

## **The Nature of a Buddhist Path<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Is there a 'common element' in Buddhist ethical thought from which one might rationally reconstruct a Buddhist normative ethical theory? Many construe this as the question: which contemporary normative theory does Buddhist ethics best approximate; consequentialism or virtue ethics? This paper will argue that two distinct evaluative relations underlie these distinct positions; an instrumental and constitutive analysis. It will raise some difficulties for linking these distinct analyses to particular normative ethical theories but will give reasons to think that both may be justified as meta-ethical grounds for rationally reconstructing Buddhist thought as an ethical theory. It will close with some reflections on the complexity involved in trying to establish a single and homogeneous position on the nature of Buddhist ethics.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Buddhist Ethics, virtue ethics, consequentialism, instrumentalism, constitution, eightfold path

Is there a 'common element' in Buddhist ethical thought from which one might rationally reconstruct a Buddhist normative ethical theory?

Each Buddhist philosophical tradition and each Buddhist practitioner seeks to be consistent with the Buddha's teachings. Central to the Buddha's teachings were the Four Noble Truths. They are the truths of or about suffering (*dukkha*), the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the pathway to the cessation of suffering; viz. the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. This might naturally suggest a 'common element' from which one might rationally reconstruct a Buddhist normative ethical theory. There is much disagreement, however, about what this common starting point entails. Some emphasize the relation between the first and third noble truths and argue that Buddhist

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ethics is best construed in consequentialist terms.<sup>2</sup> On this view, an application, violation or revision of moral rules of conduct is ethically adjudicated relative to whether it (directly or indirectly) causes the cessation of suffering. Others emphasize those elements of the Eightfold Path that call for the cultivation and expression of various attitudes and states of mind and argue that Buddhist ethics is better theorized as a form of virtue ethics.<sup>3</sup> On this view, an application, violation or revision of moral rules of conduct is ethically adjudicated relative to the attitude, quality or state of mind thereby expressed. Some, insist that no version of virtue ethics can provide a viable reconstruction of Buddhist ethics.<sup>4</sup> Others, that Buddhist ethics cannot be consequentialist.<sup>5</sup> And yet others argue for integrating these theories into some form of virtue consequentialism.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will argue that underlying these distinct positions are at least two distinct ways of thinking about the nature of a path relative to a goal and thus two ways of conceiving the relation between the Eightfold Path and the goal of the Four Noble Truths. The first is, what I will call, an instrumental analysis and the second a constitutive analysis. The terms ‘instrumental’ and ‘constitutive’ are not new to Buddhist ethics literature, although they are typically unanalysed and tend to be respectively associated with utilitarianism and virtue ethics.<sup>7</sup> I will closely analyse these notions and demonstrate how they provide for two distinct meta-ethical accounts of the normative grounds of Buddhist Ethics. I will then raise some difficulties for linking these evaluative relations with particular normative theories

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<sup>2</sup> see Goodman (2008), Siderits (2003; 2007), Williams (1998)

<sup>3</sup> see Keown (2001), Cooper & James (2005)

<sup>4</sup> see Kalupahana (1976: 60), Goodman (2009, 2013), Siderits (2015)

<sup>5</sup> Or, at least, cannot be utilitarian; see Keown (2001:177)

<sup>6</sup> see Clayton (2006)

<sup>7</sup> The most focused discussion of this distinction can be found in Dreyfus (1995), who employs it to articulate a virtue ethical analysis of Buddhist thought. The distinction can also be found in Keown (2001) and Clayton (2006).

and will propose, instead, to set aside the normative labels and focus on the evaluative relations themselves.

I will then turn to the question of whether one or other meta-ethical analysis better captures the spirit underlying Buddhist ethical thought. I will suggest that three criteria would need to be satisfied by a plausible reconstruction of Buddhist thought as an ethical theory and I will give reasons to think that at least the first and third of these criteria might be satisfied by both the instrumental and constitutive analyses of the Buddhist path.<sup>8</sup> While this paper will not go so far as to establish that both analyses are equally legitimate, it will demonstrate that the tensions between these competing rational reconstructions are sufficiently complex to resist an easy resolution into a singular and homogeneous position on the nature of Buddhist ethics.

### **An Instrumental Analysis of the Buddhist Path**

Defenders of consequentialist reconstructions of Buddhist ethics typically emphasise the cessation of suffering as the central and ultimate goal of Buddhist practice. While Buddhist texts may enjoin various actions, qualities and practices, their evaluative status is thought to be ultimately justified in terms of their function in generating (producing, causing) the cessation of suffering. A traditional way of reconstructing this justificatory ground in normative ethical terms is as a (negative) form of utilitarianism.<sup>9</sup> This reconstruction presupposes an *instrumental* analysis of evaluative status that is broadly supervenient on causation. That is to say, the normative properties of actions, attitudes and qualities of agents are conceived as depending only on whether they are means to some valued end and they do not count as means to that

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<sup>8</sup> I also believe that the second can be satisfied by both analyses but shall not argue the point in this paper.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent defence of this view, see Siderits (2015)

end unless they are causally relevant to its production. This need not imply that  $x$  must be causally sufficient for  $y$ . It need merely imply that, for  $x$  to count as a means to  $y$ ,  $x$  must (at the very least) be able make a difference to whether  $y$  occurs. This is one way to articulate the utilitarian assumption that the value of the relevant  $x$  (action, motive, attitude) depends on the value of the end it generates or contributes to producing.<sup>10</sup>

