Buddhist Ethics Is Itself and Not Another Thing

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How Can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”¹

In recent scholarship, an ongoing debate about Buddhist ethics has been taking place. On one side, some adhere to the position that Buddhist ethics resembles consequentialism. One noteworthy figure, Charles Goodman, has written on this subject at length in a book titled The Consequences of Compassion. Others hold that Buddhist ethics is akin to Aristotelean virtue ethics. Damien Keown is a key proponent of this view, which he argues in a work titled The Nature of Buddhist Ethics. Both of these views attempt to offer the best interpretation of Buddhist ethics so that it can better understood and analyzed.

In the pages that follow, I will argue for two claims: First, both Goodman and Keown make crucial errors in their methodology by failing to lay out the best set of necessary conditions for virtue ethics and consequentialism. I aim to shed light on this methodological error and to offer a basis of comparison that is more precise. Having

recalibrated the starting point of this debate by setting out the necessary conditions virtue ethics and consequentialism, I develop my second main claim—viz., that a third, distinct approach to interpreting Buddhist ethics is available.

In chapter one, I set out the necessary conditions that a theory must satisfy in order to be a version of virtue ethics or consequentialism. Next, I analyze Goodman’s view and argue that his interpretation fails because the account of Buddhist ethics he offers does not account for the fact that Buddhist ethics places value on more than just the consequences of one’s actions. After completing this, I turn to Keown’s view. In analyzing his reading of Buddhist ethics, I argue that the virtue ethics approach fails because it does not meet what I will call the Constitutivity Condition. According to the Constitutivity Condition, if the end laid out by a theory is not constituted by the means used to achieve that end, then that theory cannot be considered virtue ethics.

In order to show that Buddhist ethics does not meet the Constitutivity Condition, I devote chapter two to a detailed exegesis of the Eightfold Path. From this, I first conclude that Buddhist ethics is an interwoven and inseparable part of the Eightfold Path and second, that whatever the relationship is between the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa is, the same relationship will obtain between Buddhist ethics and Nirvāṇa. This is important because in order to discover whether or not Buddhist ethics resemble virtue ethics depends upon the relationship between the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa.

Finally, in chapter three, I argue that neither of these Western theories offers a full interpretation of Buddhist ethics and that we should start thinking about this theory not as
an analogue to a Western theory but as its own unique system. Furthermore, I argue that the private and esoteric nature of Nirvāṇa prevents us from being able to draw the kinds of conclusions that Keown and Goodman put forward. Both consequentialism and virtue ethics specify the relationship relationship between the ends and the means. In consequentialism, the relationship is not constitutive and in virtue ethics the relationship is constitutive. Because the relationship between the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa is unknowable for those who have not yet achieved enlightenment, we must remain agnostic in our interpretations of Buddhist ethics.

Suppose that my conclusions regarding Buddhist ethics are correct. What have we gained? While I certainly think that the comparative philosophy being done on this topic is a useful way for teasing out the differences and similarities between theories, there is always a lurking danger: it is tempting to think that Buddhist ethics must resemble a version of virtue ethics or consequentialism because this would make understanding it much easier. However, I hold that it is more probable that Buddhist ethics cannot be reduced into a Western ethical theory. What we gain from my conclusion is knowledge about the limits of our understanding. For instance, if it is true that Buddhist ethics is not consequentialist, it will do us no good to analyze a moral situation, from the standpoint of Buddhist ethics, in a consequentialist manner; the same goes for virtue ethics. If we can agree that the goal of understanding Buddhist ethics is not only to determine whether or not it looks like another ethical theory, but also to comprehend it enough so that we can judge whether or not it is a useful theory in its own right, then I believe the following
work can take us one step closer to this goal. Understanding what a theory is *not* is half the battle of understanding what a theory *is*. 


§1.1 A Universal Buddhism

Before undertaking an in depth analysis of the both Goodman’s and Known’s work, as well as the Noble Eightfold Path, a path which is accepted by many Buddhist schools of thought, I will first address a problem which lurks in the background. The problem is this: does it make sense to say that there is something common between Buddhist ethics in general such that it would further make sense to say that Buddhist ethics is most like x or is it more appropriate to say that certain schools of Buddhist ethics are like x and other schools resemble y.

