Buddhism and John Dewey's Metaethics

Or Neeman^{*}

Abstract

In this article I carry out a comparison between the meta-ethical views of John Dewey in “Theory of Valuation” and the ethical methodology of Theravāda Buddhism. I argue that the latter illustrates how Dewey’s view of ethics may be applied. Specifically, his view is that ethics can be and ought to be a science, and that ethical knowledge, like all scientific knowledge, is causal. Thus, the focus of ethics is on the causes and effects of our actions. This includes a concrete analysis of desire and the context in which it arises. I further argue that the comparison with Dewey helps to transcend the debate over whether Buddhist ethics more closely resemble utilitarianism or Aristotelian ethics.

Introduction

Comparisons have recently been drawn between Buddhist ethics and systems of ethics within the Western philosophical tradition. For example, Damien Keown argues in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* that although Buddhist ethics has some apparent similarities to utilitarianism, it more closely resembles Aristotle’s virtue ethics. Abraham Velez de Cea grants that a comparison with virtue ethics is plausible, but argues that it must

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take into account the presence in Buddhist ethics of “features of utilitarianism and moral realism” (138). In any case, these authors recognize that because Buddhist ethics would not fit neatly into any of the Western categories, the similarities should not be overstated.

This article will be concerned with the comparison between Buddhism and Pragmatism, a movement in philosophy that arose in the late nineteenth century whose major figures include Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and John Dewey. Buddhist philosophy has been described as highly pragmatic. David Kalupahana, for example, draws repeated parallels with William James as he examines the Buddha's Middle Way approach to psychology, metaphysics, and epistemology (*Principles*). In fact, Kalupahana says, “if there is any ‘ism’ that can be compared with Buddhism, it would be pragmatism with a moral foundation” (*Ethics* 161). Ewing Y. Chinn argues that Buddhist views of metaphysics and the role of philosophy are closer to those of another Pragmatist, John Dewey. My goal in this article is to show that Dewey's views on ethics bear strong similarities to those of Buddhism, and that carrying out such a comparison allows us to bring together those features of Buddhist ethics which are suggestive of utilitarianism and virtue ethics. In doing so, the discussion will center on metaethics—that is, the nature of ethical thought—and the related topics of psychology and causation.

In carrying out this comparison, I will focus on Dewey's theory as presented in his 1939 essay, “Theory of Valuation,” written for the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*. Although he discusses ethics in various books and journal articles, I have chosen this essay because despite its brevity it thoroughly articulates his mature view. In discussing Buddhist ethics, I will limit myself to the Theravāda tradition as recorded in the Pāli Canon and Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*. An expansion

of the comparison to other Buddhist traditions must remain a topic for future research.

The organization of the article is as follows. I begin with an exposition of the main points of Dewey's theory of valuation, focusing on those of its aspects that are of particular relevance. These include both his positive proposal and the main features of other views of ethics that he finds especially objectionable. I then attempt to show that the Buddha's method in addressing ethical questions bears strong parallels to that advocated by Dewey. Next, I discuss the relationship between intention, action, and consequences with regard to their goodness according to Buddhist ethics, arguing that the comparison with Dewey can illuminate this issue and, thus, also the comparisons with Aristotle's ethics and utilitarianism. Finally, I offer a discussion of *nibbāna* and the status of the *arahant*, followed by some topics for further investigation.

Dewey's "Theory of Valuation"

The central question in Dewey's essay is "whether scientific propositions about the direction of human conduct, about any situation into which the idea of *should* enters, are possible" (2). Advancing the claim that such propositions are possible, Dewey opposes moral relativism, expressivism, and any theory that claims *a priori* status for ethical truths.

In examining the view that such statements as "stealing is wrong" simply express the speaker's negative attitude towards stealing, Dewey's approach is to consider the context in which those statements might be made. The speaker's intention is typically to influence others' behavior: if they have stolen something, leading them to repent; if children are being addressed, perhaps to deter their stealing in the first place; or, perhaps, just to make it clear to them that the speaker does not approve of stealing, as a way of dispelling suspicions. Although it is, of course, possible for a person to say such a thing for no reason—like stat-

ing, during a discussion of the NBA playoffs, that Europe is a continent—this must be viewed as the exception. It thus becomes clear that the sentence “stealing is wrong,” when viewed in its proper context, refers to some past or present affair (for example, the other person’s having stolen something and being likely to do so again, the child’s naive attitude towards stealing, etc.) which is viewed as unsatisfactory, especially as compared to an alternative possible state viewed as preferable, and is intended as a means to bring this latter state of affairs into existence. The discussion is led, then, to an examination of two related topics: positive and negative evaluations of states of affairs, and the relation between means and ends.