At this point, however, utilitarian theories diverge. There is disagreement about the nature and class of relevant means (whether actions, motives, attitudes) as well as relevant ends (whether hedonic states or some other goods). There is also disagreement about whether the end must be actually or merely potentially generated for the evaluation of relevant means. The latter allows for the kind of hypothetical reasoning involved in decision-making (which requires the ability to determine what *would be* the right thing to do prior to action and thus prior to actual outcomes). The former is beholden to actual outcomes and thus evaluative status is only genuinely determined *post fact*. Utilitarians also disagree about how outcomes are evaluated; whether they need to be assessed in terms of some comparative and/or aggregative relation. For some, the value of the relevant  $x$  is judged on a case-by case basis (as in act-utilitarianism). For others,  $x$  has value only if it (actually or potentially) contributes to generating the best aggregation of valued outcomes. On traditional accounts, the best aggregation is equated with a maximal set. Thus,  $x$  will have value only if it causes *more* of the valued outcomes than any (possible agent-relative) alternative. In such case, evaluative status will not be determined simply by the nature

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<sup>10</sup> Although I will use the language of consequents or ends being ‘generated’ or caused, it is important to recognise that a causal effect is not identical to a consequent or end. A ‘consequent’ is a component of a conditional and thus irreducibly related to an antecedent. As such it marks a logical relation rather than a causal relation. Nevertheless, talk of ‘actual’ or ‘potential’ consequents or ends tends to be framed as a concern with actual or probable products or outcomes. I shall simply note this ambiguity without attempting to resolve it.

of actual outcomes but in hypothetical relationship to alternative possibilities.<sup>11</sup> Despite these variations, most utilitarians accept an instrumental analysis of evaluative status whereby the value of *x* is determined solely by its (actual or potential) relation to some valued *y*. While the ethical evaluation of *x* depends on the *instrumental* aspect of this relation (which is essentially normative and travels in the reverse direction to causation, from end to means rather than cause to effect), the fact of this instrumental relation obtaining is supervenient on an underlying causal relation (the fact that *x* can at least make a difference to the occurrence of *y*). Independent of this instrumental-causal relation, *x* is devoid of value.

This much, I hope, is uncontroversial. Understood in these terms, it is easy to see how instrumental forms of consequentialism can be used to model the relation between the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. If we extend the class of relevant means to range over the various elements that comprise the Eightfold path, each can be justified as ‘right’ and thus proper aspects of the path in relation to some end towards which they function as means. Extending the class of relevant means in this way can accommodate Buddhist talk about virtues and the cultivation of various qualities. They would each count as good and right to the extent that they count as means to the relevant end and thus are causally relevant to its production. It might also seem that the metaphor of a ‘path’ naturally suggests this instrumental reading: i.e. one follows a path because one is trying to get somewhere. To where is one trying to get? One natural answer is: to *nirvāṇa*. What is *nirvāṇa*? On a straightforward reading, it is the state of complete cessation of suffering as articulated in the third noble truth. One might further argue that the relevant end is not agent-relative (viz. cessation of suffering *for me*) but, rather, universal and agent-neutral (viz. cessation of

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<sup>11</sup> Some utilise this structure to advance forms of rule utilitarianism, according to which an act is right if it follows a rule that *would* bring about better outcomes *if* everyone followed it than otherwise.

suffering, in general and as such, for all sentient beings). How might this be justified? In relation to the Buddha's doctrine of no-self (*anātman*) and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

This instrumental analysis of the Four Noble Truths has several implications. First, as mentioned above, the instrumental analysis supervenes on causation. When generalized as an analysis of a Buddhist path, it follows that a proper aspect of the path is one that is causally related to the cessation of suffering and its value (as means) transfers from the value of this effect (as end). Suffering has negative value within a Buddhist framework; the cessation of suffering has positive value. On the assumption that the cessation of suffering is the goal of the Buddhist path, this instrumental analysis implies that wisdom (right view, right intention), modes of conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood) and modes of mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration) have positive value (are 'right' or 'good') just in case and to the extent that they are causally related to this positive state of affairs. Independent of their causal contribution to the cessation of suffering, they are devoid of value.

Second, if we emphasise the causal underpinning of the instrumental relation, it might seem that once the end or goal is achieved, it no longer needs a cause, at which point the various aspects of the path will lose their purpose and value *qua means* and thus contributing causes. If this is right, it might then follow that once one achieves *nirvāṇa* (and thus the cessation of suffering) the relevant aspects of the path lose their point and value. Like a ladder no longer required once one has successfully climbed to one's destination, the Eightfold path is neither required nor of value once the goal

has been achieved.<sup>12</sup> This analysis might support certain transcendental accounts of *nirvāṇa* and Buddhahood. According to such accounts, the achievement of *nirvāṇa* is coextensive with a complete escape from *saṃsāra*; i.e. the cycle of karmic rebirth which is causally driven by actions and their effects. For some, when one achieves transcendent-*nirvāṇa* one entirely transcends the realm of causally efficacious action (*karman*). It would seem to follow, however, that a transcendent Buddha is not an agent and it thus makes no sense to speak of a Buddha's *good* (compassionate, virtuous) actions.<sup>13</sup> Those who wish to defend this view might find some meta-ethical support in the instrumental analysis of the Buddhist path. Realising the right view, engaging in good modes of living and mindfulness might thus be understood as necessary means for ordinary human beings to achieve transcendent-*nirvāṇa* but lose their point once this goal has been achieved. Once one achieves the goal of the Eightfold Path, once one has climbed to the top of the ladder, the ladder itself can be pushed away.