In Michael Barnhart’s article “Theory and Comparison in the Discussion of Buddhist Ethics,” he discusses Buddhist ethics and gives an attempt at answering three questions:

1. What do we mean by Buddhism, and who represents Buddhist ethics?
2. Do Western ethical theories illuminate the Buddhist traditions and thinkers as well as their proponents argue?
3. Is there anything that we learn about what Buddhist ethics is from the ways in
Barnhart points out that different scholars approach Buddhism from different angles. For instance, he thinks of Damien Keown as someone who takes the “fundamentalist” approach and prefers looking at the Theravāda tradition as representative of Buddhism proper. That said, other approaches are available; Charles Goodman, as we will see, looks frequently to Śāntideva and the Mahāyāna tradition in order to make sense of Buddhist ethics. Barnhart does not explicitly disagree with any of these approaches, but he does acknowledge that because Buddhism is such a vast and variegated tradition, coming up with good interpretations and trying to make comparisons between Buddhist ethics and Western ethics is difficult.

Barnhart’s own approach is to look at similarities across Buddhist traditions, things that seem to be “universally Buddhist,” and use those in order to draw any conclusions one may seek. While different Buddhist traditions may disagree on many issues, Barnhart says that all “unite in rejecting the ātman or self that they rightly or wrongly associate with all forms of Hinduism on the one hand or materialistic living on the other.” Furthermore, Barnhart accepts that all Buddhist’s subscribe to the legitimacy of the Four Noble Truths. To what degree they focus on each one and how they interpret them may be different depending on the tradition, but at the very least all agree that the

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Four Noble Truths are important on the path towards the liberation of suffering.

Barnhart’s approach, which differs from Keown’s and Goodman’s, is to view Buddhism as one thing, despite the many differences that occur. He sides with Peter Harvey, who thinks that the ethics of Buddhism all head off in “related but different directions that depend on the exact doctrinal placed by different types of Buddhism on the generic fundamentals.”4 While I will not argue for this approach directly, it is one that I will be adopting, at least to some degree. When necessary, I will also make direct references to particular traditions, however I am taking Barnhart’s approach and assuming that the Four Noble Truths are one thing that is common to the different forms of Buddhism.

Throughout this work I will also be referring to two different ethical theories, viz. consequentialism and virtue ethics. For the sake of precision, I would like to first offer a definition of these concepts so that it is clear as to what I mean when I use them. I do not deem it necessary to explicate these two theories to the point of exhaustion nor to highlight the many problems or objections to each. Rather, I aim at giving the necessary conditions that any theory would need to meet in order to be considered one or the other. Having accomplished this, we will then be able to analyze Buddhist ethics as it functions within the Noble Eightfold Path and determine whether or not it meets either of the conditions that I lay out in this chapter. If Buddhist ethics can satisfy the necessary

conditions for either consequentialism or virtue ethics, we will be one step closer to understanding what kind of ethical theory Buddhism offers.

§1.2 Consequentialism

Consequentialism is a moral theory according to which the consequences of one’s actions are the only thing that should be considered when making moral evaluations. To be clear, when determining whether a theory is consequentialist, it is not important to determine what the consequences are and for whom they should be sought, but only whether or not value is placed solely on the consequences.

Brink (2006) says that: “[c]onsequentialism takes the good to be primary and identifies right action as action that promotes value.”7 To understand this lets take, for example, hedonism, which offers a conception of the good on which what is good is maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. For the hedonist consequentialist, a right action is any action that promotes pleasure and minimizes pain. On this view, one and the same action—considered apart from its consequences—can be either good or bad. If the killing of an innocent life yields a greater overall amount of beneficial consequences, then the consequentialist is committed to saying that the action was good. If the

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5 Good could mean acting in such a way that causes the most amount of pleasure or acting in a way that causes the most amount of cats to exist.

6 One could aim at acting in such a way that provides the most amount of pleasure for simply themselves, or for all humans, or for all living beings.

opposite consequence occurs and everyone is worse off because of it, then the action was bad.

