

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE POSSIBILITY OF BUDDHIST VIRTUE: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	2
Statement of the Importance of the Problem.....	3
Statement of Position on the Problem.....	4
Limitations .....	4
Methodology .....	5
Chapter One .....	7
The Foundations of Virtue .....	7
Aristotle’s Virtue Ethic .....	8
A Universal Account of Virtue .....	11
Chapter Two .....	21
The Four Marks of Reality .....	22
The Four Noble Truths.....	33
Interpretations of Buddhist Ethics.....	35
<i>Utilitarian or Virtue Ethic</i> .....	35
<i>The Utilitarian Interpretation</i> .....	36
<i>The Virtue Interpretation</i> .....	38
A Critique of Buddhist Virtue.....	41
<i>The Problem of Teleology</i> .....	41
<i>The Problem of Unity</i> .....	45
Chapter Three .....	48
The Foundations of Christian Ethics.....	48
<i>The Nature of God</i> .....	48
<i>The Nature of Man</i> .....	49
Christ: The Ideal Man and Savior of Virtue.....	61
Conclusion .....	65
Bibliography .....	67

## Introduction

Aristotle, the great teacher of Greece, once asked, “What is the good for man?” This is a question that every worldview seeks to answer. The Israelites said that good for man consisted in living a life of holiness to God, as a separate and distinct people. The Greeks said that man was meant for the *polis*.<sup>1</sup> Christ taught men were for his kingdom. The Buddha held his own view.

The heart of Buddhism is ethics.<sup>2</sup> This is evident even in the legendary accounts of the Buddha’s life. The Buddha first encountered the problem of suffering after he finally escaped the isolation of the palace he had grown up in. His father, a powerful ruler, wanted to force his son into a life of politics and war. He had been warned that if his son was exposed to the kind of life people experience every day, a life marked by suffering, that his son would likely become a great teacher instead of a ruler. However, despite his father’s best efforts, the Buddha eventually ventured outside the palace walls. There he was faced with illness, old age, and death. As a result, the Buddha became a renunciate; he gave up his royal lifestyle and began searching for a way to bring an end to suffering. In his search, the Buddha tried all the available philosophies and religions; whether they be hedonistic or ascetic. Whatever he tried, the Buddha excelled beyond his teachers, but in each case, he found that suffering still remained. Eventually, while under the Bodhi tree, and after much effort, the Buddha attained enlightenment. He saw reality as it really is and was able to formulate a solution.

The solution he came up with was an entirely practical one: cultivate happiness.<sup>3</sup> This was to be achieved by taking “the appropriate action: seeking nirvana.”<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford : Stanford University, 2007). Par 6.

<sup>2</sup> Damien Keown, *Buddhism A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher W Gowans. *Philosophy of the Buddha* (London: Routledge, 2003), 25.

action means that Buddhism is primarily an orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup> What is important is “the harmony of behavior, not harmony of doctrines.”<sup>6</sup>

What this means is that Buddhism as a worldview is in a unique position. Since it is primarily a particular set of practices, essentially an ethic, the validity of the Buddhist worldview rises and falls on whether or not Buddhism succeeds as an ethical system. This provides an opportunity to test Buddhism to see whether it is a coherent worldview.

### Statement of the Problem

There are two leading interpretations of Buddhist ethics. The first and most popular interpretation understands Buddhism as a kind of utilitarianism. Proponents of this view argue that Buddhist ethics are merely provisional and ought to be disregarded once *nirvana* is attained. The well respected Saddhatissa takes a utilitarian view and argues that the moral teachings of the Buddha "were never ends in themselves, confined to a mundane life, but were the essential preliminaries, and the permanent accompaniments, to attaining the highest state."<sup>7</sup> However, a system that is merely provisional will not do if it is agreed that ethics must account for what is ultimately good or valuable. But there is another interpretation. Damien Keown, as well as several others, suggests that Buddhism is a kind of virtue ethic, very much similar to the kind taught by Aristotle.<sup>8</sup> A Buddhist version of virtue ethics offers the possibility of a complete, substantive account of ethics. Whether or not virtue ethics can be meaningfully understood in a Buddhist context is the first problem that thesis will seek to solve.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Siderits, *Buddhism As Philosophy: An Introduction* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Keown, *Buddhism*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 99.

<sup>7</sup> H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism* (New York: G. Braziller, 1971), 81.

<sup>8</sup> Keown, *Buddhism*, 33.

The second problem concerns whether a Christian worldview might accommodate a virtue view of ethics better than a Buddhist one. Increasingly, Christians are adopting a blended approach to ethics, usually holding to a combination of deontological and virtue ethics.<sup>9</sup> This thesis will put the possibility of a Christian virtue ethic to the test. If it turns out that Christianity can, in fact, provide a more robust context for a virtue ethic, then in order to be a fulfilled virtue ethicist, one ought to abandon the Buddhist worldview and adopt a Christian one.

#### Statement of the Importance of the Problem

A *prima facie* look at this thesis might cause some readers to think it is relevant only to Buddhists who hold to a virtue view of ethics—the subject matter here ought not concern the average Buddhist, much less anyone else. However, this is not the case. To understand the importance of this thesis, one must first understand just how the topic falls within contemporary scholarship. First, there is the current state of Buddhist ethics as a scholarly discipline. Many writers on the subject have been quick to point out that serious study of Buddhist ethics from a theoretical standpoint is a rather new phenomenon.

So far, there have been primarily only two theoretical accounts of Buddhist ethics offered: utility and virtue. If one agrees that a utility view is not a satisfactory account of ethics, then there is only one other viable option: the virtue view. Of course, there can also be new interpretations and revisions to old ones, but that is why this thesis is significant: the best contemporary interpretations of Buddhist ethics may need to be adjusted. Second, since Buddhism is primarily a system of ethics, then whether or not it succeeds as an ethical system is vitally important to the entire worldview. If the Buddhist worldview does not succeed as an ethic, it does not succeed at all.

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<sup>9</sup> This is the position of Reuschling, Moreland, and Craig .

Foundational questions of worldviews are always weighty, so it is hard to overestimate the importance of engaging the foundations of a religion, especially a religion as influential as Buddhism. While it has been shown that the discussion in this thesis will be relevant for more than just a few, it also needs to be understood that a goal of this thesis is to be part of a wider conversation about the nature of Buddhist and Christian ethics and not the final word. The topics discussed are immensely important; the thesis itself is only part of that vital conversation. Hopefully, it will contribute to a greater understanding of both systems.

### Statement of Position on the Problem

As stated above, this thesis seeks to discover whether a virtue ethic interpretation of Buddhist ethics is viable. This thesis addresses the question both negatively and positively. Negatively, the position taken on this problem is that a virtue view is inadequate for multiple reasons. Positively, this thesis holds that a Christian view of virtue ethics succeeds and is superior to the Buddhist view. Consequently, if one wants to be a satisfied virtue ethicist, one ought to abandon the Buddhist worldview and become a Christian.

### Limitations

Since the label “Buddhism” covers a wide array of beliefs and practices, this thesis will be limited specifically to early Buddhism. All Buddhist scriptures are taken from the Pali Canon, a set of scriptures considered authoritative by nearly all Buddhists. Further, the clarification needs to be made that Buddhist cosmology or metaphysics itself is not under scrutiny. It is specifically the relationship between worldview and ethics that is being examined. This means that questions like, "How can it be the case that these are the four marks of existence and not three others?" will not be addressed. Also, this thesis will be limited to metaethical concerns. Issues of practice will not be discussed. Primarily, the goal will be show that foundational issues

in early Buddhism prevent Buddhist ethical practices from being applied in a way consistent with a virtue view of ethics.

### Methodology

Comparative ethics can be a difficult endeavor. There are two primary pitfalls. The first is to presume the truthfulness of one view at the start. The result is that opposing viewpoints are inadequate due to mere definition and no understanding is gained. A Buddhist, presuming Buddhism to be correct, might say that Christianity is inadequate simply because it does not further progress toward *nirvana*. The other danger is to assume that there can be no conclusions. Systems may be compared, but each one is right in its own context. The best we can hope for is greater understanding. This produces unsatisfactory results as well. There ought to be resolution: one view demonstrated to be superior to another. To avoid these dangers, a neutral framework is needed. The first component of this framework is a shared assumption: the fundamental relationship between ethics and reality. This is the same assumption as made by Geertz:

It is the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection. What sacred symbols do for those to whom they are sacred is to formulate an image of the world's construction and a program for human conduct that are mere reflexes of one another.<sup>10</sup>

The second component needed is an account of virtue ethics that is neutral to both Christianity and Buddhism. Alasdair MacIntyre has established such a view of virtue ethics. His view presupposes at least two features that are required of a worldview in order to accommodate a virtue ethic: an account of teleology and the narrative unity of a single human life.

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<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 97.

The next step will be to take these criteria and their necessary conditions and apply them to Keown's interpretation of Buddhist ethics. If it turns out that Keown has adequately accounted for these in his system, then perhaps it is correct to characterize Buddhism as a kind of virtue ethic. However, if Keown does not succeed, then he has not saved Buddhist ethics from the other primary interpretation: Buddhist ethics is merely utilitarian. The final step will be to apply the criteria to the Christian worldview in order to determine whether the Christian worldview provides a superior account of virtue.

## Chapter One

### The Foundations of Virtue

Given the goals of this thesis, the first and most important task is to establish just what virtue ethics is and what it entails. A survey of the literature will show that the field of virtue ethics is both broad and deep. Its history extends back to the Homeric epics and into current, cutting-edge moral philosophy. There is also a wide variety of virtue ethics. There are Aristotelian, feminist, and “agent-based” virtue ethics, among many others.<sup>11</sup> Each of these accounts of virtue has slightly different and often apparently contradictory conceptions of what virtue is. So while the amount of information about virtue ethics is not lacking, the vast number of voices in the field does create another problem: discovering what is universally true, if anything, about virtue ethics.

Contemporary virtue ethicists are quick to give broad definitions of virtue ethics. For example, Hursthouse says that

Virtue ethics has been characterized in a number of ways. It is described (1) as an ethics which is ‘agent-centered’ rather than ‘act-centered’; (2) as concerned with Being rather than Doing; (3) as addressing itself to the question, ‘What sort of person should I be?’ rather than to the question, ‘What sorts of action should I do?’; (4) as taking certain areteic concepts (*good, excellence, virtue*) as basic rather than deontic ones (*right, duty, obligation*); (5) as rejecting the idea that ethics is codifiable in rules or principles that can provide specific action guidance.<sup>12</sup>

Schneewind adds that virtue ethics is a theory of ethics that “requires an acceptable view of the human good which will enable us to show how morality can be explicated in terms of character traits that are indispensable or useful for the attainment of that good.”<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, these

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<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford : Stanford University, 2007). Par 3.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 26.

<sup>13</sup> J.B. Schneewind, “Virtue, Narrative, and Community: MacIntyre and Morality” *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 11, 653.

definitions are too broad for the purpose of this thesis. The terms they use are largely, often intentionally, undefined. Schneewind's definition only raises the question, "Acceptable to whom and under what criteria?" while Hursthouse's definitions highlight just how important the construal of "agent" or personhood (and the ideas presupposed by the concepts) will be to a virtue ethic. While these broad definitions help to give the contours of virtue ethics, in order to test both Buddhism and Christianity for their compatibility to a virtue view, what is essential to virtue must first be drawn out. In order to get a first approximation of the core of virtue ethics, it makes sense to start with Aristotle, who was one of the first virtue ethicists and still widely considered "its finest exponent."<sup>14</sup>

### Aristotle's Virtue Ethic

Examining Aristotle's writing on the virtues, and in particular the *Nichomachean Ethics* (*NE*), it is clear that he had at least three key concepts in his ethic: virtue (*ἀρετή*), moral wisdom (*φρόνησις*), and *eudaimonia* (*εὐδαιμονία*).<sup>15</sup> Aristotle begins the *NE* with a discussion of teleology. He argues that "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."<sup>16</sup> He takes this same line of reasoning and applies it to man, saying that just as all things aim at some good, so does the life of man. The aim of man's life is to achieve and maintain *eudaimonia*. Thus the *telos* of man is *eudaimonia*.

Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* is often translated as "happiness," which is unfortunate because that only confuses his meaning. In contemporary culture "happiness" is something

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Simpson, "Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Aristotle," in *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, ed. Daniel Statman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 245.