With regard to the former, Dewey distinguishes two uses of the word “value.” The first is akin to such terms as *like*, *enjoy*, *be pleased at*, and so on, as one may be said to enjoy being complimented. What is here referred to is an emotional response to some object that is present, whether that response be liking or disliking. The second use consists of putting a value on the object, evaluating it. This too may be positive or negative, but the evaluation is necessarily undertaken in relation to other factors. One may, for example, believe that one’s car is worth a certain amount, which is to effect a comparison of value between possession of the car and that amount of money. Or one may realize that, although one likes to be complimented, the enjoyment one derives does not justify spending time with flatterers. Or, if one takes the opposite view, one may reasonably be expected to seek out flatterers. Dewey repeatedly emphasizes that what people value is indicated not by what they profess to value, but by what they pursue or avoid. And this is precisely the difference between desires and idle wishes: a desire, according to Dewey, entails effort—mental or physical—aimed at its satisfaction. And, because states of affairs are not brought into existence simply by wishing for them, we are brought to consider the relation between the state desired and the courses of behavior that are means to its achievement.

We are now in a position to see the causes and effects of desires. A desire arises when the objective situation is viewed as unsatisfactory, as lacking, and when some possible situation, which is desired, is viewed as remedying that lack. Its content is, of course, based on past experience, which is essential to imagining the alternative situation. The consequence is deliberation—a consideration of the various means by which that situation may be brought about and of the other effects to which those means would lead, such as having to forsake other appealing courses of behavior (as one cannot be at two places at once or spend the same dollar twice). Deliberation occurs when one has doubt about how to act; its goal is to dispel that doubt so that action may proceed.

It may seem that we have, so far, only discussed instrumental reasoning. *If* one desires a certain end, one must take certain actions to bring it about; but which objects are worthy of being chosen as ends? That an error is involved here is suggested by the fact that deliberation about means may in fact lead one to abandon the end, even if one finds means sufficient to achieve it. One may decide that the necessary means are themselves objectionable or that they may lead to additional consequences that would be objectionable. Also, as I have already noted, being aware that adoption of a particular end entails forsaking certain other ends necessarily leads one to compare them. Deliberation is, thus, not just evaluation of courses of action in terms of their suitability as means to an end, but also evaluation of the end itself in terms of what consequences its achievement would entail. As Dewey puts it, the error consists in “the belief that the relation of ends-means is unilateral, proceeding exclusively from end to means” (42). Because every end we may pursue, once it is brought about, has its own effects, it must also be viewed as a potential means to other ends. This agrees with common sense, which considers it foolish to pursue an end without giving any thought to its consequences. Likewise, every means becomes an end once we choose to pursue it. Dewey thus rejects the view that some

things are good in themselves while others are only good or bad depending on whether they lead to those goods. In other words, he rejects the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goods. Rather, the goodness of an end depends on the means adopted as well as its own role as a means for further ends. And such goodness or badness is, in reality, a quality of the course of action as a whole, not just of the end.

Now, the question naturally arises concerning the basis on which one evaluates the means and their consequences, aside from whether or not they lead to the desired end, and whether that leads us into a regress. Two regresses might seem to threaten, one regarding the ultimate source of one's values, and another regarding how far one should go in examining the consequences of a course of action. First, it cannot be denied that our evaluations are ultimately grounded in our likes and dislikes, in what *leads to* greater or lesser satisfaction (so that the knowledge involved is, as it always is for Dewey, causal). If we could not distinguish between different states of affairs—if we were in a constant state of bliss, for example—there would be no occasion for deliberation or any kind of thought. And this point, which concerns the *function* of deliberation, also suggests why the second regress does not arise. Although one could go on endlessly trying to foresee further consequences, more distant in terms of both time and space, of the course of action under consideration, doing so would not itself be satisfactory since the aim of deliberation is action. It may not be easy to know when to stop deliberating, but one must stop all the same when one judges it to be appropriate. Dewey's phrasing could not be improved upon: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof and sufficient also is the *good* of that which does away with the existing evil" (46). When it comes to deliberation, the evil in question is doubt about how to proceed, and when this is eliminated deliberation has fulfilled its function.