Sinnott-Armstrong (1992) argues that “[a] moral reason to do an act is consequential if and only if the reason depends only on the consequences of either doing the act or not doing the act.”\(^8\) He offers a similar definition in Sinnott-Armstrong (2014) saying that, “Any consequentialist theory must accept the claim that I labeled ‘consequentialism’, namely, that certain normative properties depend only on consequences. If that claim is dropped, the theory ceases to be consequentialist.”\(^9\) One way a theory would forfeit the consequentialist label is if it considered things like intentions in its moral evaluation. For instance, if I intended to help my roommate move his brand new TV into his room safely, but I drop my end of the TV causing it to break, the consequentialist will say that my action was a bad one. If one wishes to point towards my intentions to help my roommate in the evaluation and argue that my good intentions made my action good, then the evaluation is no longer being made on a strictly consequentialist basis.\(^10\) As Sinnott-Armstrong asserts that, “[a]ll other moral reasons are


\(^10\) One kind of consequentialist might argue that the promotion of good intentions are a part of the best kinds of consequences. However, this will not factor into my argument against Goodman as his analysis tries to characterize Buddhist ethics as consequentialist because it aims at the cessation of suffering and promotion of happiness, and leaves intentions out entirely.
non-consequential. Thus, a moral reason to do an act is non-consequential if and only if the reason depends even partly on some property that the act has independently of its consequences.”

Notably, consequentialism is not intended to be a decision procedure. To use this theory as a decision procedure would be both highly impractical and, given our actual information-processing capacities, largely impossible. One could certainly make a rough estimation as to the consequences of one’s actions, but the sheer number of factors that go into determining the consequences of one’s actions is incalculable. Sinnott-Armstrong asserts that even Bentham and Mill, two of the founders of utilitarianism, thought that people should rely on their moral intuitions instead of their theory of utility, because one is likely to either (a) make a miscalculation and act on that or (b) be unable to make the calculation at all because it is simply impossible to determine the outcome of an action and how it effects everyone involved. Bentham himself stated the following concerning one form of consequentialism, viz. utilitarianism: “It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every

Because treating a consequentialist theory like utilitarianism as a decision procedure would be impractical, consequentialism is primarily an backwards-looking evaluative moral theory.

§1.3 Virtue Ethics

Historically, virtue ethics is associated with Aristotle. He begins his work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, by discussing what a complete end is. Virtue ethics is thus immediately cast in teleological terms. Aristotle held that there are many kinds of ends;\(^1^3\) scientific ends, artistic ends, political ends, etc. Each of these ends is incomplete, however, for each can be sought for another end. This process of seeking one end for another, without ever seeking something for its own sake, is what makes an end incomplete. Aristotle suggests that there is a complete end, one which is sought for itself and no other end. This end is The Good, or as Aristotle says “The best good.”\(^1^4\) This best good turns out to be human happiness because, as Aristotle says, “we always choose it because of itself, never because of something else.”\(^1^5\) Furthermore, Aristotle holds that we always choose everything else for the sake of happiness. However, knowing that


\(^1^5\) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097B 5.
happiness is the best good is just the first step one must take towards living a good life as we will need to know what exactly happiness is.

Aristotle next determines that human happiness is defined by the function of a human being, which he thinks is an “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason.” He goes on to amend this claim, because for a thing to function well it must display the appropriate traits which will allow it to do so—its virtues. Aristotle believes the function of a human to be “[the] activity of the soul in accord with virtue.” For him, it is the perfection of virtues that will make a person happy and thus one should strive to achieve this end.

Annas (2006) defines a virtue as “a disposition to act for reasons, and so a disposition that is exercised through the agent’s practical reasoning; it is built up by making choices and exercised in the making of further choices.” Similarly, Hursthouse (2013) calls a virtue “a character trait …, a disposition which is well entrenched in its possessor.” To have a disposition to act in a certain way, to act in accordance with a particular character trait, is more than just displaying that trait once or even habitually. One must have the right kind of emotions and understanding when one acts in accordance


with the character trait. If honesty is a virtue, simply always telling the truth from habit does not make someone virtuous; one must tell the truth because one recognizes that telling the truth is inherently good. Furthermore, someone who is fully virtuous is inclined to act that way without a struggle against contrary desires, whereas one who struggles to act in accordance with virtues and must use one's will to follow through with the virtuous act are continent and less than perfectly virtuous.\(^{20}\) A perfectly virtuous person is rare, if possible at all, and the virtues one can possess occur on a sliding scale. One can be honest in degrees and do something to improve their disposition to act honestly. What is clear however, is that in order to live a good life according to the virtue ethicist, one must possess virtues.