<sup>15</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Book I, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross.

subjective, totally dependent on the state of mind a person at a given time. However, Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, is not a subjective state, but an objective one with clearly defined criteria. To possess *eudaimonia* is to be a certain kind of person and living within a certain kind of society.<sup>17</sup> A person who possesses *eudaimonia* is a person who embodies the virtues "throughout an entire lifetime."<sup>18</sup> The *telos* of man for Aristotle was not an *end* of man, in the sense that the life of man ended when he achieved *eudaimonia*. Instead, it was the goal and purpose (the aim) of man. *Eudaimonia* is an active and continuous state where man continues his life, but fulfilling his *telos*. Further, for the state of *eudaimonia* to be complete, this person must live within a society of people who are also practicing the virtues and who are also moving toward their *telos*.

Virtue, for Aristotle, is bound up in his teleology. He views "the acquisition and exercise of the virtues as means to an end," but, the virtues are not merely a means.<sup>19</sup> *Eudaimonia* itself is a continuation and perfection of the virtues so that when one practices a virtue, he is not only bringing about a desired end, but also participating in the good in a more immediate sense. If Aristotle is right and there is some "chief good" at which all things aim, then he must also be right that an act is good in itself whenever it corresponds to that chief good. For example, when a soldier practices the virtue of courage, his action corresponds to the chief good so that in the moment he is courageous, he participates in the good and also helps to bring about a state of *eudaimonia* for himself and the society he lives in. In this way, the virtues are both a means to an end and good in themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> D.S. Hutchinson, "Ethics," in *the Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 203.

<sup>19</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007) 147.

Another implication of the relationship of *eudaimonia* and virtue in Aristotle's system is that in order for a person to achieve *eudaimonia*, he must actually possess the virtues as states of his character, "The virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well."<sup>20</sup> This means that he must have a certain kind of character, a character that has been transformed by the practice of the virtues to the point that he is spontaneously generous or courageous.

The final element of Aristotle's virtue ethic is moral wisdom (*φρόνησις*). Moral wisdom has two aspects: "the rational choice (*prohairesis*) on which a person acts, and the process of deliberation or reflection by which a rational choice is formed."<sup>21</sup> Essentially, moral wisdom is the ability to choose the best action in light of the circumstances by drawing on one's experience. For example, a person might have the virtue of generosity, but lack moral wisdom. Such a person might give his fortune away to an unworthy cause, like a fraudulent TV preacher for example. If a person possesses both moral wisdom and generosity, then he will take into account that TV preachers are often frauds, and even though they have apparently good intentions it would be best to give his money to some other cause that has a proven record of integrity and effectiveness. Hutchinson provides an excellent summary here: "All in all, practical wisdom is an appreciation of what is good and bad for us at the highest level, together with a correct apprehension of the facts of experience, together with the skill to make the correct inferences about how to apply our general moral knowledge to our particular situation."<sup>22</sup>

Given this brief sketch, it is clear that there are already certain assumptions lurking in the background of Aristotle's thought. For example, Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* presupposes

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<sup>20</sup> Book II, *Nicomachean Ethics*

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Broadie *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1991), 179.

<sup>22</sup> Hutchinson, "Ethics," 207.

that there is, in fact, a chief good for man, that man has a particular function or purpose. Man has a certain function (*ergon*) that he is meant, in some sense, to fulfill and this function is morally good so that it grounds the virtues. How *eudaimonia* itself is good is an important question and part of the solution for Aristotle seems to be that “the supremely happy life is the life which most closely imitates God’s life.”<sup>23</sup> Aristotle’s conception of the virtues further presupposes a certain view of man, namely that individuals exist as unified persons over at least the period of their lifetime. In fact, Aristotle thought that “a man who made no effort to make a unity of his life, being free, was very foolish.”<sup>24</sup> Moral wisdom also presupposes that humans are certain kinds of moral agents. It supposes, for example, that a person has access to past experiences in order to make the best decisions. In short, Aristotle’s virtue ethic is deeply imbedded within his own worldview.

#### A Universal Account of Virtue

Given all the presuppositions mentioned here, as well as others that are not (like Aristotle’s metaphysical biology) it is clear that his account of virtue will not translate easily into other cultures or worldviews. On the surface, Aristotelian virtue ethics and Buddhism appear to be irreconcilable because Buddhism strongly denies the commonsense understanding of a self, something critical to Aristotle’s system. But it is not fair to discount Buddhist virtue ethics at this point because there might be ways of understanding virtue ethics that are compatible with Buddhism. Besides, many modern accounts of virtue ethics try to avoid making the kinds of assumptions Aristotle does. Slote, for example, specifically states that he wants a virtue ethic distinct from Aristotle’s, an ethic that is totally agent-based and avoids some of the Aristotelian

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<sup>23</sup> Howard Curzer, “The Supremely Happy Life in Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Aperion* 24 (1991), 51.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Clark, *Aristotle’s Man: Speculations upon Aristotelian Anthropology* (Toronto: Clarendon, 1983), 26.

ontology.<sup>25</sup> Such a move brings up an important question: is a virtue ethic only possible within an Aristotelian framework? Clearly, philosophers have answered this question negatively, but if the Aristotelian framework is not necessary to virtue ethics then the next step is to discover just what is necessary. What is needed is to separate virtue ethics, as much as it possible, from the components that are only cultural artifacts or only contingent to virtue and find out what is necessary for a successful account of virtue. In order to test different worldviews for their compatibility with virtue ethics, there must first be a way to understand virtue ethics that can be more universally applied.

Fortunately, MacIntyre tackles this precise problem in *After Virtue*. He examines a wide array of different accounts of virtue ethics, from those of Homer to Benjamin Franklin. Each of these accounts is just as embedded within a culture or worldview as Aristotle's. MacIntyre points out that at first glance each account of the virtues is contradictory to the next. After his initial survey of these many systems, he asks, "Are we or are we not able to disentangle from these rival and various claims a unitary core concept of the virtues of which we can give a more compelling account than another of the other accounts so far?"<sup>26</sup> MacIntyre responds: "I am going to argue that we can in fact discover such a core concept."<sup>27</sup>

MacIntyre suggests that in order to understand the virtue ethic of a particular culture or worldview, it must be examined against three background factors: the concept of a practice, the concept of the narrative order of a human life, and the concept of a moral tradition.<sup>28</sup> Each of these factors is related to and dependent upon the previous factor so that MacIntyre's conception

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Slote, "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995): 20.

<sup>26</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 149.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

of a “practice” becomes foundational to his account of virtue. Of course, by “practice” MacIntyre means something largely different than its common meaning:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>29</sup>

Key to understanding this definition is the concept of “internal goods.” MacIntyre uses the practice of chess playing as an example. Goods external to playing chess might be a monetary reward earned in a tournament or the notoriety gained from being an exceptionally good chess player. These goods are contingently related to playing chess and could be achieved by other means. Goods internal to chess are “the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity.”<sup>30</sup> These are the sorts of goods that can only be achieved by playing the game of chess or some other game that is sufficiently similar. Further, these goods are both utilitarian and teleological. They are utilitarian in the sense that possessing these goods will help one to excel at the practice. They are teleological in the sense that possessing these goods constitutes what it means to be excellent at chess. In this way, goods internal to a practice both help to achieve the aims of that practice and constitute excellence within the practice.

The other key component of MacIntyre’s definition of a practice is his contention that a practice must be a “socially established cooperative human activity.” By this, MacIntyre means that to enter into a practice is to enter into a community with established rules and standards of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 179.

excellence.<sup>31</sup> For example, a painter will be subject to the standards and rules of excellence within the artistic community. Being an excellent painter will mean meeting the expectations and standards of the artistic community.

The second background issue for MacIntyre is the narrative order of a human life. MacIntyre suggests that it is only when a particular action is understood within the context of a single, unified human life that the action becomes intelligible. An agent's actions are understood only when the reasons for his actions are understood.<sup>32</sup> Simply describing an agent's actions is not sufficient for understanding her behavior. MacIntyre argues that "behavior is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions invoked are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer."<sup>33</sup> An accountant entering information into a spreadsheet may, in the short term, only be trying to finish his current project. In the longer term, he may be trying to get a promotion. In the longest term, he is trying to make sure his family is well provided for. The only way to make sense of his action is to examine it within the narrative order of his life. Further, the narrative of human life has an ideal "genre:" the quest. According to MacIntyre, the good for man, the teleology, is to live his life as quest for *the good*.

The last piece of background information MacIntyre says is needed is an account of a moral tradition. Unless there is a kind of *telos* that "transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>32</sup> Schneewind, "Virtue," 656.

<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 192-3.

shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately.”<sup>34</sup> In a sense, what MacIntyre means by a moral tradition is simply an extension of what he means by the narrative order of a single human life. A moral tradition is the context within which the good for a human life must be understood: “Within a tradition, the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part.”<sup>35</sup> What this suggests is that, as the individual has a *telos*, so does society itself. It is in society’s moving towards its *telos* through traditions that the good for man is to be found. It is only within a society aimed at its *telos* that “the virtues matter.”<sup>36</sup>

With these background features explained, MacIntyre’s preliminary definition of virtue makes sense: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>37</sup> However, he argues that such a definition introduces too much arbitrariness and that the foundation of virtue must extend beyond mere practices. A full definition of virtue must account for all three of the background factors: an account of practice, the narrative unity of a human life, and an account of moral tradition. When such factors are considered, MacIntyre’s definition of virtue becomes much more nuanced. A virtue is more than a human possession enabling one to achieve goods internal to practice; virtue is both the means and the end to the good for man and for society as a whole. Further, when one practices the virtues, he is participating in not only the narrative of his own life, but the

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 203.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>36</sup> Greg Pence, “Virtue Theory,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 251.

<sup>37</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

narrative of his tradition. By practicing the virtues, one both participates in the *telos* for himself and society as a whole; he helps to bring about *the* good.

The goal so far has been to arrive at conception of virtue ethics that goes beyond the broad, vaguer definitions of virtue ethics. The account that MacIntyre offers is unique in that it provides a substantive way of understanding virtue ethics that is not bound to a particular culture or worldview. Such an account is exactly what is needed to allow for fair analysis between Buddhist and Christian conceptions of virtue. However, before moving into that analysis, what this account presupposes in terms of a worldview ought to be drawn out. There are at least two presuppositions underlying this account of virtue: a particular view of man and a particular view of the world.

Virtue ethics is an agent centered ethic. The result is that, as Smith points out, “in any account of virtue ethics, the self must play a prominent role.”<sup>38</sup> Further, any account of virtue ethics will require a certain kind of self, a conception of self that has several minimum criteria. MacIntyre’s account requires that the self must be able to “learn, acquire knowledge, be rational or irrational, understand concepts... and even co-author their own narratives.”<sup>39</sup> If there is a self with these abilities, that self must further be able to “maintain their personal identity through time and change, since they, and not someone else are the subjects of their own ongoing narratives.”<sup>40</sup> This unity of a single human life is critically important to a theory of virtue ethics. MacIntyre argues that apart from this unity, the actions of a moral agent become utterly meaningless.

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<sup>38</sup> R. Scott Smith, *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge: Philosophy of Language after MacIntyre and Hauerwas* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 145.

<sup>39</sup>Smith, *Virtue*, 148.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

In MacIntyre's account, the narrative unity of a person's life allows the agent to ask, "How ought my story to turn out?"<sup>41</sup> Essentially, this is the same question Aristotle asked, "What is the good for man?"<sup>42</sup> only framed slightly differently. The unity of a human life allows for the actions within that life to have significance and to be directed to a certain teleological end. On this point, he remains compatible with Aristotle. Aristotle strongly emphasized that the good for man, *eudaimonia*, was something that must persist throughout an entire lifetime.<sup>43</sup> Aristotle further thought that "a man who made no effort to make a unity of his life, being free, was very foolish."<sup>44</sup> Both MacIntyre and Aristotle believe that for virtue ethics to succeed, a human life must be understood as a whole and aimed at particular end. This confirms that a substantive account of self will be required of any worldview that wants to accommodate a virtue ethic.

The *telos* for man also presupposes that man has certain ontological features. In particular, it presupposes that he actually does have a particular function or purpose. Man is meant *for* something. While Aristotle argues that the *telos* or purpose is *eudaimonia*, MacIntyre suggests the good for man is to participate in a certain kind of quest, a quest for *the* good. He argues that "the good life for man is spent in seeking the good life for man."<sup>45</sup> This is not in contradiction to Aristotle, who saw *eudaimonia* as a state of affairs, that even when attained must be continually pursued. Both MacIntyre and Aristotle agree that the good for man is not a static end of virtue, but the continuation and perfection of virtue. The significance here is that man's

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<sup>41</sup> Shneedwind, "Virtue," 657.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford : Stanford University, 2007). Par 6.

<sup>43</sup> Hutchinson, "Ethics," 203.