## **A Constitutive Analysis of the Buddhist Path**

Those who defend a virtue ethical reconstruction of Buddhism emphasise the development of certain attitudes, capacities or mental states, the perfection of which are unified in a certain way of living as exemplified by a Buddha or a bodhisattva.

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<sup>12</sup> This is aside from the value and purpose that the Buddhist path may have *for someone else* who has yet to achieve the goal of the path. However, nuance is still perhaps needed here. It is arguable, for instance, that purpose and value can come apart. A constituent of the Eightfold Path might still have value even if it no longer has a purpose in achieving the goal relative to which it is evaluated. However, this may depend on whether one thinks a causal relation ceases once its effect is fully actualized and how this bears on the status of some *x* as means. For instance, if some *x* must be *able* to make an *actual* causal difference to *y*'s occurring in order to count as a means to *y*, this condition cannot be satisfied in the case of *y* being fully actualised. As a result, there is no basis for the transference of value from end to means and hence that *x* loses value once *y* occurs. If, however, it is sufficient that *x* must *have* been able to make such a difference (or *did* make such a difference) to count as a means to that end, then this problem can be averted.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of some problems that arise for this view, see Finnigan (2010/11, 2011a,b)

While the Buddhist canon offers several competing lists of the relevantly perfected attitudes (*pāramitās*), most Buddhist traditions and schools consider the following four ‘immeasurables’ (*apramāṇa*) to be characteristic of a Buddha’s mode of living; i.e. loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), empathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*).

How are we to understand these attitudes, their cultivation and perfection, in relation to the goal of a Buddhist path? The instrumental analysis might seem to provide the most straightforward answer. They have value to the extent that they are means to generating the various aspects of the Eightfold Path, which, in turn, have value as means to the cessation of suffering, which is the goal of the path. It is only insofar as loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy or equanimity instrumentally cause us to (e.g.) engage in right actions, right speech and right modes of livelihood that they have positive value, where the ‘rightness’ of these modes of living is determined in instrumental-causal relation to the cessation of suffering.

This is not the only way to analyse the relevance of these attitudes, however. They might alternatively be analysed in *constitutive* relation to the Buddhist path. There are several ways to analyse a constitution relation. The sense relevant to this paper is not a mere mereological sum. Rather, like the instrumental relation, it has a goal or object that is the basis for determining value. The crucial difference between these two kinds of relation, however, concerns whether the basis for determining value is an *external effect* or *internal objective* of that which is evaluated.<sup>14</sup>

According to my analysis, the instrumental relation broadly supervenes on an underlying causal relation. If interpreted in efficient causal terms, it implies that the

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<sup>14</sup> Although I am stipulating the terms ‘constitutive’ and ‘instrumental’ to the analyses provided in this paper, I recognize that these terms are not always used in these stipulated senses. For instance, the term ‘instrumental’ is sometimes used to characterize all conditional relations and thus could be used to describe *both* analyses of goal-directed activities. ‘Constitutive’ can also be used to cover both (e.g. ‘x *constitutes* the path because it is internally/externally related to y’).



path and goal are separate and distinct and thus the basis of evaluation is external to the evaluated act. This is standardly assumed by classical hedonic utilitarians, for instance, who take it to be uncontroversial that there is an ontological distinction between actions and the hedonic states produced as a result. If extended to the Buddhist context, it follows that engaged aspects of the Buddhist path are separate and distinct contributing causes of *nirvāṇa*, relative to the production of which they obtain positive evaluative status. In this way, the basis of evaluation (*nirvāṇa*) is external to the evaluated objects (the various aspects of the Eightfold Path).

According to a constitutive analysis, however, the goal of the Buddhist path is not a separate and distinct event that is caused by acquiring and engaging various modes of wisdom, living and mental discipline. Rather, it marks their point of perfection or completion (the *telos*) and thus is actualised in their very engagement. It is an objective which is internal to a way of living, rather than an effect that is external to and caused by the living of such a life.

To grasp the difference, consider dancing and the goal of becoming a graceful dancer. This goal is *teleological* and *internal* to the relevant activity to the extent that it is actualised in the dancing rather than being an ontologically separate and distinct effect that is produced by dancing. Of course, one might seek to bring about certain effects as a result of being able to dance gracefully (such as entrancing a partner or winning a prize). However, this is merely to say that an action can have multiple goals, some internal and some external. Where the instrumental analysis views the Eightfold Path as a roadmap to some destination that is separate and distinct from one's present location, the constitutive analysis views it as circumscribing a certain *way* of living; namely, one that consists of mutually reinforcing modes of understanding, conduct and mindful attention. The perfection of these distinct modes

of living is analysed in relation to the cultivation of the four immeasurable attitudes (loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity).