Whether the result is good or not depends on the quality of deliberation and the experience it draws upon (and in some cases, luck). It might be that the course of action chosen is inappropriate to resolve the difficulty one was originally faced with. But this is precisely what enables Dewey to attribute scientific status to the judgments involved. The case is similar to science, where there is no guarantee that any given hypothesis will turn out to be true, but rather a method by which one may improve one's hypotheses—which are always viewed as tentative—and then proceed to put them to the test. This point clearly distinguishes Dewey's view from both moral skepticism and *a priori* theories of the good. For, the former denies that truths regarding what ought to be done may be found, while the latter make claims which are not empirically testable, and so must be accepted or rejected on purely dialectic grounds.

Buddhist Ethics as an Example

Although I have not referred to Buddhist ethics in the previous section, I believe that the similarities are clear. In this section, my goal is to make these explicit. I refer to Buddhist ethics as an example because Dewey's discussion, though admirable in its focus on the concrete aspects of the context of valuation, is nonetheless quite formal. His concern is with the nature of ethical inquiry, not its content (except for the purpose of illustration). He does not set out his views regarding what are good and bad actions, but rather the manner in which answers to this question are to be obtained and improved upon. For this reason, his discussion belongs to metaethics, rather than normative ethics. The Buddha, on the other hand (and if my comparison is sound), displays pragmatism in practice, defining good and bad actions and explaining his reasoning. Buddhist ethics, therefore, may be viewed as complementing Dewey's discussion by offering an implementation of his suggestions.

Recall that, according to Dewey, deliberation is comprised of the following stages: (1) The present situation is viewed as unsatisfactory, as lacking in some way, so that proceeding as before is either impossible or undesirable; (2) some alternative situation is imagined which, it is hypothesized, would resolve this lack; (3) deliberation then proceeds, with the goal of finding out whether and how the present situation may be altered to bring about the preferred alternative. In the process of deliberation, the imagined situation is made concrete in terms of how it may be achieved and what consequences this would entail. Thus, the anticipated result becomes part of the hypothesis. This describes the process that precedes action. Action may confirm or deny one's hypothesis, leading to further deliberation and action.

These stages are apparent in the descriptions of the Buddha's search for enlightenment: (1) He became unsatisfied with the pursuits of his home life due to the dangers of old age, sickness, and death; (2) he then thought of pursuing "the unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*" (M i:163); (3) he believed that this would require going forth into homelessness, even though his parents objected and were saddened. Although the details are not given, we are not to suppose he was indifferent to his parents' wishes, but rather that he believed his pursuit to be more important than those wishes, which is, of course, a case of evaluating the end together with the required means. This correspondence should not be surprising because, if Dewey's account is correct, these stages are identifiable in any rational process of deliberation.

Before attaining enlightenment the Buddha tried courses of action that proved inadequate, including going to the teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta and later undergoing extreme physical mortification. This brings out the essential role of experience in grounding our valuations. (For example, he changed his positive valuation of

mortification to a negative one.) This role was made explicit shortly after his enlightenment in his claim that this *Dhamma* is “unattainable by mere reasoning.” (M i:167)

The stages of deliberation are also apparent in the Four Noble Truths. Corresponding to Dewey’s first stage, the First Noble Truth affirms the unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) nature of the five aggregates affected by clinging.¹ This poses a problem to be solved, not because their being *dukkha* is viewed as immoral, but simply because the situation is experienced as unsatisfactory. This fits Dewey’s refusal to institute a sharp distinction between prudence and wisdom (26), as well as his view that ethical action is not something to be pursued for its own good, but rather, because it provides a way to improve one’s life.

The last three Noble Truths present the solution to this problem. They may be seen to be in full agreement with Dewey’s claim that the object of scientific knowledge, even in matters of action, is “an ascertained correlation of changes” (29), if “change” is understood broadly as equivalent to “process.” The Second Noble Truth correlates craving as cause with suffering (or lack of satisfaction) as its effect. The Third Noble Truth correlates the cessation of that craving with the cessation of suffering. Finally, the Fourth Noble Truth correlates following the Noble Eightfold Path with the cessation of that craving as its result. We can thus see why the content of the Buddha’s enlightenment is sometimes described as consisting of the Four Noble Truths, and at other times as his theory of dependent origination, which encompasses causation as well as other forms of dependence. Alternatively, we can frame this in terms of Dewey’s three stages described earlier: the Third Noble Truth affirms the possibility of *nibbāna* as a solution to the problem posed, while the Fourth presents the Noble Eightfold Path as the means to that end.