<sup>44</sup> Clark, *Aristotle*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

*telos* does not constitute a fundamental change in the nature of man, but rather the ideal realization of it. Therefore, the *telos* of man in any account of virtue should preserve man as he essentially is, only in a perfected or ideal state.<sup>46</sup> Such a conclusion is in line with the criteria Devettere gave for the end of man:

We can note that virtue ethicists emphasize three major defining characteristics of happiness: (1) happiness in life is mostly, perhaps totally, a result of our choices, (2) happiness thus requires deliberation and reasoning so we can make good choices, and (3) happiness also requires good character because only people of good character are able to reason well and make good choices.<sup>47</sup>

If moral value is essential to human nature, the *telos* ought to be a context where man, as essentially man, continues and perfects his moral nature so that the virtues are practiced in their most excellent form once *telos* is attained. Further, this kind of good for man that is presupposed by MacIntyre and Aristotle must possess intrinsic value so that it is worth pursuing for its own sake; it must serve as a kind of ground for moral value. It must also exist in an objective way, that is, it cannot be something subjective—it must *actually* exist. Thus any worldview that wants to accommodate a virtue ethic must have the sort of metaphysics that allow for concepts like objectivity, intrinsic goodness, and ultimate value.

Another way that the unity of a human life is important is in how it incorporates Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* or moral wisdom. For Aristotle, moral wisdom "is an appreciation of what is good and bad for us at the highest level, together with a correct apprehension of the facts of experience, together with the skill to make the correct inferences about how to apply our general moral knowledge to our particular situation."<sup>48</sup> With his concept

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<sup>46</sup> There could be an objection here that man, in his current state, finds himself in a state where he is estranged from who he essentially is. However, it is rather inelegant to suggest that at any point man could be separated from what is essential to man. To make such a separation would be the end of man.

<sup>47</sup> Raymond Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks* (Washington, Georgetown University, 2002) 53.

of narrative unity, MacIntyre introduces the same idea. A person should act in light of the narrative of her life. Doing so, a person will take into account her past experiences (her narrative past) as well as the possible future outcomes (her narrative future).

Even the concept of character, a key element in virtue ethics, presupposes the unity of a human life. The virtues are understood as human possessions or qualities that modify or develop one's character towards its *telos*.<sup>49</sup> The only way it makes sense to talk about "development of character" is if the character of an individual is identical (in the strict, logical sense) to the character possessed in the past and will be identical in the future. If there is no unity of human life, then it remains to be seen how the virtues can be intelligibly practiced.

In addition to the unity of a human life, MacIntyre's account further presupposes a certain kind of a world: a world that contains multiple, distinct selves that relate to each other in meaningful ways and that itself possesses a *telos*. MacIntyre constructs his account of virtue ethics in three stages. The first stage concerns the role of activities within the life of a person. The second stage concerns the relationship of a person's actions within the whole of that person's life. The final stage explains the relationship between a person's life and a historical community.<sup>50</sup> It is only when the individual human life is placed within the larger context of a society that a human life becomes intelligible. MacIntyre further argues that the virtues themselves will depend on society: "One of the features of the concept of a virtue which has emerged with some clarity from the argument so far is that it always requires for its application

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<sup>48</sup> Hutchinson, "Ethics," 207.

<sup>49</sup> Hursthouse, "Virtue," par 3.

<sup>50</sup> Schneewind, "Virtue," 655.

the acceptance of some prior account of certain features of social and moral life in terms of which it has to be defined and explained.”<sup>51</sup>

In light of all of this, there are at least two sorts of criteria for any possible account of virtue ethics. First, the account itself ought to conform to the expression of virtue that MacIntyre has developed. That is, it should be able to be expressed in terms of practices, narratives, and moral tradition. If it cannot be expressed in these terms, then there ought to be a reason why other accounts of virtue, whether Aristotle’s, Homer’s, or Eyre’s, fit MacIntyre’s account but not this particular account. Second, the worldview assumed in the account should be able to accommodate the presuppositions about man and the world he inhabits. If the account of virtue fails either of these criteria, it is not an adequate account of virtue.

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<sup>51</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 179.

## Chapter Two

### The Case for Buddhist Virtue

The first step in evaluating Buddhist ethics will be to understand the Buddhist worldview. Ethical systems are always intimately tied to a worldview, but this is especially the case for Buddhism. The Buddha's teaching was in response to an ethical problem, the problem of suffering. Through much effort and insight, the Buddha was able to perceive reality as it really is; he saw the Four Marks of reality. The solution the Buddha offered was also ethical: the solution to suffering is to live a certain kind of life, a life characterized by the virtues of the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha often spoke in parables. In one famous parable, he explained that a man struck with a poison arrow does not demand that someone explain the origin of the arrow to him before it is removed by a physician with the antidote.<sup>52</sup> Here the Buddha is represented by the physician; humankind is represented by the warrior so unfortunately wounded. According to the Buddha, it is not so important *why* humanity is in this injured state, as the fact that the Buddha has provided a solution - a solution that is entirely ethical. Early Buddhism was an orthopraxy, not orthodoxy. But, practice is always related to belief. There is a fundamental relationship between reality as it is (*Dharma*) and ethics. The Buddha himself explained this using another parable:

Just, oh Gotama, as one might wash hand with hand, or foot with foot, just even so, oh Gotama, is wisdom purified by uprightness, and uprightness is purified by wisdom.

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<sup>52</sup> See the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

Where there is uprightness, wisdom is there, and where there is wisdom, uprightness is there.<sup>53</sup>

In this context, the Buddha is equating wisdom with insight into the true nature of existence (*Dharma*). Thus, according to the Buddha, living a moral, upright life is necessarily tied to understanding the universe as it really is. That being the case, understanding Buddhist ontology will be the first step in understanding Buddhist ethics.

### The Four Marks of Reality

The Buddha taught that there are four essential properties of reality. One early sutra records the Buddha's teaching: "Whatever is phenomenal is impermanent. Whatever is phenomenal is suffering. Whatever is phenomenal is devoid of self. Nirvana is eternally tranquil."<sup>54</sup> Reality is, at its most basic level, characterized by impermanence, suffering, the absence of self, and the existence of *nirvana*.

#### *Impermanence*

The Buddha taught that "all things are transitory [*anitya*]."<sup>55</sup> This is a straightforward point that is apparently confirmed by everyday experience: every material thing human beings encounter will, soon or later, pass out of existence. People will eventually die, so will flowers. Even mountains will eventually be brought down. Some of the early discourses draw out the implications of the Buddha's idea, suggesting that everything that exists is changing moment by moment so that, as Heraclitus suggested, one can never step in to the same river twice.<sup>56</sup> Even something as apparently static as a rock changes from moment to moment so that it is not

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<sup>53</sup> "Sonadanda Sutta," in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, trans. T. W. Dīghanikāya, Rhys Davids, and Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids. Sacred books of the Buddhists (London: Luzac, 1956.), 157.

<sup>54</sup> *Ekottara-agama*

<sup>55</sup> *Magandiya Sutta*, in *In the Buddha's Words*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville: Wisdom, 2005), 205.

<sup>56</sup> David Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy* (University of Hawaii, 1984), 36.

identical to the rock that existed a moment before and will be different from the rock that will exist in the next moment. One way of understanding this point is to think of the Buddha as denying the existence of something like the Platonic forms, which are permanent and unchanging.

Another implication of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence is that all conditioned things are ultimately contingent, the result of an endless series of other causes. Whatever arises, arises co-dependently with a multitude of other causes and will pass from existence sooner or later. One of the most famous illustrations of this concept is the Wheel Dharma which shows how each effect is dependent on a previous cause, which itself is dependent on another cause. Each effect also serves as the cause for the other effects.<sup>57</sup>

### *Suffering*

The second characteristic of reality is that "All created beings live in sorrow [*dukkha*]."<sup>58</sup> Usually, *dukkha* is translated as *suffering*. However, as many authors have pointed out, *suffering* is not an adequate translation. When the Buddha said that all things suffer, he did not mean that existence in the world would always be uncomfortable; rather, he meant that phenomenological existence would always be *conditioned* by states of ignorance, greed, and hatred.<sup>59</sup> Reality that is conditioned is called "*samsara*."<sup>60</sup> Because people exist within *samsara*, they are never able to have their desire for what is ultimate or eternal satisfied. They will always be disappointed with

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<sup>57</sup> Tich Nhat Hahn, *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching* (New York, Random House, 1999), 229.

<sup>58</sup> *Magandiya Sutta*, 206.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London, Routledge, 2000), 42.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

the temporary, fleeting happiness derived from the phenomenal world and are destined to be continually reborn so that suffering will never cease.<sup>61</sup>

The ideal sort of existence is an existence that is completely unconditioned, free from the vicious cycle of dependent co-arising resulting from ignorance, greed, and hatred. People suffer “because we take too seriously the useful fiction of the person.”<sup>62</sup> When a person is ignorant of reality as it is characterized in the Four Marks, then suffering arises as a natural result. Life based on the assumption that the world is permanent and that selves exist causes clinging to the cycle of *samsara* and thus there is rebirth.<sup>63</sup> To cease suffering is to cease being conditioned by external factors; this is *nirvana*. The doctrine of *dukkha* teaches, simply, that the kind of existence that human beings experience is not the ideal.<sup>64</sup>

### *No Self*

The third and most controversial of the Four Marks is the doctrine of no-self. The Buddha taught that "all states are without self [*anatman*]."<sup>65</sup> In affirming this doctrine, the Buddha was denying that composite entities, like rocks, people, and animals, exist in the commonsense way they are normally understood to exist. Instead, objects and people only exist as collections of parts, aggregates of other, more basic elements.<sup>66</sup> Persons, in particular, are composed of five parts called the *skandhas*: form, feeling, perception, mental fabrications, and consciousness. As

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<sup>61</sup> Kalupahana, *Buddhist*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Siderits, *Buddhism As Philosophy: An Introduction* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 76.

<sup>63</sup> H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethic: Essence of Buddhism* (New York: G. Braziller, 1971), 21.

<sup>64</sup> Some, like Tich Naht Hahn, have suggested that second mark of existence is *nirvana*. In a sense, *nirvana* and *dukkha* are, as Hahn suggests, two sides of the same coin. Nirvana is the state of being without *dukkha* and *dukkha* is existence in anything but *nirvana*.

<sup>65</sup> *Magandiya Sutta*, 206.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

the Buddha taught, "The body is composed of the five *skandhas*, and produced from five elements. It is all empty and without soul."<sup>67</sup> However, the Buddha emphasized the importance of composite objects as they relate to themselves and to other objects. This tension in Buddhist discourse has resulted in a distinction between the conventional and ultimate existence of an object. A Buddhist might refer to an individual as a single, distinct person that exists through time; however, he does this only as a convention of language and not in reference to the person's ultimate, ontological condition.<sup>68</sup>

"The Discourse of the Not-Self Characteristic" from the Pali Canon provides an excellent record of the Buddha's argument against a persisting self. Within this narrative, the Buddha answers questions from five of his disciples. The Buddha explained that each of the five *skandhas* cannot be identified as the self. Each of the *skandhas* are subject to change, inconstant, and give rise to suffering. At the end of the analysis of each *skandha* the Buddha asks, "And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?"<sup>69</sup> The disciples responded, "No, lord." In response to this the Buddha gave his approval. The discourse concludes with an explanation of how to achieve freedom from the suffering arising through the *skandhas*:

Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, 'Fully released.'

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<sup>67</sup> "The *Skandhas* and the Chain of Causation," in *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, ed. Robert E. Van Voorst (Belmont: Wadsworth), 89.

<sup>68</sup> Siderits, *Philosophy*, 56.

<sup>69</sup> *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic*, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html>

He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'<sup>70</sup>

The argument the Buddha makes here has at least two presuppositions: there is not an *I* that stands behinds the *skandhas*—the *skandhas* are all a person is—and if there were an ultimate self, it would be permanent.<sup>71</sup> From those two assumptions, he proves that since the *skandhas* are impermanent and cannot be identified with *the* self, then there is no ultimate self. The perception that a person possesses a substantive identity that endures over time is incorrect.

Instead of “substance-selves,” the Buddha argues that people are “process-selves” that exist only momentarily and only “in a dependent sense.”<sup>72</sup> The “self” is dynamic so that a new self arises and departs each moment.<sup>73</sup> However, there is a causal connection between these moments, so there is a loose relationship between past, present, and future “selves” in a single collection of parts. This conclusion should be understood as a middle way between the sort of egoism taught in other Indian schools of thought and a complete denial of the existence of self in any sense.<sup>74</sup> Clearly, the Buddha wanted avoid the sort of clinging that results from egoism, but he also acknowledges that there is at least a conventional self even if there is no ultimate self. Siderits sums up the matter: “The Buddhist view of non-self says that a person just consists in the occurrence of a complex causal series of impermanent, impersonal *skandhas*.”<sup>75</sup> “The person who lives at 9 a.m. this morning is the result of the person who lived at 7 a.m.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic*.