A crucial part to becoming virtuous, Hursthouse explains, is possessing *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Annas also points out that practical wisdom is crucial: “The exercise of the agent’s practical reasoning is thus essential to the way a virtue is both built up and exercised.”\(^{21}\) According to Annas, there are two different aspects to practical wisdom, an affective component and an intellectual one. The affective element requires that one has the right kind of attitude towards one’s own actions. If one acts honestly, but this acting simultaneously causes one great frustration, then one lacks the qualities of someone who is fully virtuous. Furthermore, the intellectual component requires that one understand why they are acting the way they are. One could be honest and also enjoy being honest,

\(^{20}\) Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics.”

\(^{21}\) Annas, “Virtue Ethics,” 516.
but lack the right understanding and not understand why they should act this way and also feel this way about acting honestly. Annas claims that “Ideally, then, the learner will begin to reflect for himself on what he has accepted, will detect and deal with inconsistencies, and will try to make his judgments and practice coherent in terms of a wider understanding which enables him to unify, explain and justify the particular decisions he makes.” Phronesis is important because virtues need to be applied with discretion. Consider, again, the virtue of honesty. It is possible to be too honest, or honest in the wrong situation. To cite a common example, imagine that you are hiding a Jewish family in your attic during World War II. If Nazi officers knock on your door and ask if you are hiding anybody, it would be better to lie if your goal is to save the lives of innocent people, something that seems obviously good. Knowing when to tell the truth is just as important as being disposed to tell the truth without having to use one’s will. In the above scenario, blindly telling the truth, without phronesis, would lead to a morally reprehensible situation. Hursthouse defines practical wisdom as “the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor, unlike the nice adolescents, to [act well or “do the right thing”], in any given situation.” It seems, then, that at least prima facia phronesis is a necessary part of virtue ethics.

The last concept that must be addressed in determining what counts as virtue ethics is eudaimonia. Eudaimonia means happiness or flourishing. Hursthouse notes that

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22 Annas, “Virtue Ethics, 517.

23 Hursthouse, “Virtue ethics.”
these translations are often “moralized, or ‘value-laden,’”24 and what it means to flourish or be happy becomes the subject of debate. Annas describes eudaimonia, which is the final end for Aristotle, as meeting the “formal constraint of being complete—all my actions are done for its sake, while I do not seek it for the sake of anything further.”25 The pursuit of virtues and the perfection of phronesis are sought for their own sake because they are seen as constituting eudaimonia. Annas points out that living a life of virtue and trying to flourish are not egoistic, as some may claim. Annas argues that a moral agent “aims at her own flourishing and not mine just in the sense that she is living her life and not mine. There is no implication that she is furthering her own interests at the expense of mine.”26 What’s more, the end goal of virtue ethics, viz. eudaimonia, has a particular relationship to the virtues which must be understood. Hursthouse writes:

All usual versions of virtue ethics agree that living a life in accordance with virtue is necessary for eudaimonia. This supreme good is not conceived of as an independently defined state or life (made up of, say, a list of non-moral goods that does not include virtuous activity) which possession and exercise of the virtues might be thought to promote. It is, within virtue ethics, already conceived of as something of which virtue is at least partially constitutive.27

In other words, utilizing phronesis and obtaining certain virtues is not merely a means to reaching eudaimonia—it is constitutive of eudaimonia. One must have these qualities if

24 Hursthouse, “Virtue ethics.”


27 Hursthouse, “Virtue ethics.”
one is to live a life of flourishing. Importantly, when trying to determine what kind of theory Buddhist ethics is, close attention must be paid to the means used to achieve the specific end given by the Buddhist theory. If the end sought in Buddhism, viz. Nirvāṇa, can be achieved by more than one kind of means, i.e. not only the Noble Eightfold path, then the theory would not be a kind of virtue ethics, as it would fail to satisfy what I will hereafter refer to as the Constitutivity Condition. If the end sought in Buddhism cannot be achieved by any other means than the Eightfold path, then it would meet the Constitutivity Condition.