As was mentioned earlier, desire plays a role in deliberation, in the process of which it is made more concrete and may change in other ways, perhaps even being replaced by an entirely different one. The desire settled upon then guides action and may be satisfied or disappointed. A moral skeptic might say that each person has certain desires and pursues them, viewing their desires as good and those of others which conflict with these as bad. In reality, the skeptic might argue, neither the desires themselves nor their pursuit are good or bad. Dewey attributes this view to a failure to consider the context in which desires arise and have their effects:

If “valuation” is defined in terms of desire as something initial and complete in itself, there is nothing by which to discriminate one desire from another and hence no way in which to measure the worth of different valuations in comparison with one another. Desires are desires, and that is all that can be said. (16)

If, on the other hand, desires are seen to be dependent on causes (as opposed to being “initial”), and to have different effects depending on their content and context, this is bound to have implications for what our attitude towards them should be. If we find that some desires tend to lead to satisfaction whereas others lead to frustration, suffering, and conflict, we are led to value the former more highly than the latter. I might, for example, think, “I wish I no longer wanted to excel over others,” because I am aware of the negative effects of that desire. Such a valuation is clearly a case of viewing desires as potential means to one's ends, and thus, as more proximate ends. That the desire itself may be experienced as unpleasant does not contradict this as, on Dewey's view, means and ends are always evaluated both in terms of their immediate qualities and in terms of their relation to other means and ends. In fact, knowledge of unpleasant consequences permeates the quality of the desire as expe-

rienced. We thus see here the first two stages of the process discussed earlier: viewing some of our desires as experienced in the past as unsatisfactory, we then form the hypothesis that we would be better off if we had certain other desires instead. So far, however, this is a mere wish rather than a desire. What is required for it to bear fruit is consideration of the means by which our desires may be modified. This is only possible through inquiry into the relevant causal relations, followed by formation of hypotheses and action aimed at testing these relations. Finally, what is said of desire is also affirmed of all other mental phenomena; having their causes and effects, they are all potential means and ends, and subject to evaluation as such.

This view is to be found throughout the Buddha's teachings. However, some clarification of the term "desire" is necessary. It might be thought that Buddhism, instead of viewing some desires as better than others, views them all as leading to suffering and therefore as something to be eliminated. Further, it might be thought that the *arahant* has no desires, or even that a person pursuing the holy life should not have any desires, not even a desire for liberation. Such a view would apparently directly contradict Dewey, who emphasizes consistently that all thinking is essentially tied up with desire, inasmuch as thinking is aimed at the solution of some problem.

We must be clear on the distinction between *taṇhā* and *chanda*. *Taṇhā*, which literally means "thirst" but is often translated as "craving," is asserted in the Second Noble Truth to be the cause of *dukkha*. It is not to be equated with *chanda*, for which the *Buddhist Dictionary* (Nyanatiloka) offers as translations "intention, desire, will." *Chanda* is used to refer to good, bad, and neutral desires. When it refers to good desires it is often translated as "zeal" rather than "desire." We thus see that it is *chanda* in its neutral connotation, not *taṇhā*, which corresponds to Dewey's

concept of “desire.” Dewey and Buddhism thus agree in distinguishing between desires based on their goodness.

With that said, we may consider some examples from Buddhist ethics. A general one is embodied in the Four Noble Truths, which evaluate craving negatively and lay out the means by which it is to be eliminated. Craving is itself classified in different ways, such as craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being (i.e., immortality), and craving for non-being (i.e., annihilation). Let us reflect on some of the Buddha's recommendations for how to overcome the first type, craving for sensual pleasures.

First, we would reflect upon the consequences of those desires. An example may be found in the *Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*:

Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, . . . source, . . . basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, Brahmins with Brahmins; . . . friend with friend. And here in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes they attack each other with fists, clods, sticks, or knives, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. (M i:86)

These are described as “the danger in the case of sensual pleasures,” making clear their relevance to the evaluation of sensual pleasures and their pursuit. The hope is that an understanding of these dangers will help to prevent the arising of desire for sensual pleasure and to lead to its cessation when it has arisen.