<sup>71</sup> Siderits, *Buddhism*, 39.

<sup>72</sup> Christopher W Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 23.

<sup>73</sup> Winston L King, *In the Hope of Nibbana; an Essay on Theravada Buddhist Ethics* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1964), 15.

<sup>74</sup> Kalupahana, *Buddhism*, 39.

<sup>75</sup> Siderits, *Buddhism*, 69.

<sup>76</sup> Gunapala Dharmasiri, *Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics* (Antioch: Golden Leaves, 1989), 13.

## *Nirvana*

The final mark of reality is *nirvana* and it the most difficult of the Four Marks. The term *nirvana* literally means ““extinguishing,” and in its broadest sense *nirvana* is the extinction of *samsara*: “This is the peaceful, this is the sublime, that is, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion cessation, *Nibbana*.”<sup>77</sup> *Nirvana* is the cure for what ails humanity.<sup>78</sup> However, it is not merely the proper goal of all conditioned beings, it also the ultimate reality in Buddhism: “‘*Nibbana* is supreme,’ say the Buddhas.”<sup>79</sup> So in addition to being the foundation of reality, it is also the soteriological goal of Buddhism.

Buddhist doctrine teaches that the solution to suffering is the attainment of *nirvana*: “It signifies soteriologically the complete extinguishing of greed, hatred, and fundamentally delusion, the forces which power *samsāra*.”<sup>80</sup> As the soteriological goal, there are two elements: “the *Nibbana*-element with residue left and the *Nibbana*-element with no residue left.”<sup>81</sup> The element with “residue left” refers to the kind of *nirvana* that was available to *arahants*<sup>82</sup> that still exist in their composite form. The Buddha described the *arahant* in this condition as a person who has

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<sup>77</sup> Bodhi Ñāṇamoli, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), 540.

<sup>78</sup> Gowans, *Philosophy*, 135.

<sup>79</sup> *Buddhavagga: The Buddha*, trans. Acharya Buddhārakkhita <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.14.budd.html>

<sup>80</sup> Williams and Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> *The Nibbana Element*, trans. John D. Ireland, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/iti/iti.2.042-049x.irel.html#iti-043>

<sup>82</sup> An *arahant* is a person who has achieved *nirvana*.

The holy life fulfilled, who has done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained the goal, destroyed the fetters of being, completely released through final knowledge. However, his five sense faculties remain unimpaired, by which he still experiences what is agreeable and disagreeable and feels pleasure and pain. It is the extinction of attachment, hate, and delusion in him that is called the *Nibbana*-element with residue left.<sup>83</sup>

On the basis of this text and others, there are several conclusions that can be made about *nirvana* in this life. First, the Buddha takes it as self-evidently true that *nirvana* is the appropriate goal in light of impermanence, no self, and suffering. Second, it is clear that the *arahant* lives without ignorance concerning the way things really are. He lives in light of the fact that all is impermanent, there is no ultimate self, and that all conditioned states are full of suffering. He exists in contrast to the unenlightened who still suffer from greed, hatred, and ignorance. Whereas the unenlightened might despair over his home being destroyed in a flood, the *arahant* recognizes that the home destroyed is not *his* and that clinging to material possessions only results in more suffering. He is able to face such disaster with steadfastness and a kind of aloofness, not because he is apathetic, but because he views the disaster as if it happened to someone else far away. He feels concern that such destruction results in more suffering, but he is not overwhelmed and he does not experience it as a *personal* disaster.<sup>84</sup>

Some might object that this kind of existence would create a lack of empathy for others or even an unhealthy lack of concern for one's self. The Buddha himself is said to have been living in a place called Atuma when "two people were killed, being struck by lightning, but the Buddha, who was seated under a tree close by, did not hear a sound."<sup>85</sup> However, Buddhists argue apathy is not the result of attaining *nirvana*. Instead, it is the realization of what is actually

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<sup>83</sup> *The Nibbana Element*.

<sup>84</sup> Gowans, *Philosophy*, 144.

<sup>85</sup> Kalupahana, *Buddhism*, 76.

important: the destruction of suffering which arises out of ignorance. The Buddha himself is the greatest example of a person who achieved *nirvana* in this life, and though he seemed aloof in the example of the lightning strike, he nevertheless reacted appropriately. Even though he was passive in this incident, there are other examples of the Buddha taking an active role in bringing about the cessation of suffering, the greatest example of course being his commitment to teach the *dharma*. So, Buddhists argue, while an *arahant* might have behavior that seems apathetic to the ignorant, his behavior is nevertheless justified in light of the *dharma*. They are illuminated so that they act appropriately in light of all the facts. The *arhanant* becomes liberated from selfishness and an unfounded concern for his own well-being to the freedom of experiencing “delight and enjoyment at whatever happens in the present moment.”<sup>86</sup> Only through this sort of liberation is one able to have peace.

The Buddha further taught that *nirvana* with remainder was not the ultimate goal of life. *Nirvana* without remainder, *nirvana* after this life, was the desired destination. The Buddha describes this element of *nirvana*: “Here a *bhikkhu* is an *arahant*. . . completely released through final knowledge. For him, here in this very life, all that is experienced, not being delighted in, will be extinguished. That, *bhikkhus*, is called the *Nibbana*-element with no residue left.”<sup>87</sup>

This aspect of *nirvana* is notoriously difficult to articulate. One of the reasons for this is that the concepts and definitions derived from conditioned reality do not apply to *nirvana* which is unconditioned. The Buddha illustrated this point in a conversation he had with a disciple named Vacchagotta. Vacchagotta asked whether an *arahat* would exist after death. In response, the Buddha asked Vaccha whether, once a fire was extinguished, it made sense to ask, “to which

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<sup>86</sup> Gowans, *Philosophy*, 142.

<sup>87</sup> *The Nibbana Element*, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/iti/iti.2.042-049x.irel.html#iti-043>

direction did it go: to the east, the west, the north, or the south?”<sup>88</sup> The answer, of course, is that the question does not apply. In the same way, concluded the Buddha, the question of whether an *arahat* exists after death does not apply. In the Udāna, the Buddha gives his most complete teachings on *nirvana*.<sup>89</sup> At the end of his first teaching on the subject he says

There is, *bhikkhus*, that base [sphere of reality] where there is no earth, not water, no air; no base consisting of the infinity of space, no base consisting of the infinity of consciousness, no base consisting of nothingness, no base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world nor another world nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here, *bhikkus*, I say there is no coming, no going, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not moving, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.<sup>90</sup>

The point is that the question of existence beyond the conditioned does not fall into easy to understand categories. *Nirvana* is both not static and not dynamic. The *arahat* does not exist but he also does not cease to exist. This is not a contradiction of logic, as some naïve interpreters have understood it to be. Strictly speaking, the Buddha does not teach something like “A and not A.” Such a claim would violate the law of non-contradiction. What he actually suggests is “Not A and not B,” while offering distinctions between what is, apparently, not distinct.<sup>91</sup> The Buddha is expressing that *nirvana* is not comprehensible while trapped in *samsara* and conditioned by ignorance. To achieve *nirvana* is to transcend conventional ways of understanding the world; it is to understand the world as it really is, without conditions. The extinguishing that takes place in *nirvana* is not the destruction of an individual; the individual never really existed anyway. Instead, it is the extinction of all conditioned states. The *illusion* of self is destroyed.

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<sup>88</sup> *The Middle Length Discourses*, 593.

<sup>89</sup> Gowans, *Philosophy*, 148.

<sup>90</sup> *Nibbana Sutta: Parinibbana*, trans. John D. Ireland, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.8.01.irel.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Although, the Buddha is not really offering distinctions. He is pointing to the fact that distinctions made on the basis of conventional reality are not valid. In reality, the categories of “existence” and “non-existence” just do not apply.

## *Karma*

Intimately related to the Four Marks is the law of *karma* since "in the moral order, *Dharma* is manifest in the law of Karma."<sup>92</sup> *Karma* is the mechanism that allows present actions to have effects on future states of affairs. In this way, *karma* is like the law of cause and effect. Gowan suggests that *karma* "is an impersonal feature of the causal relationships in the world, and there is no prospect of deviation from the causal effects of *kamma* on the grounds of mercy."<sup>93</sup> According to Keown, "*Karma* is not a system of rewards and punishments meted out by God, but a kind of natural law akin to law of gravity."<sup>94</sup> *Karma* is a moral arithmetic. Certain actions have certain effects. Karmic actions are like a seed that will ripen into a specific fruit.<sup>95</sup>

The Buddha explained it this way:

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draw the carriage. All that we are is the result of what we have thought. It is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him like a shadow that never leaves him.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Damien Keown, *Buddhist Ethics A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) Kindle Edition, location 294.

<sup>93</sup> Gowans, *Philosophy*, 105.

<sup>94</sup> Keown, *A Very Short Introduction*, locations 308-19.

<sup>95</sup> Dale Stuart Wright, *The Six Perfections: Buddhism and the Cultivation of Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 53.

<sup>96</sup> "Wisdom of the Buddha," in *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, ed. Robert E. Van Voorst (Belmont: Wadsworth), 98.

Thus, according to the Buddha, *karma* has at least two important aspects. First, it is objective. It operates according to predefined, constant values. If one performs action X, it will have result Y. However, there is no set way that consequences are dispensed.<sup>97</sup> The consequences of a particular action may appear immediately, in the next life, or even several lives from now.<sup>98</sup> Second, while the law of *karma* cannot be changed to suit one's needs, it can be used to bring about desired consequences. The Buddha makes this clear when he says that by performing actions with "pure thought," one will, as a matter of fact, be rewarded with happiness. The Dalai Lama states this rather explicitly: "To suppose that *karma* is some sort of independent energy which predestines the course of our lives is incorrect. Who creates *karma*? We ourselves. What we think, say, do, desire, and omit creates *karma*."<sup>99</sup> Therefore, as Harvey states, "Good actions are thus encouraged because, through their goodness, they lead to pleasant, uplifting effects for the doer."<sup>100</sup> *Karma* is the rudder that allows one to steer from suffering to liberation in *nirvana*.

*Karma* is typically understood as having a moral dimension. There are differing interpretations regarding just how *karma* is related to morality. There are proponents for understanding *karma* as a deontological moral law, although this view is not widely held.<sup>101</sup> There are others who suggest that *karma* is a means to a desired end, *nirvana*. Another option is to understand *karma* as rewarding actions that are good in themselves. Keown has proposed that at this point Buddhism faces its own version of the Euthyphro dilemma: Is an action good because it generates good karmic results or does an action produce good karmic results because it is

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<sup>97</sup>Lynken Ghose, "Karma and the Possibility of Rebirth: An Ethical Analysis of the Doctrine of Karma in Buddhism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2007): 286.

<sup>98</sup>Dharmasiri, *Fundamentals*, 37.

<sup>99</sup>Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 186.

<sup>100</sup>Harvey, *Introduction*, 28.

<sup>101</sup>Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

good? If actions generate karma because they are good in themselves, like the virtues of Aristotle, then Buddhist ethics might be a kind of virtue ethic. If an action is good because it generates the desired consequence, then Buddhism is more similar to utilitarianism.<sup>102</sup> Which of these interpretations is most likely will be discussed later in this chapter.

### The Four Noble Truths

The Four Marks represent that which is most fundamental to Buddhism, the *Dharma*.<sup>103</sup> When the Buddha received enlightenment, it is these Four Marks that he perceived. From these marks, he assembled his Four Noble Truths: (1) suffering arises, (2) the origin of suffering is desire, (3) suffering ceases when desire ceases, and (4) the Eightfold Noble Path is the way to bring desire to an end.<sup>104</sup> Many have pointed out that the Buddha's Four Noble Truths are like a doctor's diagnosis and prescription. In the first two truths, Buddha gives his diagnosis. In the third he provides the cure. In the fourth he gives a prescription.

The prescription suggested by the Buddha is the most critical part of his Four Noble Truths for ethics. One might rephrase the fourth truth like this: ethical practice is the way to reach *nirvana*. The Eightfold Path consists of eight criteria for reaching *nirvana*: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. One might further clarify the purpose of the Path as having the purpose of helping those who practice it to understand reality as it really is: "The principal cause that allows us to overcome our cyclic existence [*samsara*] and the basic misunderstanding that underlies it is familiarizing ourselves with the dependently existing nature of things."<sup>105</sup> The way to escape

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<sup>102</sup>Keown, *A Very Short Introduction*, locations 652-63.

<sup>103</sup>Williams and Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, 7.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 41-46.

suffering is to act appropriately in light of the true nature of reality (impermanence, not-self, and suffering) both practically and intellectually. This moves one closer to achieving *nirvana*.