Virtue ethics and consequentialism can be distinguished along one more dimension. Let us ask: what is each theory’s primary focal question? Virtue ethics takes the question of how one should live one’s life as primary and thus the notion of right action is defined in terms of the answer to this question. David Copp, in the introduction to The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory characterizes the focal questions of virtue ethics in the following passage:

Moral theory has been dominated by the debate about right action that I have been discussing, and many philosophers regret this. Virtue theory holds that the most fundamental matter of moral concern is the character of a virtuous person. The ethics of care holds that the most fundamental matter of moral concern is caring relationships. Both approaches aspire to turn normative theory away from a preoccupation with right action and toward an assessment of the broader issues of how to live and what kind of person to be.28

Right action, according to virtue ethics is any action that promotes one’s own *phronesis* and virtue. This goal will of course put some limitations on an agent, depending on what they consider to be relevant and important virtues. It also makes one’s own individual flourishing primary. Consequentialism, on the other hand, is a theory that, according to Brink, “makes the good explanatorily primary, explaining other moral notions, such as duty or virtue, in terms of promoting value.” 29 Consequentialism takes right action to be that which promotes the good, to the extent of sacrificing one’s own good for the sake of others. Virtue ethics is a theory of how one should live one’s life and does not offer principles on how to act in specific scenarios. Rather, it provides a guide for how to live so as to achieve a happy life. Annas notes that “The answer that virtue ethics offers to the question what is the right thing to do denies that there is any such thing as a ‘theory of right action’ in this abstract sense. In explaining what is the right thing to do, virtue ethics appeals to the idea of what would be done by the virtuous person.” 30 The difference in the scope of the question being answered by both virtue ethics and consequentialism may offer some help when determining what kind of theory Buddhist ethics is. In particular if we find that Buddhist ethics takes right action to be primary, then we should, to that extent, be inclined to class it alongside consequentialism. By contrast, if we find that it takes living a good life as primary, then we should, to that extent, recognize its affinity with virtue ethics. In chapter three, I will argue that Buddhist ethics is, on this measure,

29 Brink, “Some Forms and Limits of Consequentialism,” 399.

closer to virtue ethics, on account of it taking living a good life as primary. However, Buddhist ethics fails to satisfy the Constitutivity Condition, which will complicate the interpretation.

Having now set out the conception of virtue ethics and consequentialism that I shall be working with in the remainder of this discussion, I turn now to an analysis of Charles Goodman’s view that Buddhist ethics should be considered a version of consequentialism. My goal will be to show that Goodman’s interpretation of Buddhism as consequentialism is not based in the necessary conditions required for a consequentialist reduction.

§1.4 Goodman on Consequentialism and Buddhism

In chapter two of his book, *Consequences of Compassion*, Goodman sets out to provide the basic groundwork for Western ethical theories, so that a proper dialogue can begin to take place between Western scholarship and Buddhist scholarship. While I have already said what I take to be the necessary features of consequentialism, I will provide a brief summary of Goodman’s own views on the kind of consequentialism he considers most fruitful for comparison. Goodman focuses on theories of consequentialism that are both universalist, taking into account all sentient beings, and welfarist, holding that the welfare or goodness of the lives of the sentient beings is both intrinsically good and something to be promoted. He first directs our attention to one form of consequentialism, known as rule consequentialism, which aims at “ascertaining the set of rules that, if
everyone followed them, would produce the best overall consequences.”31 Doing so preserves the good that consequentialism aims at obtaining, viz., promoting the welfare of the greatest number of people. Rule consequentialism sidesteps placing the value directly on the consequences of an action by placing the emphasis on rules that, if everyone follows them, would likely produce the best outcome, thus preserving the overall goal of consequentialism.

Goodman also addresses Aristotle's virtue ethics which he says is an “agent-relative theory, in that it gives different aims to different agents. Such a view gives each agent the aim of that agent’s own flourishing, where the flourishing of each agent involves the flourishing of the small group of people that the agent cares about.”32 This is a key difference between virtue ethics and consequentialism—one that leads Goodman to conclude that Buddhist ethics is more properly a consequentialist theory. Consequentialism is agent-neutral and takes everyone’s happiness to be equally important. At the end of chapter two, Goodman draws the following conclusion:

Once we turn to the interpretation of Buddhist ethics, these differences can be used as tests. If we want to determine which kind of theory can most appropriately be attributed to some school of Buddhist philosophers, it makes sense to look for passages that respond to the issues I have just raised. In this way, we can determine whether any particular form of Buddhist ethics embodies a form of consequentialism or a version of virtue ethics. We can then try to establish


which specific theory within these broad families of view it makes most sense to attribute to the tradition we are examining.\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Consequences}, 48.}

Already, it should be noted that I disagree about the difference between virtue ethics and consequentialism. One reason for thinking that Goodman’s distinction here is wrong is this: given the right set of virtues, one could argue that virtue ethics can at least appear to be agent neutral, where the agents flourishing is actually defined in such a way that includes developing a virtue that requires one to be agent neutral.