The same intent may be seen in the Buddha's wonderful similes for sensual pleasure in the *Potaliya Sutta*. The first compares one indulging in sensual pleasures to a dog chewing on a skeleton of meatless bones. This does not satisfy the dog's hunger, but only leads to “weariness and disappointment” (M i:364). The point of this and the following

six similes is to indicate that sensual pleasures “provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is great.” Elsewhere, the point is made that they bring little satisfaction (as is true of the dog and the bones).

This method is of a general nature and may be used whether or not craving for sensual pleasure is present at the time. It is aimed at eliminating the general cause of such craving, unwise attending to pleasant sensations. Other methods work by eliminating more specific causes, such as the method of guarding the senses described in the *Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta*:

On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him, he practices the way of its restraint, he guards the eye faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty. (M i:180)

In his discussion of this passage, Buddhaghosa tells the story of a monk who, on hearing a woman laugh, looked up and saw her teeth, but instead of then looking at the rest of her body to determine whether she was beautiful or not, thought about the foulness of teeth and became an *arahant* (I.55). If on the other hand, he had fixated on the signs (for example, of femininity) or the features (for example, a hand, a leg), he might have been invaded by unwholesome lustful thoughts. It also illustrates how the arising of lust might be prevented by contemplation of foulness.

Similarly, techniques are prescribed for overcoming anger, the conceit “I am,” and so on—states which are detrimental to spiritual progress and to life in general. Techniques are also prescribed for bringing about states which are beneficial. In the *Cankī Sutta*, the Buddha is

questioned by a student about how he is to achieve “final arrival at truth” (M ii:173). The Buddha works backwards, describing what is most helpful for achieving that goal, then what it in turn depends on, and so on: striving, scrutiny, application of the will, zeal, a reflective acceptance of the teachings, examination of the meaning, memorizing the teachings, hearing the *Dhamma*, giving ear, paying respect, visiting, and faith (M ii:174-176). This series includes verbal and physical acts as well as mental states. The Buddha seems to consider everything in terms of its causes and effects, recommending the development of that which is found to be beneficial and the abandoning of that which is harmful.

The Roots, and the Rest, of Good and Evil

Keown's comparison between Buddhist ethics and utilitarianism brings up many points worthy of discussion. For lack of space, however, I will limit myself to one particularly important topic: the relationship between motives, actions, and consequences and the bearing that relationship has on whether they are evaluated as being good or bad. One of the main differences Keown sees between Buddhist ethics and utilitarianism is the lack of consequentialist tendencies in Buddhism (setting aside his discussion of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is a topic for another paper). As an example, he refers to a passage in the *Sakkapañha Sutta* (D ii:285). There, Sakka, ruler of the gods, when asked whether he had previously felt happiness such as he was experiencing conversing with the Buddha, tells him how he felt after the gods had defeated the *asuras* in battle. But he then qualifies his remarks by pointing out that, even though it was very pleasant, that happiness, “which was due to blows and wounds, does not conduce to dispassion, detachment, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, enlightenment, Nibbāna,” whereas listening to the *Dhamma* does. Keown interprets this passage as meaning that “pleasant and unpleasant consequences do not lie at the root of Buddhist moral evaluation” (*Nature* 182).

This claim naturally brings up the question of what does lie at the root of moral evaluations. Keown's answer, given in the chapter comparing Buddhist ethics to Aristotle's, is that actions are judged good in as much as they exhibit the primary Buddhist virtues: nongreed, nonhate, and nondelusion (*Nature* 177). The opposite states are, of course, the three roots (*mūla*) of evil: greed (*dosa*), hate (*lobha*), and delusion (*moha*). The *arahant* exhibits the three virtues without any trace of their opposites, so that an action that is motivated by these virtues partakes in a way in *nibbāna*, the ultimate goal of human life. On such a view, the consequences of one's actions become irrelevant to their evaluation. The only exceptions that might be admitted are actions that develop the virtuous states of mind. However, because actions motivated by the three roots of evil would not develop the opposed virtues, there is no need, even in this case, to appeal to consequences as grounding the moral evaluation. Keown, therefore, does not assign any role to consequences in determining an action's (or a mental state's) goodness. A hint that this view leads to some difficulties may be seen in that Sakka's criticism of his joy at their victory over the *asuras* explicitly appeals to consequences (its not leading to *nibbāna*).