According to the Buddha, it is the Eightfold Path that "opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind."<sup>106</sup>

Therefore, the Fourth Noble Truth should be understood as defining the goal of Buddhism: to extinguish the conception of self, to remove the clinging to this world that causes *samsara* in order to achieve liberation. *Karmic* merit, accumulated through adherence to the Eightfold Noble Path, is instrumental in achieving the liberation, *nirvana*, that the Buddha saw as the solution.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, all of Buddhist thought and practice is designed to aid in the obtaining of *nirvana*. It is because *nirvana* is described as the goal that it is sometimes as seen the *telos* and meaning of Buddhism. As Keown argues, "*Nirvana* is the perfection of these virtues [listed in the Eightfold Path]."<sup>108</sup> However, others are more reserved in ascribing a *telos* to Buddhism. For example, Siderits argues that "there is no one whose life either has or lacks meaning. There is just the life."<sup>109</sup>

This Fourth Noble Truth reveals how ethics is related to ontology in Buddhism. The way a person ought to live is determined by the certain desired outcomes; in this sense, Buddhist ethics is teleological. Ethical practice in Buddhism is at least partially motivated out of soteriological goals. Harvey points out that "from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths,

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<sup>105</sup> Sonam Rinchen, Ruth Sonam, Nāgārjuna, and Tsoñ-kha-pa Blo-bzañ-grags-pa. *How Karma Works: The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising : An Oral Teaching* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), 27.

<sup>106</sup> "The Sermon on the Four Noble Truths," in *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, ed. Robert E. Van Voorst (Belmont: Wadsworth), 88.

<sup>107</sup> Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, 47.

<sup>108</sup> Keown, *Nature*, 107.

<sup>109</sup> Siderits, *Philosophy*, 77.

ethics is not for its own sake, but is an essential ingredient on the path to the final goal."<sup>110</sup>

Keown agrees and says that "It is the purpose of the Eightfold Path to bring about the transition from *samsāra* to *nirvana*."<sup>111</sup> The question that remains for a virtue view of Buddhism is whether Buddhism is *merely* teleological. Is the Eightfold Path merely a means to an end or is it good in itself? Is Buddhism a utilitarian or a virtue ethic?

### Interpretations of Buddhist Ethics

#### *Utilitarian or Virtue Ethic*

There are two primary interpretations of Buddhist ethics: utilitarian and virtue.<sup>112</sup> Keown is quick to point out that Buddhist ethics will not fit neatly into any one category in Western ethics. However, Buddhist scholars see many benefits to interpreting Buddhist ethics in Western categories. Western ethics provides a highly developed vocabulary and conceptual framework that was never developed in Buddhism. Because of this, there is a strong tendency to identify Buddhism in terms of Western ethical theories, even if there is not complete congruence.

It is relatively uncontroversial that Buddhist ethics is *teleological*, at least to a certain point. While scholars agree that Buddhist ethics is aimed at the goal of *nirvana*, what is controversial is whether the means to that goal are morally good. One of the key issues in this debate concerns the nature of *nirvana*. Those holding a utilitarian view understand *nirvana* in a straightforward way: it is the desired end in light of the circumstances. It is a place of peace and rest, an escape from suffering. Those holding the virtue view believe that *nirvana* is similar to the *eudaimonia* of Aristotle and that it constitutes the *telos* of man.

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<sup>110</sup> Harvey, *Introduction*, 41.

<sup>111</sup>Keown, *Nature*, 107.

<sup>112</sup> Siderits, *Philosophy*, 77.

### *The Utilitarian Interpretation*

The ethics of utilitarianism, broadly speaking, could be summed up like this: "Good actions are those actions that are instrumental to pleasure; evil actions are those actions that destroy pleasure." If the means to *nirvana* are merely instrumental, then Buddhist ethics is a kind of utilitarian ethic, where the "good exists in pleasure" and the means to that good are not important.<sup>113</sup> Only the consequences count in terms of moral evaluation. Good and evil only exist relative to the predefined goal. While utilitarian kinds of ethical systems are objective in the sense that they provide objective criteria for evaluating good and evil, these systems are not objective in the ultimate sense, meaning that utilitarian systems are not able to give an objective account of what is ultimately good or valuable. Generally, the end is decided based on what the community already counts as valuable or good in itself.<sup>114</sup> As such, utilitarian forms of ethics are, at some point, transcended. They require a prior account of what is valuable or morally praiseworthy so that the goal selected is not arbitrary. This is exactly the condition in which many scholars have found the teaching of the Buddha.

One proponent of this view was Winston L. King, who held that Buddhism "aims at goals which completely transcend the ethical and always places its ethics in that transcendent context."<sup>115</sup> The Dali Lama himself seems to share the instrumental view. For example, he seems to suggest that an act like stealing is not wrong in itself, but wrong because of the resulting consequences: "As a result of stealing, one will lack material wealth."<sup>116</sup> Those holding

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<sup>113</sup> Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University), par 3.

<sup>114</sup> Goodman, *Consequences*, 23.

<sup>115</sup> King, *In the Hope of Nibbana*, 4.

<sup>116</sup> Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho and Donald S. Lopez, *The Way to Freedom: Core Teachings of Tibetan Buddhism* (India: Indus, 1996), 100.

this view take the Buddha's classifications of the criteria within the Path, wisdom (*panna*), the virtues (*sila*), and concentration (*samadhi*), in a straightforward way. The virtues of the Path (right speech, right action, and right livelihood) are said to be made possible with wisdom (right view and right intention). By having wisdom and virtue, the monk is able then participate in the "higher" order goods of the Path, the development of concentration (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration) that leads to *nirvana*.<sup>117</sup>

If ethical practice is merely the means by which one overcomes the suffering of this world, then, at the moment suffering is overcome, the practice of the virtues is obsolete. In the *sutta* entitled "What is Purpose?" the Buddha explicitly addresses the reason for practicing the virtues:

Thus in this way, Ananda, skillful virtues have freedom from remorse as their purpose, freedom from remorse as their reward. Freedom from remorse has joy as its purpose, joy as its reward. Joy has rapture as its purpose, rapture as its reward. Rapture has serenity as its purpose, serenity as its reward. Serenity has pleasure as its purpose, pleasure as its reward. Pleasure has concentration as its purpose, concentration as its reward. Concentration has knowledge & vision of things as they actually are as its purpose, knowledge & vision of things as they actually are as its reward. Knowledge & vision of things as they actually are has disenchantment as its purpose, disenchantment as its reward. Disenchantment has dispassion as its purpose, dispassion as its reward. Dispassion has knowledge & vision of release as its purpose, knowledge & vision of release as its reward. In this way, Ananda, skillful virtues lead step-by-step to the consummation of arahantship.<sup>118</sup>

In this text, the Buddha never mentions that the purpose of practicing the virtues relates to an inherent value in doing so. Instead, the virtues are practiced because they "lead step-by-step to the consummation of arahantship," which is *nirvana*. Once *nirvana* is achieved, then there would no longer be a purpose in practicing the virtues: "The highest life seems to be a complete escape

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<sup>117</sup> David J Kalupahana, *Ethics in Early Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 93.

<sup>118</sup> *Kimattha Sutta: What is the Purpose?* trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an11/an11.001.than.html>

from, or transcendence from, the ethical sphere."<sup>119</sup> Having achieved *nirvana*, terms like “moral” and “non-moral” no longer have any meaning.<sup>120</sup> The Reverend Saddhatissa also held this view, as he explained when outlining his two guidelines for understanding Buddhist ethics: “In the first place, according to Buddhist and other Indian thought, the highest state is one that lies beyond good and evil. In the second place, according to Buddhism there is no break between the moral teaching and that which pertains to the ideal state.”<sup>121</sup>

Given the instrumental nature of the virtues, they cannot be ultimately good: the “virtues are not sufficient in themselves. On the one hand, to be virtuous is not the ultimate goal of life... If there is any goal, it is freedom.”<sup>122</sup> They are described in a simile taught by the Buddha himself, like a raft that is to be abandoned once one has crossed the river: “for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.”<sup>123</sup> They are only valuable insofar as they enable one to reach the goal of the ethical pursuit, *nirvana*.

### *The Virtue Interpretation*

The outline of Buddhist virtue

Besides the utilitarian interpretation, the other major view is that “the virtue ethics tradition is the Western tradition most congenial to the assumptions and insights of Buddhist ethics.”<sup>124</sup> Virtue ethics is also aimed at a goal, the good for man, which is objectively the best

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<sup>119</sup> King, *In Hope of Nibbana*, 30.

<sup>120</sup> Harvey, *Introduction*, 44.

<sup>121</sup> Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, 4.

<sup>122</sup> Kalupahana, *Ethics*, 72.

<sup>123</sup> *The Middle Length Discourses*, 229.

<sup>124</sup> James Whitehill, “Buddhism and the Virtues,” in *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Damien Keown (Richmond: Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 17.

and most proper pursuit of mankind. Good actions, or virtuous actions, are good because they correspond to and participate in the good for man.<sup>125</sup> Keown suggests that a utility view is a mere caricature and that a proper understanding of Buddhism will show that the Buddha has much more in common with Aristotle than John Stuart Mill.

While there are several scholars who interpret Buddhism as a virtue ethic, Damien Keown's work is regarded as the most developed. Most other accounts of Buddhist virtue take him as foundational.<sup>126</sup> Keown suggests that there are four points of convergence between Buddhist ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics: the goal of ethics, the general psychology of each system, the particular psychology of moral choices, and the desire for the good.<sup>127</sup> Essentially, Keown is making two kinds of claims: (1) reality has certain moral properties (2) human beings, as agents within a moral reality, possesses a certain moral psychology. Since Keown's discussion of moral psychology is primarily concerned with categories unique to Aristotle that are not directly relevant to this thesis and given his own statement that "the discipline of ethics only requires that one individual can be distinguished from another... to pursue the issue of ultimate ontological constitution of individual natures in this context is to confuse ethics with metaphysics," only his first contention will be examined here.<sup>128</sup>

Key to (1) is the claim that *nirvana* is intrinsically and essentially good so that it serves as the good for man in a way similar to *eudaimonia* in Aristotle's thought:

*Nirvana* is the good, and rightness is predicated of acts and intentions to the extent which they participate in nirvanic goodness. The right and the good in Buddhism are

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<sup>125</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2010), par. 6.

<sup>126</sup> Whitehill, "Buddhism," 18.

<sup>127</sup> Keown, *Nature*, 195-222.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

inseparably intertwined. If an action does not display nirvanic qualities, then it cannot be right in terms of Buddhist ethics whatever other characteristics (such as consequences) it might have.<sup>129</sup>

Keown takes it as being self-evidently true that *nirvana* constitutes the good for man: “Whatever else *nirvana* is, it is indisputably the *summum bonum* of Buddhism.”<sup>130</sup> Keown strongly emphasizes the difference between *nirvana* in this life and *nirvana* after death and narrows his discussion to accommodate only *nirvana* in this life.<sup>131</sup> In general, those holding to a virtue view of Buddhism draw some important limitations to their interpretations.<sup>132</sup>

Another key feature of Buddhism as a virtue ethic is the relationship of *nirvana* to the practices that the Buddha taught. While other interpreters of Buddhism, like King and Saddhista, understand the Buddha as teaching that the Eightfold Path reveals a hierarchal structure of practices, with moral virtue as merely the first step and meant to be discarded once it is mastered, the proponent of the virtue view disagrees. Instead, all practices taught by the Buddha are meant to be understood as equally important. If moral virtue is placed first on the list, it is not because it is a merely a stepping stone to more advanced practice, it is because moral virtue constitutes what is foundational for other practices so that to cease practicing the virtues is to fail at all other practices. Moral virtue is *both* a means to then end of Buddhist practice and the foundation of it.

Moral practice exists on the same continuum as *nirvana* so that *nirvana* is not a transcendent, amoral state, but moral practices participate in and constitute *nirvana*. As Keown says, "In both Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics, an action is right because it embodies a virtue

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>132</sup> For example, Whitehill limits his interpretation by suggesting that his virtue interpretation is only for the sake of building bridges between Eastern and Western ethics, and not necessarily an attempt to offer a straightforward rendering of Buddhist ethics.

which corresponds with and 'participates' in the goal of human perfection."<sup>133</sup> Even though he disagrees with the virtue interpretation, Kalupahana nevertheless agrees with Keown on this point: "Ultimate freedom [*nirvana*] is above the world, like the lotus that rises above the water without being severed from its root in the water."<sup>134</sup> Moral practice is not merely a means because moral practice constitutes the good for man, *nirvana*.