In chapter three, Goodman argues that Theravada Ethics is much more akin to consequentialism, specifically rule-consequentialism, than to virtue ethics. He bases his argument, in part, on passages from the Pâli cannon, such as the following:

\begin{quote}
When you reflect, if you know: “This action that I wish to do with my body would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results,” then you definitely should not do suchlike an action with the body.…\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Consequences}, 50.}
\end{quote}

Unlike the virtue ethicists, who focus less on providing criteria of right action and more on providing instructions for how one should live one’s life, Goodman thinks that this passage clearly defines the right in terms of the good by saying those actions that cause others harm are not to be done. For this reason, Goodman holds that specifically the Theravāda tradition is consequentialist. He insists that “Central to the spiritual practice of the Theravāda is the cultivation of four qualities known as the Four Divine Abidings….”

\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Consequences}, 48.}
(brahma-vihāra); these are lovingkindness (metta), compassion (karuNā), sympathetic joy (pamudita), and equanimity (upekkhā).”

Interestingly, he takes the characterization of each of these qualities as a good reason for believing that, again, the Theravāda tradition is consequentialist and not a kind of virtue ethics. These qualities are, for Goodman, imbued with “materials to articulate a form of consequentialism.”

He reasons that qualities like lovingkindness and compassion are good to develop, not because they are good in themselves, but because they will create a person whose actions will result in the best consequences. He further notes that the flourishing of the agent himself is one of the most central parts of Aristotle’s virtue ethics and:

> While this flourishing does depend, in part, on the welfare of a small group of other people, it does not involve that of other, unrelated sentient beings. Now there is a strong similarity between this Aristotelian interpretation and the crude conception of early Buddhist ethics found in some Mahāyāna texts: that the Śrāvakas practice compassion and moral restraint toward others, but solely in order to achieve Nirvāṇa for themselves. Ironically, then, to adopt Keown’s Aristotelian interpretation of Theravāda ethics is to accept the claim that the Saints are selfish, a false accusation that we have refuted.

I take Goodman’s reading of virtue ethics in this passage as an indication that his focus of inquiry is not pointed in the right direction. One of his criticisms of interpreting Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics is that it would entail that Buddhist saints are selfish, something which he takes to be obviously not the case. But we can avoid this consequence by

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35 Goodman, *Consequences*, 52.

36 Goodman, *Consequences*, 52.

37 Goodman, *Consequences*, 58.
characterizing the virtues in a way that blocks this entailment. Take as a concrete example the virtue of selflessness or service. Goodman might claim that to develop selflessness for one’s own Nirvāṇa is still a form of selfishness. But this would be incorrect, because in reaching Nirvāṇa one makes oneself optimally efficient in helping others do the same. What will tell us most about whether Buddhist ethics is more like virtue ethics or consequentialism is not the different formulations of one or the other, but rather the necessary conditions which I set out in §1.2 and §1.3. The reason I am so insistent on the particular necessary conditions I have set is that both virtue ethics and consequentialism have many formulations. Some formulations of virtue ethics can accommodate for the kinds of concerns that Goodman has (e.g. for selfishness) and furthermore some formulations of consequentialism can be hard to distinguish from virtue ethics. For instance, there is a form of consequentialism called objective-list consequentialism. This version of consequentialism is essentially virtue ethics with a consequentialist spin. Goodman (2008) describes this version of consequentialism, saying that “[Objective-list consequentialism holds that there] is a list of features of your life that are intrinsically good or intrinsically bad.” 38 One should develop the right kinds of virtues so that they always act in a way to promote the best consequences for everyone. That such variations exists within the theoretical structure of consequentialism leads to me conclude that Goodman’s approach is flawed precisely in its failure to start with necessary conditions.

of virtue ethics and consequentialism that make the distinction between the two theories clear.