Velez de Cea criticizes Keown for understating the importance to Buddhist ethics of goals other than participation in *nibbāna*. For example, Buddhist ethics views it as good to act in certain ways with the goal of attaining rebirth as a human or a god, and does not view these simply as non-moral consequences of moral behavior. According to Velez de Cea, Buddhist ethics judges actions by taking into account, in an integrated fashion, "three factors: motivation and content of actions (wholesomeness, blamelessness) and their consequences (harmless and happy results for oneself and others)" (139). On this point, I agree entirely. His argument appeals primarily to the *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda Sutta* (M 61), in which the Buddha advises his son to consider, before, during, and after engaging in any action, whether it would lead to the affliction of

himself, others, or both, and whether it is an unwholesome action with painful consequences (and results), or whether the opposite of each of these is the case. Velez de Cea characterizes the first part of this criterion as utilitarian in its injunction not to lead to anyone's affliction, and the second as falling under either moral realism or virtue ethics, depending on whether what is being considered is an external action or mental actions and states. Although I do not see moral realism and virtue ethics as mutually exclusive, this characterization seems adequate.

Velez de Cea does not neglect the fact that the second part of the criterion also refers to the action's consequences, distinguishing between unwholesome actions with painful consequences and wholesome actions with pleasant consequences. Here is his interpretation of this fact:

However, this mention of consequences in relation to the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of actions is not a sign of utilitarianism. The point here is not to consider the consequences in order to minimize suffering, but rather to realize that certain actions produce certain kind of consequences. (134)

This is not, however, satisfactory. We might naturally wonder why it is that the Buddha wanted his son to think about this causal relation. After all, it is well-known that the Buddha refused to answer some questions he was capable of answering, because doing so would not have been helpful, i.e., would not have helped lead the questioner to *nibbāna*. In this case, the Buddha was not even prompted to mention consequences. The only reasonable possibility seems to be that he mentioned them because the fact that unwholesome actions have painful consequences is relevant to the evaluation of the actions.

The picture that emerges is that, when an action is evaluated, consideration of its wholesomeness and consideration of its consequences are tied up with each other. The question of whether actions are wholesome because they have pleasant consequences (in the long-term and for everyone involved) or whether they have pleasant consequences because they are wholesome loses relevance. Wholesome actions lead to pleasant consequences, and this very fact makes us evaluate such actions positively. However, this does not preclude these actions being inherently wholesome. As Dewey puts it, "Any quality or property that actually belongs to any object or event is properly said to be immediate, inherent, or intrinsic" (26). To say that they are inherently wholesome is not to say that their wholesomeness is independent of everything except the actions themselves, which would, at any rate, make wholesomeness completely meaningless. The wholesomeness of the actions is due to their having certain causes and effects, certain motives and consequences.

We may illustrate this by reference to greed, hate, and delusion being called the roots of evil and extending the metaphor. Suppose we took to heart the Biblical phrase, "By their fruits ye shall know them," and considered a (metaphorically) evil tree, saying its fruit is poisonous. It is not merely the fruit, nor merely the roots or the trunk, which are bad. The tree itself is bad because its fruit is poisonous. The fruit is poisonous in virtue of the rest of the tree. It is both true that the fruit is inherently poisonous and also that the tree, even before it fruits, is inherently one that would yield poisonous fruit. The evaluation is of the tree as a whole, even though the only part which harms us is the fruit. Were it not that certain kinds of trees yield certain kinds of fruit, we would be unable to decide which trees to cut down and which to plant. And we would, likewise, not know which fruit to eat and which to destroy, until it was too late. We can see, here, the essential role that causal knowledge plays in ethical evaluation, emphasized both by the Buddha

and by Dewey. An additional point in favor of this metaphor is that the fruit contains a seed that would lead to more bad trees and fruit, just as experiencing sensual pleasures as a result of actions motivated by greed only serves to strengthen that same greed. And further bad trees will prevent the growth in those places of good trees and the obtaining of good fruit.

We may now return to the context of Keown's discussion. As has been noted by Velez de Cea and Barbara R. Clayton, one of Keown's main goals was to oppose the view that ethical action in Buddhism is valued only as a means to *nibbāna*, and thus is transcended once that goal is reached. However, Keown's goal can be accomplished without denying that ethical action is also valued in Buddhism as a means to other desirable ends (such as rebirth as a god or the welfare of others). This point is argued well by Velez de Cea, who concludes that both motives and consequences play a role in the evaluation of actions, which I would suggest implies actions are valued as means. Similarly, Clayton argues that Buddhist virtues have both instrumental and intrinsic value (25-26). Although her discussion is based on a Mahāyāna text, my discussion above points to their also being valued as means in Theravāda ethics.