The four immeasurable attitudes, themselves, can be seen to provide a (partial) model for the constitutive analysis of a Buddhist ‘way’ of living.<sup>15</sup> In contemporary discussions, these attitudes are often characterised as emotions. The nature of emotions is a matter of contemporary dispute. Some characterise emotions as simple and basic sensations akin to the phenomenal experience of bodily, physical pain. This characterisation is arguably equivalent to the Buddhist notion of *vedanā*. The four immeasurables are more complex. Each is an intentional attitude that is (a) about or directed towards certain kinds of objects construed in certain kinds of ways, and (b) made manifest in certain kinds of bodily and behavioural responses, where (a) and (b) are constitutive of the relevant attitude rather than related to it either as cause or effect. While the four immeasurable attitudes may involve phenomenally simple sensory elements, they are not reductively defined in terms of them. Arguably, much the same can be said for many varieties of emotion.

To illustrate this point, consider fear. While the nature of fear is, itself, subject to much debate it is arguably not (or not simply) a bare, simple sensation like bodily, physical pain. Rather, there is reason to think that it is an intentional attitude that is about or directed towards some object. While the objects of fear differ between subjects, it is nevertheless the case that insofar as one experiences fear one is afraid *of* something. Moreover, the object of fear is not necessarily identical with its originating or triggering cause. Consider, for instance, a subject who was once attacked by a dog and subsequently feels fear whenever they pass the building where the event occurred. It seems mistaken to say that the subject is afraid of the building.

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<sup>15</sup> I say ‘partial’ because although I will argue that they are necessarily oriented with regards to an intentional object, this is not exactly the same as saying they are goal directed.

It seems more correct to say that they are afraid of dogs (or, perhaps, being harmed by dogs, which is an unwanted possibility about which the subject experiences some agential uncertainty or lack of control) where this fear is occasioned or triggered by the perception of the building (in causal association with the memory of being attacked, which may have been the originating cause of the attitude). Both the originating and triggering cause of the subject's fear of dogs are external to and, in principle, dissociable from this attitude. The object of the subject's fear, by contrast, that of which the subject is afraid (i.e. dogs) is internal and constitutive of the attitude itself.

Of course, the relevant attitude would not be that of fear if it did not manifest in certain kinds of bodily and behavioural responses. Physiologically, the manifestation of fear may involve a rush of adrenaline, phenomenologically apparent in the form of bodily trembling or increased heart rate or sweating. Behaviourally, fear may manifest in variations of 'freeze, flight, fight' responses as subtle as an almost indiscernible increase in walking pace or as obvious as crossing to the far side of the street. These bodily, behavioural manifestations are not separate and distinct causal effects of fear, understood as a simple and discrete bodily feeling. Rather, the attitude of fear is a bodily, behavioural *orientation* towards (or mode of recoiling from) certain objects.<sup>16</sup>

The four immeasurables can be subjected to a similar analysis. Compassion is canonically characterised as an attitude of aspiring for the diminishment of suffering (in oneself or another). Loving-kindness is characterised as an attitude of aspiring for well-being and happiness (for oneself or another). Empathic joy is an attitude of rejoicing in the happiness of others and the relevant sense of equanimity is a clear-minded, tranquil mode of responding to the vicissitudes of life. Each is an intentional

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to deny that the ways in which fear manifests may differ between subjects and may be complicated in various ways when other attitudes are simultaneously triggered.

attitude oriented to certain kinds of objects construed in certain kinds of ways. Each, once sufficiently cultivated, is robustly dispositional in the sense that they reliably manifest in relevant kinds of bodily, behavioural response in relevant kinds of circumstances. The ethical conduct (*śīla*) component of the Eightfold Path (i.e. right speech, action, livelihood) might be understood as three primary ways of manifesting these attitudes and it is relative to the expression of these attitudes that they are justified as constituents of the path.<sup>17</sup>

### **A qualification and refinement of the framing question**

I have claimed that a nominal distinction between instrumentality and constitution is widely used in Buddhist ethics literature and is broadly associated with utilitarianism and some form of virtue ethics. I have demonstrated how these evaluative relations, once analysed, provide for two distinct meta-ethical accounts of the normative grounds of Buddhist Ethics. There are complications, however, in associating these analyses with current work in normative ethical theory.

Contemporary consequentialists, for instance, do not limit themselves to instrumentalism about evaluative status but, rather, allow themselves a much broader range of evaluative relations. Indeed, it would seem that many consequentialists include as consequentialist all evaluative relations which can be logically construed as consequential (i.e. all claims of conditional form). Take, for instance, ordered list

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<sup>17</sup> How might the remaining aspects of the Eightfold Path fit with this analysis? The wisdom components (*prajñā*) might be justified in relation to the intentional object of these attitudes. The notion of intention (*samkalpa*) has a broad interpretive range. *Right* intention might be plausibly construed as correctness in the intentional object towards which one's attitudes are oriented, where the obtaining of such correctness is influenced by obtaining the right view (*drṣṭi*). While the *value* of right view and intention are justified relative to *truth*, one might argue that they are *relevant* constituents of the Eightfold Path insofar as they help shape the attitudes that are expressed in our modes of living. The concentration components (*samādhi*) might be similarly justified by their role in facilitating the cultivation of wisdom and thus correction of the intentional objects of the attitudes expressed by modes of ethical conduct.