Further, the means of attaining *nirvana* is inherently good because "it is the *only* way to secure the utility sought. But for consequentialist views of morality like utilitarianism, no *means* can have inherent value."<sup>135</sup> This is an important distinction because, according to virtue ethics for an act to be considered virtuous, it must both be good in itself, regardless of the consequences, and participate in the final good.

### A Critique of Buddhist Virtue

The point of this critique will be to test for the criteria established for virtue in the first chapter: any worldview that wants to accommodate a virtue view of ethics must have an explanation of teleology in the world and the narrative unity of a human life.

#### *The Problem of Teleology*

G. E. Moore claimed that one cannot move from observations about the world to conclusions about what constitutes the *good*.<sup>136</sup> Empiricism cannot be the foundation of a moral

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<sup>133</sup> Keown, *Nature*, 50.

<sup>134</sup> Kalupahana, *Ethics*, 86.

<sup>135</sup> Damien Keown, "Karma, Character, and Consequentialism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996), 346.

<sup>136</sup> Michael Ridge, "Moral Non-Naturalism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2010), par. 9.

theory. Those guilty of this have committed the naturalistic fallacy, which is to “conflate the ‘is’ and the ‘ought.’”<sup>137</sup> However, a virtue view of Buddhism seems to make precisely this move.

The Buddha was one the world’s finest empiricists. In fact the Buddha’s teachings are entirely based on his observations and experience. It was a result of his observations about reality that he formulated his Four Noble Truths—truths which were confirmed through his own experience and the experience of his disciples: “Monks, I have known two qualities through experience: discontent with regard to skillful qualities and unrelenting exertion. . . From this heedfulness of mine was attained Awakening. From this heedfulness of mine was attained the unexcelled freedom from bondage.”<sup>138</sup>

The challenge that Keown and other virtue ethicists face here is the challenge of understanding the Buddha’s empiricism as teaching robust metaphysical concepts like *eudaimonia* and intrinsic goodness. In other words, they want to understand the Buddha as arriving at an “ought” from an “is.” Keown suggests that *nirvana* is sufficiently similar to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* so that *nirvana* can be said to serve as the human good just as Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* does.<sup>139</sup> To make his point, he describes *eudaimonia* as being “desired for its own sake; everything else that is desired is desired for the sake of it; it is never chosen for the sake of anything else.”<sup>140</sup> He concludes that the same criteria can be applied to *nirvana* so that *nirvana* constitutes the good for man just as *eudaimonia* does. According to Keown, the fact that *nirvana* is desirable explains its role as the good for man.

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<sup>137</sup> Christopher Ives, “Deploying the Dharma: Reflections on the Methodology of Constructive Buddhist Ethics,” *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15 (2008): 25.

<sup>138</sup> *Cula-Malunkyovada Sutta: The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya*, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.063.than.html>

<sup>139</sup> Keown, *Nature*, 197.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

However, the fact that *eudaimonia* is desirable is only part of the reason why Aristotle saw it as constituting the good for man. According to Aristotle, the first and most important claim about the good for man was not a claim about its desirability, but teleology: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good.” Given this teleology, Aristotle continues his argument: “If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good.”<sup>141</sup> Aristotle’s argument rests on a metaphysical reality: human beings, like all other things, have a particular end or function. There is, in fact, a *telos* for all things. Given this fact, Aristotle uses observation about desires and their objects to arrive at *eudaimonia* as the appropriate goal for man. Keown does not have a means of explaining a *telos* prior to defining *nirvana* as the good for man. The result is that Keown works backward, making observations about reality and then formulating metaphysical truths. Sallie King explains the problem:

There seem to be two non-reducible foundations of morality: (1) natural law, the Dhamma (conditionality); and (2) an empathetic, caring, compassionate response to the suffering of sentient beings; empathy, caring, compassion, fully manifest in Buddhas, are implicit in the whole enterprise of Buddhism. The first foundation, the claim that conditionality and interdependence universally characterize *samsara*, Buddhist thought extensively strives to demonstrate (though, of course, whether or not it succeeds is a separate issue). The second, the perception that suffering is bad, Buddhism assumes, but few would probably want to challenge this assumption. It is the second foundation—the assumption that suffering is a problem and the caring response to that problem—that takes us from is to ought, from metaphysics to ethics.<sup>142</sup>

Aristotle is making a distinction between *eudaimonia* and what is ontologically good that Keown does not. While equating *nirvana* with *eudaimonia* Keown argues that “*Nirvana* is the good, and

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<sup>141</sup> Book I, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>142</sup> Sallie B. King, “From Is to Ought: Natural Law in in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Prayudh Payutto,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30, no. 2 (2002): 284.

rightness is predicated of acts and intentions to the extent which they participate in nirvanic goodness. The right and the good in Buddhism are inseparably intertwined.”<sup>143</sup> However, “Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* with the highest human good of human flourishing, but not with the moral domain of the good.”<sup>144</sup> What Keown conflates, Aristotle keeps separate and by doing so, Aristotle avoids committing the naturalistic fallacy. What Keown needs to avoid this trap is to provide an explanation of *nirvana* as the good for man and the pursuit of *nirvana* as being morally his *telos*. He must provide a metaphysical account of both the existence of a moral domain and human teleology prior to formulating his ethical framework.

Another problem faced by a virtue view of Buddhism is an interpretive one. The Buddha described reality as it is and made recommendations about changing aspects of that reality in light of the circumstances. However, to understand the Buddha as introducing metaphysical concepts like “the good for man” in the Aristotelian sense seems to be more the result of idealization and eisegesis than an honest reading of his teachings. In one famous example, the Buddha is questioned by one of his disciples regarding the nature of the soul, the universe, and *nirvana*. The disciple wanted a statement by the Buddha on each of these subjects, but the Buddha responded by reminding his questioner that he has left such statements undeclared on purpose. They are undeclared because they “are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That's why they are undeclared by me.”<sup>145</sup>

The Buddha explains what he has declared and why:

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<sup>143</sup> Keown, *Nature*, 199.

<sup>144</sup> Abraham Velez de Cea, “The Criteria of Goodness in the Pali Nikayas and the Nature of Buddhist Ethics,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11 (2004): 129.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

And what is declared by me? 'This is stress,' is declared by me. 'This is the origination of stress,' is declared by me. 'This is the cessation of stress,' is declared by me. 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,' is declared by me. And why are they declared by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That's why they are declared by me.<sup>146</sup>

Given these statements by the Buddha, it seems like an anachronism to read concepts like *teleology* and “the good for man” into his teaching. However, Keown suggests this is not the case.

Providing man with a *telos* might solve the is/ought problem since possessing a *telos* means having a certain purpose, direction, and design. However, the *telos* brings up other difficult metaphysical questions. In particular, if a person has a function, design, or purpose, such a claim seems to presuppose a personal agent that can bestow such qualities. However, Buddhism does not allow for such an agent or any other means of accounting for teleology in human beings. Further, it seems completely foreign to Buddhism to suggest that there is a “good for man” in the Aristotelian sense. Without an adequate account of teleology present, the virtue view of Buddhism fails the first criterion established in chapter one. This leaves the criteria of the narrative unity of the human life.

### *The Problem of Unity*

The concept of the self is critical to any account of ethics. This is a point that even Buddhist scholars appreciate. For example, Jones brings the *New Social Face of Buddhism* by asking, “What is the self?” and “Who am I?” to which he responds, “These are the questions around which the whole argument of this book revolves.”<sup>147</sup> In virtue ethics, the nature of the

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<sup>146</sup>Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), 2.

self is even more important since it is an agent centered ethic: “in any account of virtue ethics, the self must play a prominent role.”<sup>148</sup> However, Keown seems unwilling to define and engage the nature of the self in his argument for Buddhist virtue. He limits the scope of his argument to *nirvana* in this life<sup>149</sup> and then adds that “I do not address directly the problem of the apparent absence of a moral subject in the light of the no-self (*annata*) doctrine. It seems to me that Buddhism provides sufficient criteria for personal identity to allow the identification of subjects within the moral nexus.”<sup>150</sup>

This seems like a strange omission given the importance of the conception of self to most other forms of ethics. Why would Keown put such a crucial issue aside? One clue comes from the suggestion of Whitehill, who himself takes a virtue view of Buddhism. Whitehill calls Keown a “revisionist.”<sup>151</sup> Whitehill himself does not seem particularly interested in understanding historical Buddhism in its context, but rather as a means for expanding Western ethical “horizons.”<sup>152</sup> Perhaps Keown is motivated by reasons other than understanding the Buddha in his own context. Given the discussion of the no-self doctrine earlier, there is apparently no possibility for understanding a human life as a unified whole. All language regarding the self is mere convention, not referring to any substantive “person.”

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<sup>148</sup> R. Scott Smith, *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge: Philosophy of Language after MacIntyre and Hauerwas* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 145.

<sup>149</sup> This move seems arbitrary and unsupported by the Buddha’s early teachings. The Buddha did not draw a sharp distinction between *nirvana* in this life and *nirvana* without remainder. However, Keown’s distinction is so great that he divorces his ethic from the ultimate goal of Buddhism, *nirvana* without remainder. Why would he want to do this? The answer seems to be, as argued later, that Keown is revising Buddhist teaching to be compatible with a virtue ethic.

<sup>150</sup> Keown, *Nature*, 19.

<sup>151</sup> Whitehill, “Buddhism,” 19.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. “My purpose in this chapter is to speculate about the optimal, future development of Buddhism in the West.”

Buddhist scholars who are willing to comment on the nature of the self paint a picture that is not compatible with MacIntyre's requirement of narrative unity. Persons are only "persons" in terms of convention and not substance. They are a collection of parts, loosely associated with previous arrangements of other parts. This leads Siderits to conclude that, in light of the Buddhist no-self doctrine, "I should continue to identify with the past and future stages of this causal series. But I should not do so as the hero of the story that is my life."<sup>153</sup> But it is just such an identification that is necessary according to MacIntyre. As a result, Buddhism fails the second criteria for a virtue ethic: the narrative unity of a single human life.

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<sup>153</sup> Siderits, *Philosophy*, 77.

## Chapter Three

### The Victory of Christian Virtue

In Chapter One, it was argued that for a particular worldview to be compatible with virtue ethics, it has to meet two kinds of criteria. First, it must be able to account for teleology of persons and the world. Second, it must have a view of man that allows for the narrative unity of a single human life. Chapter Three will demonstrate two claims. First that experience and reason confront the Buddhism with facts that are difficult to explain away; these same facts naturally flow from the Christian worldview. Therefore, Christianity provides a better explanation for the nature of reality and human persons than Buddhism. The second claim is that Christianity can accommodate a virtue view of ethics.

#### The Foundations of Christian Ethics

##### *The Nature of God*

Any account of Christian ethics must begin with God. In Christian thought, God is metaphysically necessary: “The existence of God is a first truth; in other words, the knowledge of God’s existence is rational intuition. Logically, it precedes and conditions all observation and reasoning.”<sup>154</sup> Further, he is the “infinite Spirit in whom all things have their source, support, and end.”<sup>155</sup> God is defined as the greatest conceivable or maximally great being. As such, he is said to possess all great making properties, like moral perfection and ultimate value. By definition and ontological necessity, God constitutes *the* good of Christian ethics.

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<sup>154</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace-Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland Press, 1907), 52.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

As a maximally great being, God exists with certain attributes. Strong divides the attributes of God into two categories: the absolute or immanent attributes and the relative or transitive attributes. The absolute attributes are those attributes that God possesses without reference to anything else. God possesses life, personality, aseity, unity, and moral perfection as ontologically necessary properties. The life that God possesses is not biological life, but rather mental energy. He “lives” as a personal being, possessing “the power of self-consciousness and self-determination.”<sup>156</sup> God, then, is fundamentally and necessarily a unified, conscious, and rational person who possesses libertarian free will. In addition, he constitutes the ultimate ground of all value and moral objectivity.

### *The Nature of Man*

#### The *imago Dei* explained

As a free being, complete within himself, God chose to create mankind in his image:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”<sup>157</sup>

While the Bible does not specifically explain the nature of the *imago Dei*, Erickson argues that there are at least six facts that can be inferred from what the Bible does say. His first five facts explain that the image of God is something bestowed freely by God, without reference to any trait or merit within man, and that *all* humans possess the image equally. Each of these facts is vitally important to ethics, and the application of ethics in particular. However, his sixth point is especially important to demonstrating that Christianity meets the requirements of virtue: “The image refers to the elements in the human makeup that enable the fulfillment of human

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>157</sup> Gen 1:26

destiny. The image is the powers of personality that make humans, like God, beings capable of interacting with other persons, thinking, and of willing freely.”<sup>158</sup> Essentially, possessing the *imago Dei* is what makes human beings persons; the absence of which makes animals merely animals.