Underlying Keown's claim that "the gap between consequentialism and an ethic of virtue is unbridgeable in any context" ("Karma" 346) is a hard distinction between right actions being good intrinsically or instrumentally. Clayton questions the hardness of the distinction by suggesting that these are not mutually exclusive. Dewey, on the other hand, attacks the distinction itself, through an analysis of the means-end relation and of terms such as "intrinsic" and "inherent." His argument has been rehearsed briefly above, but may now be expanded and supplemented by some considerations from Buddhist philosophy. If this succeeds, we may then accept Keown's arguments against characterizing

Buddhist ethics as consequentialist without having to dismiss consequences as irrelevant.

I must first remark that the use of words such as “inherent” or “intrinsic” in discussions of Buddhism always calls for a high level of care, as one runs the risk of overlooking the implications of the *anattā* (not-self) doctrine, which applies to all *dhamma*. Dewey attributes the confusion regarding such words to a fallacy of equivocation. In the unproblematic sense already mentioned, any quality belonging to an object is intrinsic to it. As Dewey points out, “Strictly speaking, the phrase ‘extrinsic value’ involves a contradiction in terms” (28). For if the value of a means is extrinsic to it, it must presumably be intrinsic to something else, and we might ask why we should call it the value of the means rather than of that something else. As may be seen in the debate about whether ethical action is intrinsically or instrumentally good (or both), this fact is obscured by speaking of “instrumental” instead of “extrinsic” value, but its significance is unaffected. Similarly, Keown’s claim that “*Kusala* describes those qualities or states which are intrinsically related to *nibbāna*” (*Nature* 118) exemplifies Dewey’s point, as “intrinsically related” is also a contradiction in terms unless taken to mean no more than “related.”

Problems arise when a quality’s being intrinsic to or inherent in an object is interpreted as meaning that it belongs to it independently of anything other than that object. It is using this sense of “inherent” that Mādhyamikas such as Candrakīrti argue that nothing has inherent existence. Such a conception, unless qualified by the claim that no quality is intrinsic to anything, amounts to no less than belief in essential attributes and a denial of dependent origination and *anattā*. Although this might be justified in some contexts, it is exceedingly problematic in discussing Buddhist ethics.

Referring back to the specific case of types of actions, I would again suggest that their wholesomeness or unwholesomeness is due to the relationship between motives, actions, and consequences. Whether the wholesomeness of right actions is intrinsic or not is no longer a concern: on one interpretation of "intrinsic," any quality any object has is intrinsic to it; on the other, there is nothing which is intrinsic to anything; either way, nothing is gained by asking or answering the question. Once this is recognized, the question of instrumentality also falls into line. When being an end and being a means (though not to itself, of course) are seen to be coextensive rather than mutually exclusive, the same holds true for being valued as a means and being valued as an end. Common sense and Buddhist texts agree in including appeals to the consequences of different types of action when considering what should be done.

To counteract any fear that the argument relies on sophistry, a brief example may be helpful: the use of intoxicants. Any account of why using intoxicants is unwholesome would have to appeal to such use's leading to heedlessness. In fact, this causal relation is implied in calling them "intoxicants" in the first place, which illustrates the *anattā* doctrine. Therefore, the use of intoxicants cannot be intrinsically unwholesome if that is taken to mean that it is unwholesome independently of its consequences.

It is my hope that this brief discussion has shown that the similarities which Buddhist ethics bears to utilitarianism and Aristotle's ethics can be reconciled by thinking in terms of Dewey's metaethical framework. I also hope that this goes some way towards transcending the debate over which of the two Buddhist ethics more closely resembles. The fact that this is possible also speaks to the similarities between Aristotle and utilitarians such as Mill, which I believe are quite strong, despite significant differences. My final goal in this paper is to say a little

about *nibbāna*, whose status as the ultimate end of Buddhist ethics might appear to conflict with Dewey's refusal to admit ends which are not also means.

***Nibbāna* as the Ultimate End**

As mentioned earlier, Dewey views every end one may choose also as a means to further ends, since it will, in turn, have its own consequences that must be taken into account. Buddhist ethics, on the other hand, views *nibbāna* as the ultimate goal. This is exemplified in the understanding often attributed to *arahants*: "Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being" (S IV:20). This might seem to present a difficulty, inasmuch as Dewey is opposed to the idea of ends in themselves. However, I believe the difficulty to be merely apparent.