Goodman notes that one of the main differences between the universalist consequentialist and the virtue ethicist is that for the consequentialist, an action that produces good outcomes yet also prevents the agent from flourishing can still be a good action. This feature certainly aligns with Buddhist ethics, especially when considering the Mahāyāna tradition and the vows of the bodhisattva. When one takes the vows of a bodhisattva, one agrees to help all beings attain enlightenment at whatever personal cost. The bodhisattva would prefer that the worlds sufferings be placed on her shoulders if it meant that all other beings would be free from suffering.

However, one problem in Goodman’s thesis is that when making ethical considerations, the consequences are not the only factor one must consider when using Buddhist evaluative measures, nor are they the most important considerations. A balance must be struck when pursuing the Eightfold Path between ethics (śīla), wisdom (prajna), and concentration (samādhi). The ethical component of Buddhism cannot be separated from the other two components of the eightfold path because each division supports the other. Whereas consequentialism tells us that one should consider only on the consequences of one’s actions when making evaluation, Buddhist thought tells us not only to evaluate our actions by their consequences but also by the intentions of the action (wisdom) and the process by which we make the decision (concentration).
Goodman’s argument gains strength when he introduces his understanding of Mahāyāna ethics in chapter four. He judges that Mahāyāna texts “are full of references to the moral importance of benefiting others. Such texts repeatedly tell us that a bodhisattva should be concerned with the welfare of all beings, and should not succumb to selfish concern for her own welfare.”\(^{39}\) This feature is distinctively consequentialist, Goodman thinks. He further argues because the Mahāyāna view places such an emphasis on impartiality, comparing it to virtue ethics would make it “very different from all Western versions of virtue ethics, since they all embrace agent-relative perspectives.”\(^{40}\) This criticism is relatively weak. Impartiality is not a necessary condition for a theory to be considered consequentialist nor does impartiality preclude a theory from being analogous to virtue ethics. In Christine Swanton’s work *Virtue Ethics*, she addresses this is and says the following:

However, it is less clear that virtue ethics can handle the impartialistic aspects of ethics. Certainly it eschews the idea that a ‘principle’ of impartiality should be at the foundation of ethics (e.g. Peter Singer’s Principle of Equal Consideration of Like Interests). From the perspective of virtue ethics this is quite the wrong way of looking at the matter. Rather, the targets of some virtues (e.g. benevolence) are broadly based; the targets of others such as parental virtue are narrowly based. The profiles of various virtues, then, will shift along axes of various types of partiality and impartiality, and will shift in ways appropriate to the various kinds of items within the fields of the virtues, the relation of the agent to those items, and so on.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{39}\) Goodman, *Consequences*, 80.

\(^{40}\) Goodman, *Consequences*, 81.

On Swanton’s view, virtue ethics can handle impartiality so long as one endorses virtues that both contribute to one’s overall flourishing and require one to practice impartiality. For instance, in her discussion of impartial love, she endorses the view that one can in fact develop a universal love, in which one loves everyone equally, for no particular reason based on the beloved.\footnote{Swanton, \textit{Virtue Ethics}, 121-122.} I take Swanton’s view to be sufficient evidence that impartiality does not limit Buddhist ethics from being considered a kind of virtue ethics.

In chapter five of Goodman’s work, he makes use of Śāntideva as a key figure of his consequentialist analysis of Buddhist ethics. While he references many aspects of Śāntideva’s work which might lead one to believe Śāntideva’s ethics is consequentialist, there is also plenty of evidence to the contrary. For instance, Goodman cites the following passage from Śāntideva:

8. May I avert the pain of hunger and thirst with showers of food and drink. May I become both drink and food in the intermediate aeons of famine.
9. May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings. May I wait upon them with various forms of offering.
10. See, I give up without regret my bodies, my pleasures, and my good acquired in all three times, to accomplish good for every being\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Consequentialism}, 98.}

According to Goodman, this passage is clearly representative of consequentialism. These commitments are focused on mitigating negative consequences for all beings and seem to be focused solely on the consequences that obtain in the world. However, there are other versus which can give us just as much reason to think that this way of life is
really just a complicated and difficult method which is directed towards achieving happiness for one’s self.