J.P. Moreland has argued that as the *imago Dei* relates to persons, there are five principle parts: consciousness, free will, rationality, the soul, and objective moral values and the intrinsic value of a human being. If Christianity is true so that people are, in fact, created in the image of God, then there ought to be facts about human persons that are difficult for other worldviews to explain away. This provides an excellent opportunity to offer an apologetic toward Buddhism and a fuller explanation of what constitutes the *imago Dei* and how it is relevant to Christian ethics.

The recalcitrant *imago Dei*: human persons and the failure of Buddhism<sup>159</sup>

One of the criticisms made of the virtue view of Buddhism is that it is motivated for some reason other than obtaining an honest interpretation of the Buddha’s ethics. Some Buddhist virtue ethicists even openly admitted that they had ulterior motives.<sup>160</sup> It was suggested that Keown was a kind of “revisionist.” This raises an important question: Why would someone want to reinterpret the Buddha in favor of a virtue ethic? The answer seems to be that a theory of virtue ethics makes better sense out the world than the theories that the Buddha taught. While the insights of the Buddha are tremendous, they are nevertheless out of step with what human beings

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<sup>158</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 532.

<sup>159</sup>This heading is adapted from Moreland’s *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism*

<sup>160</sup> James Whitehill, “Buddhism and the Virtues,” in *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Damien Keown (Richmond: Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 17.

can know by experience and reason. In particular, Chapter Two pointed out that a virtue view of ethics was guilty of ignoring or distorting truths about the nature of a human person and the moral quality of reality. There are *recalcitrant* facts about the nature of man and morality for Keown and other Buddhist virtue ethicists. These are facts about the sort of world human beings find themselves in as well as the sort of lives they experience, facts about the apparent narrative unity of the human life and the teleology of the world in general. Specifically, the Buddhist will have trouble explaining the five parts of a person who possesses the *imgao Dei*.

### Consciousness

Moreland argues that “mental states require a subjective ontology—namely that mental states are necessarily owned by the first person sentient subjects who have them.”<sup>161</sup> According to Moreland, there are five states of consciousness and each is expressed in terms of a subject/object relationship. A sensation is a state of awareness. One might have the sensation of “seeing red,” or “feeling pain.” A *thought* is a “mental content that can be expressed in an entire sentence.” “All fire trucks are red,” is a thought and so is “My favorite fruit is apples.” A *belief* is a “person’s view, accepted to varying degrees of strength, of how things really are.” A *desire* is a “certain felt inclination to do, or experience certain things or avoid such.” And finally, an *act of will* is a “choice, an exercise of power. . . usually for the sake of some purpose.”<sup>162</sup> The states of consciousness do not constitute some conventional person nor are these states aggregates of a whole. Instead, the five states are all properties of a mind (*mental states*), which is a unified whole and indivisible. Moreland further suggests that there is an *I* that stands behind and above these various states so that they *belong* to a particular individual: “the first person perspective is

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<sup>161</sup> James Porter Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: University of Nottingham, 2009), 20.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

not a property persons have, it is the thing that persons are – centers of a personal kind of consciousness.”<sup>163</sup> On this point, Moreland agrees with Strong:

Self-consciousness is more than consciousness. This last the brute may be supposed to possess, since the brute is not an automaton. Man is distinguished from the brute by his power to objectify self. Man is not only conscious of his own acts and states, but by abstraction and reflection he recognizes the self which is the subject of these acts and states.<sup>164</sup>

Moreland’s view of consciousness as mental states stands in contrast to the Buddha’s. The Buddha believed that there are five aggregates that constitute a conventional person: form (*rupa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*sanna*), mental formation (*sankhara*), and awareness<sup>165</sup> (*vinnana*). The last four of these aggregates are mental states,<sup>166</sup> similar to the ones utilized by Moreland, although the Buddha is clear that these mental states do not *belong* to anyone. An unnamed monk, in a dialogue with the Buddha, argued that human persons mistakenly assume that one of the *skandhas* might be identified as the self.<sup>167</sup> Later in the discourse, the Buddha explains that each of these assumptions is unfounded. The Buddha asks the monk concerning each of the *skandhas*, “Is this what I am?” The monk responds, with Buddha’s approval, “No, lord.” There is no unified self; there is only an aggregate of parts with an illusion of self.

However, the idea that a person is merely a collection of parts does not solve the problem that Moreland raises. For example, the Buddha suggests that awareness or *vinnana* is the

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>164</sup> Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 252.

<sup>165</sup> Typically, *vinnana* is translated as *consciousness*. However, this translation is not consistent with what is usually meant by *consciousness*, “the totality of conscious states of an individual.”

<sup>166</sup> Peter Harvey, “Theravada Philosophy of Mind and the Person,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, ed. William Edelglass and Jay Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 265.

<sup>167</sup> Maha-punnama Sutta: The Great Full-moon Night Discourse, trans. Thanissaro Bhikku, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.109.than.html>

“awareness of sensory and mental objects.”<sup>168</sup> But *awareness*, as a mental state, requires necessarily a subject and an object. There must be a subject who experiences awareness of a particular object or state of affairs. The other aggregates (with the exception of form which merely describes the physical body) have the same requirement. Perceptions will require both a “perceiver” and an object to be perceived. Formations (*sankhara*), which are “a range of mental responses to objects,” also require a subject/object relationship.<sup>169</sup> By formulating the aggregates, the Buddha has not solved the problem of the *I* standing over and above the aggregates. Instead, he has merely described the conscious states that an *I* possesses. Further, it is not likely that the doctrine of “no-self” and a belief in the aggregates as mental states can be held simultaneously. The only option would be to either affirm that a conscious self exists over and above the aggregates or that the five aggregates are not describing mental states. The juxtaposition of the “no-self” doctrine and the strong sense of the reality of self creates a tension within the Buddhist worldview to such a point that the language employed must be understood as either being only conventionally true (there is a self) or ultimately true (there is no self).

Besides the subject/object problem implicit within the aggregates, there is a kind of cosmological problem. How could consciousness arise when reality is fundamentally empty, non-personal, and lacking any causal powers? A monk asked the Buddha this question directly: "Lord, what is the cause, what the condition, for the delineation of the aggregate of form? What is the cause, what the condition, for the delineation of the aggregate of feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness?"<sup>170</sup> The Buddha responded:

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<sup>168</sup>Harvey, “Theravada Philosophy,” 266.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Maha-punnama Sutta: The Great Full-moon Night Discourse

Monk, the four great existents (earth, water, fire, & wind) are the cause, the four great existents the condition, for the delineation of the aggregate of form. Contact is the cause, contact the condition, for the delineation of the aggregate of feeling. Contact is the cause, contact the condition, for the delineation of the aggregate of perception. Contact is the cause, contact the condition, for the delineation of the aggregate of fabrications. Name-&-form is the cause, name-&-form the condition, for the delineation of the aggregate of consciousness.<sup>171</sup>

According to the Buddha, consciousness arises as result of a material cause (earth, water, fire, and wind) intersecting with particular conditions, the reality of dependent origination. While the Buddha refrains from metaphysical speculation, there is nevertheless another tension in Buddhism at this point: how does consciousness arise out of reality as the Buddha understood it? The answer is not clear. Consciousness, for Buddhism is a recalcitrant fact.

The unity of human life (the soul)

If mental states are something possessed so that there is an indivisible *I* over and above them, then another issue presents itself: the concept of a substantial soul. Moreland argues against naturalism, but his point can easily be adapted to a Buddhist view:

- (I) I exist, as does a particular arrangement of *skandhas* associated with me.
- (II) I am not identical with the *skandhas* associated with me.
- (III) I am not identical with any single *skandha* (like *vinnana*, for example).
- (IV) I do not have any proper part which is not part of the *skandhas*
- (V) Therefore, I have no proper parts: I am altogether simple entity.

The Buddhist would likely find (III) and (IV) uncontroversial. There would be no ultimate *I* to be identical to a set of *skandhas* and whatever an *I* is, it would consist totally of the *skandhas*.

Clearly, there would a problem with (I). But, if Moreland is right about mental states necessarily requiring a “subjective ontology,” then (I) should be acceptable even if there is protest. If (I)

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

makes it through, then so do (II) and (III). If there is a “subjective ontology” that possesses the five *skandhas*, then it follows that a person is not identical to the *skandhas*. The result is that the self is an “immaterial, non-extended substance”<sup>172</sup> that has no necessary relationship with the *skandhas*. This would explain why “we have very strong, deep intuitions that we are enduring continuants even though we undergo various changes and... experience part replacement.”<sup>173</sup>

The Buddhist faces a problem here: if there is a self that exists over and above the *skandhas*, that self would, presumably, not be conditioned by the laws of dependent origination or karma since it stands outside the space where those laws would have causal powers. The self would create a kind of dualism within Buddhism: there is what is unconditioned and without self (*nirvana*) and there is the unconditioned self. To explain these phenomena, Buddhism would need to develop a doctrine of the soul. The apparent necessity of an unconditioned self, enduring over time, and being metaphysically simple, the apparent necessity of the soul, creates another recalcitrant fact for Buddhists.

## Free will

The concept of free will creates another tension in Buddhist thought. In one of the most important *suttas*, responding to the question, “What is dependent co-arising?” the Buddha said,

From birth as a requisite condition comes aging and death. Whether or not there is the arising of Tathagatas, this property stands — this regularity of the Dhamma, this orderliness of the Dhamma, this this/that conditionality. The Tathagata directly awakens to that, breaks through to that. Directly awakening & breaking through to that, he declares it, teaches it, describes it, sets it forth. He reveals it, explains it, makes it plain, & says, 'Look.' From birth as a requisite condition comes aging & death.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei*, 120.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>174</sup> Paccaya Sutta: Requisite Conditions, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.020.than.html>.

From the dependent co-arising of things come “dependently co-arisen phenomena.” These phenomena are the complex conjunction of several “lines” of dependent co-arising and result in events like birth, becoming, craving, and so on.<sup>175</sup> The Buddha summarized his teaching on causality by saying that “Where this is present, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. When this is absent, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases.”<sup>176</sup> The Buddha extended this kind of causality uniformly to explain “the evolution and dissolution of the world process...plant life... and [even] to human personality.”<sup>177</sup> However, the Buddha is said to be able to break this chain of causation so that he is free from the cycle of rebirth. This assumes that the Buddha is able to enact “top-down” causation, and that he is significantly free from prior causes. In short, the Buddha possesses a form of libertarian free will.<sup>178</sup>

Once again, there is tension within Buddhism. The Buddha has explained the universe in fully deterministic terms so that every effect has, at least theoretically, a detectable cause. The Buddha also wants to maintain that he and others like him are sufficiently free to break the chain of causation. However, he provides no means by which this is possible. Persons, in particular, are not a good candidate for the sort of top-down causation that is required as persons are themselves an aggregate of parts reacting according to the laws of karma and dependent-origination. The apparent existence of free will establishes another recalcitrant fact for Buddhism.

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<sup>175</sup> Kalupahana, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 29.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>178</sup> Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei*, 50.

## Rationality

Buddhism faces a similar problem with the idea of rationality. The Buddha taught that the world was arranged in a rational way so that causes have predictable effects; he had a kind of process metaphysics. His teaching represents a “framework of thought that hinges on the ideas that sentient experience is dependently originated and that whatever is dependently originated is conditioned, impermanent, subject to change, and lacking independent selfhood.”<sup>179</sup> The Buddha consistently emphasizes that reality is a rational place in his teaching on Right View. A disciple named Kaccayana Gotta asked the Buddha, “What is right view?” The Buddha said that

This world is supported by (takes as its object) a polarity, that of existence and non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one.<sup>180</sup>

Clearly, there is a twofold assumption here: first that reality is a fundamentally rational place and second that human persons are rational themselves so that they are able, at least potentially, to apprehend reality as it is. However, the Buddha does not provide reasons as to why reality and human persons would be arranged in just this way. Thomas Nagel suggests that the fact that humans have the ability to reason is only possible under two sorts of circumstances: either “we can reason in these ways because it is a consequence of a more primitive capacity of belief formation that had survival value when the human brain was evolving” or “the universe is intelligible to us because it and our minds were made for each other.”<sup>181</sup> In Chapter Two, it was shown that the sort of teleology presupposed Nagel’s second option is unlikely on the Buddhist

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<sup>179</sup> Noa Ronkin, “Theravada Metaphysics and Ontology,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, ed. William Edelglass and Jay Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>180</sup> Kaccayanagotta Sutta: To Kaccayana Gotta (on Right View), trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.015.than.html>.