theory and welfarist consequentialism. Unlike classical utilitarianism, these forms of consequentialism do not consider hedonic states of pleasure and pain to be the only intrinsic goods. Welfarist consequentialism, in particular, includes anything that is thought to have genuine and non-derivative significance for well-being. Moreover, according to this view, some quality or character trait is considered good to the extent that it contributes to, and thus is properly constitutive of, well-being. Charles Goodman defends welfarist consequentialism as the best reconstruction of Buddhist ethics.<sup>18</sup> It would seem, however, that the metaphysical foundation for this particular form of consequentialism better fits the constitutive analysis that we have attributed to virtue ethics than the instrumental analysis that underlies traditional forms of utilitarianism.

Consider also recent criticisms of virtue ethical reconstructions of Buddhism. While at one time quite popular, these reconstructions are now often strongly rejected as incompatible with the metaphysical underpinnings of Buddhist thought.<sup>19</sup> The reason typically offered is that Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics are person-centred in a sense that assumes some essential property of self as evaluative grounds of the various attitudes and character traits that are expressed in action, where this assumed essential self is taken to be incompatible with the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anātman*).<sup>20</sup> However, as with contemporary consequentialism, there is much diversity in contemporary virtue ethical views. Not all contemporary forms of virtue ethics are Aristotelian, neo-Aristotelian and/or person-centred.<sup>21</sup> And even those that are need not presuppose a permanent, unchanging, essential self (*ātman*) as the

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<sup>18</sup> See Goodman (2009, 2013, 2015)

<sup>19</sup> According to Goodman (2009), for instance, no version of virtue ethics can provide a viable model of Buddhist ethics. A similar view is advanced by Siderits (2015)

<sup>20</sup> See Goodman (2013), Siderits (2015), and Garfield & Priest (2015)

<sup>21</sup> While some Buddhist scholars note this point, few go on to actually engage the relevant differences in contemporary virtue ethical theory. Examples of non-Aristotelian approaches to virtue ethics can be found in Phillipa Foot (2001), Christine Swanton (2003), Lisa Tessman (2005).

metaphysical foundation for evaluating character traits. Similar to welfarist consequentialism, it is open to defenders of, say, a neo-Aristotelian approach to ethics to insist that virtues are character traits that, when perfected or made excellent, mutually constitute and sustain well-being or a good way of living (*eudaimonia*). If plausible, a virtue ethical reconstruction of Buddhist ethics on a constitutive metaphysical foundation need not be inconsistent with Buddhist views on self.

Given these considerations, it might seem that there is no settled answer to the question of which contemporary normative ethical theory (consequentialism or virtue ethics) Buddhist thought best approximates. The comparative task cuts both ways; a proper answer is beholden on Western philosophy to provide a clearly demarcated basis for comparison. And Western philosophers disagree about how to distinguish these theories. This is not to deny the potential fruitfulness of comparative analysis in terms of *some* theory as defended by *some* Western philosopher. The above considerations nevertheless reveal the limitations of this approach.

An alternative approach our framing question, however, is to set aside the normative labels (consequentialism and virtue ethics) and focus, instead, on the instrumental and constitutive analyses that some versions of these normative theories metaphysically presuppose. While it is arguable that the difference between (e.g.) welfarist consequentialism and well-being based virtue ethical theory might, in the end, be merely verbal, the relational structures analyzed above are substantively distinct, diverging over whether the basis for evaluation is internal or external to what is evaluated and potentially requiring distinct arguments to justify.

If we take this alternative approach, however, we still face the question of whether one of these two analyses is more correct, fundamental or better represents the ‘spirit’ of Buddhist ethical thought than the other. Is there a singular best meta-

ethical analysis of Buddhist thought or are both analyses provided above equally legitimate? How might we settle this issue?

One possibility is to assess whether either of these analyses are systematically consistent with Buddhist thought in various respects. There seem to be at least three respects in which such consistency could be tested.

- (1) Consistency with the Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths;
- (2) Consistency with at least some established Buddhist metaphysical and epistemological theory;
- (3) A plausible reconstruction of at least some canonical Buddhist text.

Why these three criteria? I take (1) to be obvious insofar as the Four Noble Truths comes closest to being a central tenet of Buddhism and thus common element underlying the diversity of philosophical views. What about (2)? Since these meta-ethical analyses are contemporary, philosophical *reconstructions* of the Buddhist path, their legitimacy will, in part, depend on whether they can be systematically related to more established philosophical views within the Buddhist canon. Historical Buddhist thinkers provided highly sophisticated metaphysical and epistemological analyses of the Buddha's teachings on non-self and dependent origination. It is reasonable to suppose that a plausible reconstruction of Buddhist ethics should be consistent with some such analysis. Indeed, as noted above, we already see some rational reconstructions being dismissed precisely because they are taken to be inconsistent with these metaphysical commitments (on some understanding). Finally, it is reasonable to consider whether there is any textual evidence to support either analysis in canonical Buddhist texts that are explicitly concerned with ethical conduct. Hence (3).