At one point in his essay, Dewey defines ends in themselves as "ends or ideals that are not also means, which, as we have already seen, is precisely what an ideal is [a means to deciding how to act], if it is judged and valued in terms of its function" (40). In this light, it ought to be clear that *nibbāna*, though of incomparable value as an end, is also a means. Namely, it is a means to avoiding rebirth, and to living out one's life without mental suffering, free from the bondage of the defilements (*kilesa*). That *nibbāna* is more pleasant than anything else does not stand in the way of this fact. Additionally, since *arahants* are incapable of doing wrong, it is also a means to assuring oneself of living ethically the rest of one's life—a goal of unquestionable value for oneself and others.

Another objection to the notion of ends in themselves is related to the expression "The end justifies the means." Dewey agrees with one interpretation of this phrase, namely that the end provides the reason for undertaking the means. However, Dewey views as simple foolishness the more common interpretation that some ends are so worthy as to jus-

tify any means whatsoever. Because the necessary means are bound to have consequences in addition to the desired end, it is wrong to disregard these and focus exclusively on the desired end. The harmful results of such disregard are widespread: from the binge drinker's hangover, which was overlooked the previous night, to the environmental problems due to an exclusive focus on economic growth. Although the agents involved would not claim their ends justify *any* means, they commit the same underlying error in evaluating the ends in separation from the consequences of bringing them about. In the case of pursuing *nibbāna*, however, there is nothing akin to this: the Buddha's *Dhamma* is "good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing; . . . a holy life that is utterly perfect and pure" (M iii:280). In fact, what is revealed is the opposite of what worries Dewey: the Buddha considered it important that monks keep to strict standards of behavior, not only because that is the way to *nibbāna* for them, but also because of subsidiary consequences of failing to do so. For example, one of the reasons a monk is not allowed to speak to a woman with no one else present is that this might lead to suspicions among other monks or even householders, and so to a decline in faith.

We can thus see that viewing *nibbāna* as the ultimate end does not imply that nothing else happens after it. The *arahant* continues to act after achieving *nibbāna*: to say that what had to be done has been done is not to say that nothing further will be done. The Buddha lived for many years after his enlightenment, and still faced what would appear, to an unenlightened person, to be problems: the quarrel at Kosambī, the schism generated by Devadatta, sickness in old age, etc. But, with regard to these, two points stand out. First of all, none of them caused the Buddha any mental suffering. Although they were problems in the sense that the Buddha had to deal with them in one way or another, they were not causes of *dukkha*. Secondly, because the Buddha was free from all defilements, he was always in a good position to decide how to proceed.

Both of these are distinct advantages of attaining *nibbāna*, reinforcing the idea that there is nothing wrong in viewing it as also a means.

To sum up, I believe that Dewey's views on metaethics are both correct and helpful in considering Theravāda Buddhist ethics, whether by themselves or in relation to utilitarianism and Aristotle's ethics. The Buddha's methodology in addressing ethical questions appears to fit Dewey's theory. There are, of course, large differences when it comes to content. Dewey might not have thought that such a thing as *nibbāna* is possible. But the Buddha intended his teachings to be tested, not accepted as dogma. This is an attitude Dewey would, no doubt, have considered admirable.

There are many areas to which the Dewey-Buddhism comparison could be extended. An obvious one would be the Mahāyāna tradition. Another would be the relationship between dependent origination and the doctrine of *kamma*, which are both concerned with what we would call causation. Yet another would be how we ought to understand the claim (explained in *The Questions of King Milinda*) that although *nibbāna* is uncaused, its attainment is caused. Finally, it would be desirable to carry out a detailed analysis of the various words that roughly correspond to "desire." This would be valuable in and of itself, especially in relation to desires for conditioned phenomena conducive to enlightenment, but would also help to clarify the relationship to Dewey's view of desire.

Notes

¹ This is the short version of the First Noble Truth, as opposed to the long version, which enumerates the things that are *dukkha*. The word *dukkha* is variously translated as suffering, unsatisfactory, or ill.

Abbreviations

D: *Dīgha Nikāya*

M: *Majjhima Nikāya*

S: *Samyutta Nikāya*

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