<sup>181</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 75.

view. Presumably, then, the Buddhist would have to accept some sort of naturalistic (*naturalistic* in the sense that it would arise out of the impersonal laws of dependent co-arising and karma) mechanism as the origin of rationality. But Nagel says that this answer is “laughably inadequate” and it would still not explain why reality itself is a rational place. In addition, Alvin Plantinga argues that naturalistic accounts of rationality are self-defeating; it seems likely that his argument would stand against Buddhist forms of naturalism.<sup>182</sup> Thus, once again, the Buddhist faces a recalcitrant fact.

### Objective moral value and intrinsic human value

One final area of tension in Buddhism concerns the nature of morality and the intrinsic value of human persons. The ethics of Buddhism are “thought to be objectively true and in accordance with the nature of things.”<sup>183</sup> The *dharma* defines good and evil so that

Of paths, the eightfold is best.  
Of truths, the four sayings.  
Of qualities, dispassion.  
Of two-footed beings,  
    the one with the eyes  
    to see.  
    Just this  
    is the path  
    — there is no other —  
to purify vision.  
    Follow it,  
and that will be Mara's [the demon of corruption and desire]  
    bewilderment.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> See Plantinga’s “Naturalism Defeated,”  
[http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual\\_library/articles/plantinga\\_alvin/naturalism\\_defeated.pdf](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/naturalism_defeated.pdf)

<sup>183</sup> Keown, *A Short Introduction*, 25.

<sup>184</sup> Maggavagga: The Path, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu,  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.20.than.html>

This objectivity of ethics in Buddhism led Velez de Cea to conclude that Buddhism has characteristics of moral realism because “certain external actions are unwholesome or wholesome.”<sup>185</sup> As moral realists, Buddhists believe that “moral claims do purport to report facts and are true if they get the facts right.”<sup>186</sup> A statement like “murder is wrong” is objectively either true or false.

*Karma* serves as the foundation of moral value: “For the Buddha, the moral order of the universe is contained first and foremost in the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth.”<sup>187</sup> Given its lack of belief in a personal God, it seems fair, then, to characterize Buddhism as “atheistic moral realists” who “affirm that objective moral values and duties do exist and are not dependent on evolution or human opinion, but they also insist that they are not grounded in God. Indeed, moral values have no further foundation. They just exist.”<sup>188</sup> The trouble here is that it is difficult to understand how moral values could exist independent of persons. Craig and Moreland suggest that the idea may be incoherent and that “Moral values seem to exist as properties of persons, not as mere abstractions.”<sup>189</sup>

If moral values can exist as an abstraction that only raises another question: how is it that an abstract moral foundation would have any relevance to human persons? Even if moral value could exist as an abstraction, it would not provide moral obligation. The only way persons could be morally obligated to a set of values is if those values were grounded in a person: “A duty is

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<sup>185</sup> Velez de Cea, “The Criteria of Goodness,” 134.

<sup>186</sup> Geoff Sayre-McCord, “Moral Realism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2007). Par 3.

<sup>187</sup> Gowans, *Buddhism*, 29.

<sup>188</sup> James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 492.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

something that is owed... But something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as duty in isolation.”<sup>190</sup>

Related to the existence of objective moral value is the intrinsic worth of human beings. The value of the human person is often taken to be self-evident in Buddhism. For example, the Dalai Lama begins *Ethics for the New Millennium* by stating that the proper goal of ethics is the “great quest for happiness,” a fact that “needs no justification and is validated by the simple fact that we naturally and correctly want this.”<sup>191</sup> According to the Dalai Lama, the natural and correct desires of human beings define what is valuable. Such a view seems to presuppose that human beings are, in fact, incredibly valuable. Keown points out that “compassion (*karuṇā*) is a virtue that is of importance in all schools of Buddhism” and that the Buddha serves as a primary example of this when he decided to delay returning to *nirvana* in order to teach others the *dharma*.<sup>192</sup> However, if persons only exist in the conventional sense, it is difficult to see how some ultimately impersonal, dependently arising, arrangement of parts could be said to possess intrinsic value. Further, given the questionable nature of the Buddhist moral universe, conventional persons may not be able to be *moral* agents in the first place. Thus the existence of objective moral values and duties, as well the intrinsic value of human beings, is also a recalcitrant fact for Buddhism.

These facts, the nature of consciousness, the soul, rationality, free will, the existence of objective moral values and duties, and the intrinsic value of human persons, are features not

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<sup>190</sup> Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83.

<sup>191</sup> The Dalai Lama, *Ethics*, 5.

<sup>192</sup> Keown, *A Short Introduction*, 30.

easily explained within the Buddhist worldview. However, these truths are central and fundamental to the Christian worldview. Alvin Plantinga makes this very point:

What is it to be a person, what is it to be a *human* person, and how shall we think about personhood? ...The first point to note is that on the Christian scheme of things, *God* is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood. God, furthermore, has created man in his own image; we men and women are image bearers of God, and the properties most important for an understanding of our personhood are properties we share with him. How we think about God, then, will have an immediate and direct bearing on how we think about humankind.<sup>193</sup>

God, as a unified, conscious, personal, rational, and ultimately valuable person, created man in his image. Man possesses these same traits, though to a different degree, because he is essentially made in the *imago Dei*. Given the Christian doctrines of God and man, it has been demonstrated that it can ably accommodate the necessary components of virtue: the narrative unity of a single human life and an explanation of teleology in man and the world.

### Christ: The Ideal Man and Savior of Virtue

Aristotle argued that the good for man was to live a certain kind of life, a life characterized by the development and practice of the virtues. The driving question behind his ethic was, “What kind of person should I be?” The ancient Israelites had an answer to this question: “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy (Lev. 19:2).” Their “basic moral doctrine is the *imitatio Dei*, to be like God as much as is humanly possible.”<sup>194</sup> They were to do this by following God’s commandments. Primarily, the ethics of the Hebrew Bible were deontological. They were obligated to obey God in light of who God is and what he had done for them. While the character of God provided the standard of right actions, it did not constitute the good for man in the Aristotelian sense. However, with the incarnation of the Son of God, the

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<sup>193</sup>Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* (1984): 6.

<sup>194</sup>Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 316.

ethics of the people of God shifted: “Christ is the Word made flesh, the perfect revelation of the Father, which means that, to the Christian, God is most perfectly revealed in a person, not a set of commandments or any written or spoken words, although Jesus says he comes to fulfill the law, not to destroy it.”<sup>195</sup> The absolute center of Christian ethics is the person and work of Jesus Christ.

One of the key texts on Christian ethics was written by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul’s purpose in writing was to convey that God had begun “cosmic reconciliation” through his Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>196</sup> Given this wide scope, Ephesians is a good place to look for what is fundamental to Christian ethics. In the first three chapters, Paul explains the role that the individual, the church, and himself has within the plan of God for the world. In chapter two, Paul explains that the individual is “saved by grace, through faith.” Salvation is not given according to an individual’s actions, but because “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Here Paul affirms that people have both intrinsic value and a teleology. They are intrinsically valuable because they are “a product God’s making (αὐτοῦ γάρ ἐσμὲν ποίημα).” They possess a *telos* because they were made with a purpose: “created in Christ Jesus for good works (κτισθέντες ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἐπὶ ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς). On the basis of these realities, Paul formulates his Christian ethic throughout the rest of the book. But, Ephesians 4:22-24 is especially relevant: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>196</sup> D. A. Carson, *Ephesians: New Bible commentary : 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity, 1994), 134.

In these verses, Paul teaches that the Christian life is a process of putting aside sinful habits and attitudes, replacing them with habits and attitudes that are reflective of who God is. This dynamic component also corresponds to Aristotle's ethic.<sup>197</sup> Aristotle taught that the moral life did not consist merely in performing right actions, but also in becoming a certain kind of person through the development of character. Through this development, one can reach his *telos*. The process of sanctification in Christianity is similar: "sanctification is a teleological concept. More specifically, sanctification involves the growth and transformation of oneself and one's character toward a partially determinate picture of the human good or end."<sup>198</sup> But what constitutes the *telos* of man in a Christian context? While not answering this question directly, Paul nevertheless provides the answer as he concludes his thought in 5:1-2: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

When Paul provides an example of the end goal of this process of sanctification, he says that Christians should "walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us." According to Paul, Christ is the moral exemplar, the ideal man, and Christians should model their lives on the life of Christ. The Christian answer to the Aristotelian question, "What sort of person should I be?" is "You should be like Christ." The gospels provide the fullest picture of the mission and life of Jesus Christ. According to Hauerwas, the key ethical feature of the life of Jesus was that he "did not direct attention to himself, but through his teaching, healings, and miracles tried to indicate the nature and immediacy of God's kingdom."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Wyndy Corbin Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics: The Promises and Pitfalls of Classic Models of Morality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 117.

<sup>198</sup> Joseph J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1996), 72.

<sup>199</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Jesus and the Social Embodiment of the Peaceable Kingdom," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University, 2001), 117.

The Aristotelian virtues were realized largely within a political context. The virtues were those goods that enabled the ideal kind of society, and individuals within that society, to flourish. Both Aristotle and Christianity agree on the social nature of human beings and that “human well-being and flourishing occur in various relationships where life is shared and common goods are realized.”<sup>200</sup> Aristotle argued that only within relationships between people of a certain class, gender, and social status can one achieve *eudaimonia*. Virtue was attained through relationships with people like one’s self. However, in the Christian context, the kinds of relationships that allow moral development are the kinds of relationships found within the kingdom of God – relationships between God, the individual, and the kingdom community.

While Aristotle required a group of like individuals for moral growth, Christian ethics emphasizes the difference between God and man.<sup>201</sup> Moral development occurs when a person exists in right relationships, not only with other human beings, but also with God himself (Matt. 22:36-40). Jesus demonstrates how these relationships should be worked out when he “comes to initiate and make present the kingdom of God through healing of those possessed by demons, by calling disciples, telling parables, teaching the law, challenging the authorities of his day, and by being crucified at the hands of Roman and Jewish elites and raised from the grave.”<sup>202</sup> Jesus demonstrated that the ideal life is characterized by obedience and love for God as well as sacrificial love for other human beings, especially human beings that are considered unworthy of that sacrifice. This is why Jesus is the human paradigm of virtue; “he realized our full human potential. He resisted selfish temptations, identified with the weak and oppressed, made love his motivation and guide, responded in love to both friends and enemies, was obedient to God (even

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<sup>200</sup> Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics*, 116.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Hauerwas, “Jesus and the Social Embodiment of the Peaceable Kingdom,” 119,

to death), and found self-fulfillment in relationship with God rather than in autonomy.”<sup>203</sup>

Reuschling makes an excellent point here:

Jesus himself is the exemplar of the virtuous life. It might be easy to attribute the virtuous life to Jesus based on his divinity. Yet the virtues that Jesus taught were *demonstrated* in the life he lived through his humanity and in his social and personal interactions. It’s Jesus’ humanity that gives us the window through which to view the quality and shape of a life that pleases God. Jesus did not just teach about the virtue of mercy. Jesus was merciful. Humility was not an abstract idea in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus himself was the model of humility. Jesus did not present theories of justice. Jesus was reconciling, securing justice and righteousness as marks of shalom.<sup>204</sup>

### Conclusion

A Christian ethic of virtue, then, is well founded and superior to a Buddhist virtue ethic. The Christian worldview provides the necessary foundations, an account of teleology and the narrative unity of human life, while Buddhism does not. Christianity does more than merely allow for a theory of virtue ethics. It provides a rich, substantive, and attractive theory of virtue. The Christian account affirms what we all we want to affirm and know intuitively: that human life is immensely valuable and that we were meant for some incredible good. Jesus Christ provides the fully realized example of the human *telos* that affirms these intuitions and calls humans to the good for which they were originally intended. By contrast, the Buddha asks men to deny a substantive good and even the commonsense understanding of themselves in order to achieve the extinguishing of life:

Delight is the root of suffering and stress, that from coming-into-being there is birth, and that for what has come into being there is aging and death. Therefore, with the total ending, fading away, cessation, letting go, relinquishment of craving, the Tathagata has totally awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening, I tell you.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Kovak, *The Christian Case*, 80.

<sup>204</sup> Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics*, 123.

<sup>205</sup> *Mulapariyaya Sutta*: The Root Sequence, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.001.than.html>

In stark contrast, Jesus declares, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”<sup>206</sup> Jesus affirms what the Buddha denies, which is they very essentials of virtue. Therefore, I invite the Buddhist virtue ethicist, who correctly wants to affirm the goodness and value of human life, to identify with Christ, who, “in his full humanity and solidarity with us, became what we were created to be: the image of God.”<sup>207</sup> The good life does not consist in the extinguishing of it, but in entering into the Kingdom of God, conformed to the image of his Son.

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<sup>206</sup> John 10:10

<sup>207</sup> Kovak, *The Christian Case*, 80.

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