Establishing whether and to what extent the instrumental and constitutive analyses of the Buddhist path are consistent with Buddhist thought in *all* three respects is a considerable task beyond the scope of what can be achieved here. Showing that they both satisfy (2), in particular, would require considering how these analyses might systematically relate to the complexities of some Buddhist philosophical system (Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Yogācāra, Madhyamaka).<sup>22</sup> The remainder of this article will, instead, focus on providing some reasons to think that both of these analyses might satisfy (1) and (3).

### **Comparative assessment: consistency with the Four Noble Truths**

The instrumental analysis seems to provide a relatively straightforward reading of the relation between the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. On this view, each of the various elements that comprise the Eightfold path is justified as ‘right’ and thus a proper aspect of the path to the extent that they contribute to generating the end of *nirvāṇa*, where this is understood as the cessation of suffering.

By contrast, one might worry that the constitutive analysis of the Buddhist Path either misconstrues or does not take seriously enough the centrality of suffering to the Four Noble Truths. Traditional metaphors of these truths conceive of the Eightfold Path as a remedy for the disease of suffering that is discovered by the first truth, the causes of which diagnosed by the second and the possibility of a cure promised by the third. It could be objected that the constitutive analysis has little bearing on the actual cessation of suffering aside from an aspiration for its

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<sup>22</sup> It may also require considering the viability of these respective analyses. For instance, Madhyamaka thinkers strongly critique Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika. If one or other of our analyses can only be justified as consistent with Sautrāntika, for instance, the question will remain as to whether that is sufficient justification in view of these Madhyamaka critiques. These issues become very complicated very quickly.



diminishment. That is, while the cessation of suffering might be an internal *objective* of various attitudes, it does not seem to be a state of affairs that is actually generated as a result of following the Buddhist path. If this is right, the constitutive analysis might seem to be disconnected from, and thus inconsistent with, this central Buddhist idea, the fact of which may give reason to prefer the instrumental analysis.

There are at least two approaches available to the defender of the constitutive analysis of the Buddhist path in response to this challenge. First, compatible with this analysis is the idea that increased perfection in attitudes is co-extensive with an actual decrease in suffering. The cessation of suffering need not be conceived as a separate and distinct product of the modes of behaviour constitutive of these attitudes but might be, itself, constitutive of a life oriented by these attitudes. It is arguable, for instance, that a life lived in ways that are compassionate, loving, empathetic, and equanimous is *pleasurable* in a distinct sense that is incompatible with suffering.

Even if this is granted, one might still worry that this response only applies to the agent who is living such a life without any direct implications for the cessation of suffering of others. Given the Buddha's emphasis on dependent origination and non-self in his discussion of the second noble truth, it might be argued that an analysis of the third noble truth that did not extend the range of diminished suffering beyond the scope of an individual agent is problematic. The only way for this to be achieved, it could be argued, would be if the constitutive analysis were embedded within the instrumental analysis. That is, one might concede that the personal cessation of suffering might be constitutive of a certain perfected way of living, but nevertheless insist that this way of living must be instrumentally related to the global cessation of suffering which is the proper scope of Buddhist concern. Moreover, if utilitarianism is rightly associated with the instrumental analysis and virtue ethics with the

constitutive, the above could be used as an argument to support an analysis of Buddhist virtue ethics as ultimately embedded within a utilitarian framework.

This is a difficult argument to rebut. However, while not decisive, it might be countered by arguing that the relevant kind of pleasure can transfer to the objects of these attitudes if one conceives of the modes of behaviour that are constituent of these attitudes as purposive events with their own constitutive objectives. Consider, for instance, the simple act of smiling. A smile may result in making someone else smile, where this is a separate and distinct effect. However, the act of smiling also brings about a material change in the world; namely, a particular change in facial expression (i.e. mouth curved upwards, eyes shining, eyelids slightly narrowed). This material change is not a separate and distinct effect of smiling but is internal to it to the extent that the act of smiling would not count as the act of smiling unless this particular change in facial expression occurred.<sup>23</sup> The external effect of causing someone else to smile is dissociable from the act of smiling, but the particular change in facial expression not. Now consider a more complex action that one might categorize as manifesting compassion, such as comforting a crying friend with a warm embrace. Some would argue that the compassionate action consists in the *attempt* to alleviate suffering; i.e. what one is trying to achieve, irrespective of whether one succeeds. On this analysis, one counts as comforting one's friend irrespective of whether one's friend is actually comforted. It might alternatively be argued, however, that the friend *being comforted* and thus no longer suffering in the relevant respect marks the point of completion of the action of 'comforting one's friend'. As such, the friend being comforted is constitutive or internal to the action itself. If this is plausible, then bringing about a material change in the object of one's compassion may be

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly, dancing would not count as dancing unless there was some kind of movement in a body, which is a material change in the world.

constitutive of a behavioural manifestation of this attitude rather than a separate and distinct effect of having acted compassionately. And, if this is plausible, then bringing about the cessation of suffering in the objects of one's immeasurable attitudes might be considered constitutive of the behavioural expression of those attitudes rather than a separate and distinct causal effect.

This solution has some rather strong implications. In particular, it would seem that the nature of an action might be indeterminate until it reaches its point of completion. This may be neither apparent nor an issue for actions that have a short temporal duration, such as smiling and comforting friends. In such case, the material change in the world occurs at the time of, or shortly after, the initiation of the action and thus the action is complete almost as soon as it is begun.<sup>24</sup> If the object of compassion is the alleviation of suffering of *all* sentient beings, however, it would seem to follow that an action aimed at this objective would not reach its point of completion and thus not come to be until all suffering has been alleviated. This seems unintuitive. The concern might be alleviated, however, if this complex action is identified as a temporally extended *mode of living* analysable into more discrete action parts with their own constitutive objectives. Hence, while the mode of living that manifests *mahakarunā* (i.e. great compassion oriented towards the alleviation of suffering of all sentient beings), may not be properly instantiated until the point at which all suffering is alleviated, this temporally extended mode of living might nevertheless be analysed into more discrete and relatively more quickly completable action parts, one of which may consist in comforting a crying friend with a warm embrace.

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<sup>24</sup> The idea of an action reaching its point of completion by achieving its objective need not be identified with a stopping point. The act of 'leisurely strolling' might be said to achieve its objective at the very point at which it is begun, where this fact does not mark its stopping point. Similarly, with the act of smiling; one does not necessarily cease smiling at the point at which one's face changes its demeanor in the relevant way.

Clearly the story of how the constitutive analysis is consistent with the Four Noble Truths is more complicated than the one that provided for the instrumental analysis. But complicated does not mean false or unjustified. If coherent, then there is reason to think that the constitutive analysis can satisfy (1) for counting as a plausible analysis of Buddhist ethical thought.

### **Comparative assessment: textual analysis**

I shall close by briefly considering whether our two meta-ethical analyses might be consistent with *some* canonical Buddhist texts concerned with ethical conduct and thus whether they can satisfy (3).

Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA) is a touchstone for recent reconstructions of Buddhist ethical thought as a normative theory. Śāntideva is a Madhyamaka Buddhist thinker in the Mahāyāna tradition and this text is thought to best exemplify Mahāyāna values. Central to this tradition is the notion of a bodhisattva and an interpretation of the Eightfold Path as a *bodhisattva* path. A bodhisattva, according to this tradition, is one who has resolved to remain in the realm of suffering (*saṃsāra*) to help liberate all sentient beings from suffering.

It might seem that certain passages in BCA are best read as suggesting a constitutive analysis of the bodhisattva path. A central theme of this text is the cultivation of an Awakened Mind (*bodhicitta*), which is achieved by completing two stages in mental development. The first stage is called 'aspirational bodhicitta' (*praṇidhicitta*, 1.15), which consists of the resolution to become a bodhisattva for the sake of releasing all sentient beings from suffering. Śāntideva describes the person with this attitude as being like one who "desires to go" (1.16) but is not yet going; like one who has resolved to live compassionately but does not yet express compassion in

their conduct. By contrast, the person “who is going” and thus actually expresses compassion in their conduct is identified as ‘engaging bodhicitta’ (*prasthānacitta*, 1.15). Śāntideva characterises this second stage of bodhicitta as a superior level of moral development (1.17). While not entirely clear in the text, the transition from aspirational to engaging bodhicitta arguably involves transforming the initial resolution (*to be* compassionate; *to live* compassionately) into the intentional (dispositional and thus behavioural) attitude *of* compassion (*karuṇā*) and eventually great compassion (*mahakarūṇā*) supported by one’s gradual attainment of right understanding and reinforced by ever-deepening meditative practices. The goal of the bodhisattva path may thus seem to be internal to the practices and attitudes that constitute such a way of living in the sense that it seems to mark their point of perfection.

Further support for this constitutive analysis of BCA might be found in Śāntideva’s response to the question: “If the perfection of generosity consists in making the universe free from poverty, how can previous Protectors have acquired it, when the world is still poor, even today?” (5.9) Answer: “...the perfection is the mental attitude itself” (5.10) It is also reinforced by Śāntideva’s reflections on the limitations of individual agency. “Where is there hide to cover the whole world? The wide world can be covered with hide enough for a pair of shoes alone” (5.13); “...since I cannot control external events, I will control my mind.” (5.14) *Bodhicitta*, on this analysis, does not cause one to become a bodhisattva. *Perfected bodhicitta* (i.e. the fully Awakened Mind) is characteristic of the perfected mode of living that is conveniently designated as that of a ‘bodhisattva’.

Despite this textual evidence for a constitutive analysis of the bodhisattva path, BCA also provides textual support for the view that the evaluative status of the

‘bodhisattva way’ is ultimately justified in instrumental relation to the cessation of suffering thereby caused. This is implied by Śāntideva’s remark that “The greatness of the intent comes not from itself but rather from its effect, and so the greatness is equal” (5.14). Śāntideva also suggests that we can overlook a moral code at the time of giving (5.42), where this seems to imply that the grounds for evaluative status might be *external* to (rather than constitutive of) the perfection of generosity, which better fits an instrumental analysis. Finally, his argument for altruism in Chapter 8, based on the non-existence of a permanent self, is perhaps most intuitively read in instrumental terms. He writes:

“The continuum of consciousness, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will the suffering belong? Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this? If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone” (8.101-103).<sup>25</sup>

Much contemporary discussion about the nature of Buddhist ethics focuses on negotiating and attempting to systematise Śāntideva various remarks. Some of these tensions might be construed as orienting around the issue of whether Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* presupposes an instrumental or constitutive analysis of the bodhisattva path. However these particular interpretive issues are resolved, they need not be taken to decisively settle which analysis of the nature of a Buddhist path is the best reconstruction of *Buddhist* thought on ethical matters. Matters appear quite different if we take a different Buddhist text as our point of departure.

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<sup>25</sup> There is much controversy about how these verses are best analysed. For a detailed discussion of the relevant issues, see Cowherds (2015) and Finnigan (2017).

Consider, for instance, the less studied and much more esoteric writings of the Japanese Zen Buddhist, Dōgen.<sup>26</sup> When training as a Tendai monk, Dōgen became puzzled about the doctrine of ‘original enlightenment’ (本覺 *hongaku*). According to this Tendai doctrine, all sentient beings have buddha-nature, where this is understood as the view that all sentient beings are already and primordially enlightened. This idea is derived from the *Tathāgatagarbha* tradition of Buddhist thought rather than the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition that informs the Madhyamaka of Śāntideva. If one were to accept this Tendai idea of buddha-nature, Dōgen puzzled, what is the point of following a Buddhist path aimed at achieving enlightenment given that the relevant causal effect appears to have been already achieved?<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the very attempt to achieve that which is already possessed would seem to be counter-productive given that it may actually diminish or lead us away from our primordial buddha-nature. These reflections did not lead Dōgen to reject Buddhist practice, however. Rather, they inspired the idea that enlightenment is *not* a transcendental state that lies beyond ordinary life and is caused by following a Buddhist path. Rather, it manifests itself *in* everyday living. “When you find your place where you are, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point. When you find your way at this moment, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point.” (Translation from Tanahashi (1985) p. 72.) Dōgen might be reasonably understood as rejecting the instrumental analysis of the Buddhist path in favour of a constitutive analysis. He does not deny that enlightenment is something to be achieved. Rather, this achievement is conceived as an actualization that occurs in one’s ordinary mode of living and not as a causal effect of having lived a certain kind of life. “In your study of flowing, if you imagine the

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<sup>26</sup> I owe the following analysis of Dōgen to Koji Tanaka.

<sup>27</sup> “Both exoteric and esoteric teachings explain that a person in essence has true dharma nature and is originally a body of “Buddha nature.” If so, why do all buddhas in the past, present, and future arouse the wish for and seek enlightenment?” (Translated and quoted in Tanahashi (1985) p. 4 (Tanahashi, Kazuaki (ed.) (1985) *Moon in a Dewdrop*, Farrar: North Point Press.))

objective to be outside yourself and that you flow and move through hundreds and thousands of worlds, for hundreds, thousands, and myriads of eons, you have not devotedly studied the buddha way.” (p. 80)

Clearly much more would need to be said to *establish* that Śāntideva and Dōgen actually presupposed one or other of the above analyses of the Buddhist path. Nevertheless, from this brief reflection it seems clear that the instrumental and constitutive analyses of the Buddhist path could each be rendered systematically consistent with some canonical Buddhist texts concerned with ethical conduct. This is not to say that both *are* equally legitimate. Nor is it to pass judgment on the respective legitimacy of a Madhyamaka Buddhist conception of ethical matters, inspired by the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition, over Zen Buddhist conceptions, inspired by the *Tathāgatagarbha*. It does suggest, however, that adjudicating between these two analyses by reference to Buddhist canonical texts may well depend on how one negotiates the philosophical and cultural issues that differentiates Buddhist traditions. It also shows the dangers of unduly focusing on a limited set of examples. Even if compelling arguments could be provided to show that (e.g.) Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is most compelling read in terms of one or the other of the above analyses of the Buddhist path, further argument is required to justify why one should prefer Śāntideva’s analysis over that of (e.g.) Dōgen. These issues cannot be readily resolved by the simple assumption of the Buddha’s teachings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary philosophers engaged in the project of explaining the nature of Buddhist ethics as a normative ethical theory often assume that there is a single and



unified ‘spirit’ of Buddhist thought that ultimately determines what matters with respect to the application, flexibility, and potential revision of rules of ethical conduct. This common core ‘spirit’ of Buddhist ethics is assumed to be grounded in the relation between ethical conduct and the goal of the Eightfold Path as characterized by the Four Noble Truths.

In this paper I have demonstrated that there are (at least) two distinct ways of analysing the nature of a path relative to a goal, where these analyses afford two distinct ways of understanding the nature of a Buddhist path. I have also provided reasons for thinking that both can be rendered plausible in terms that are systematically consistent with the Buddha’s teaching of the Four Noble Truths and canonical Buddhist texts concerned with ethical practice. This is not to say that, in the final analysis, both analyses of the nature of a Buddhist path and thus that all rational reconstructions grounded on their bases are equally legitimate. There may well be a correct position on these issues. Nevertheless, I have established that the tensions between these competing rational reconstructions are sufficiently complex to resist an easy resolution into a singular and homogeneous position on the nature of Buddhist ethics.

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