For instance, the following passages occur in Śāntideva (1979):

11. Since the limitless mind of the Sole Guide of the World Has upon thorough investigation seen its preciousness, All beings wishing to be free from worldly abodes should firmly take hold of this precious Awakening Mind.44
15. In brief, the Awakening Mind should be understood to be of two types; The mind that aspires to awaken and the mind that ventures to do so.
16. As is understood by the distinction between aspiring to go and (actually) going, so the wise understand in turn the distinction between these two.
17. Although great fruits occur in cyclic existence from the mind that aspires to awaken, an uninterrupted flow of merit does not ensue as it does with the venturing mind.
18. And for those who have perfectly seized this mind, with the thought never to turn away from totally liberating the finite forms of life,
19. From that time hence, even while asleep or unconcerned, a force of merit equal to the sky will perpetually ensue.45

In verse 11, the instruction is that anyone who wishes to become free from suffering should strive to achieve the Awaking Mind, or bodhicitta. In verses 15-19, Śāntideva discusses two kinds of minds, the aspiring mind and the venturing mind. The aspiring mind, one that wishes to become awakened, will receive some though not all of the benefits of awakening (the cessation of suffering being the ultimate goal). The venturing


mind, the mind that actively strives to awaken, receives an “uninterrupted flow of merit.” Only those who have perfectly attained bodhicitta and have truly dedicated their lives to benefiting all other beings will receive the full benefits of awakening. Understood this way, Śāntideva’s ethics sounds more like virtue ethics than consequentialism.

One final note on Śāntideva's ethics and Goodman's understanding of it: On Goodman’s account, consequentialism is a theory that allows for the interference of one’s own flourishing in order to benefit all others. He says that the form of compassion advocated in Theravāda ethics “has a feature which we will come to see as part of the core of Mahāyāna ethics and as a crucial mark of a consequentialist outlook: the connection between the doctrine of no-self and the universal character of compassion.”

By understanding fully the doctrine of the no-self, the idea that there is no permanent, consistent, enduring self, one will be moved to act on behalf of all other beings equally and without discrimination for one’s own wellbeing. However, Śāntideva says that one who has obtained a fully virtuous attitude (the attitude of a Bodhisattva), will not really suffer by taking on the suffering of others, but rather that:

35. if a virtuous attitude should arise (in that regard), Its fruits will multiply far far more greater than that. When Bodhisattvas greatly suffer they generate no negativity, instead their virtues naturally increase

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47 Goodman, Consequences, 53.

With this understanding in mind, the motivation for taking the vows of the Bodhisattva and following Śāntideva’s guidelines seem to stem from a desire to reach a state of flourishing for oneself and not necessarily an impartial disregard for one’s own flourishing in preference for the greater good of others.

My analysis in this section was not intended to support the conclusion that Buddhist ethics is not consequentialist but a kind of virtue ethics. Rather, my aim has been to show that the criteria Goodman has used to make his evaluation does not get at the heart of the matter. He focuses on the Bodhisattva, a being who vows to alleviate all beings’ sufferings above his or her own and one who embodies impartiality to the fullest extent. However, impartiality and sacrificing one’s own wellbeing for all others do not show conclusively that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist. First, impartiality is not off-limits for virtue ethics. Second, while it may seem that a Bodhisattva is sacrificing his or her well-being, in reality they are not because of the particular frame of mind they have; on their view, by liberating all beings they will be able to achieve liberation themselves.

Before moving on to what I take to be a more conclusive way of settling this issue, it will be useful to shed light on Goodman’s primary opponent in the debate. Damien Keown, who argues that Buddhist ethics is properly understood as a virtue ethics, gives an interpretation that directly opposes the one just examined by Goodman.
§1.5 Keown on The Nature of Buddhist Ethics

In the opening chapter of *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Damien Keown writes that his goal is “to enquire into the meaning of sīla and its role in the scheme of the Eightfold Path: in other words, to examine the nature of the relationship between ethics and soteriology in Buddhism.”

He has three main objectives: “(a) to enquire into the meaning and content of sīla; (b) to relate sīla to the overall scheme of human good which culminates in liberation (Nirvāṇa); (c) to put forward a hypothesis concerning the formal characterization of the Buddhist ethical system.”

His approach is concerned with descriptive ethics and metaethics. More specifically, he is inquiring into the relationship between the three divisions of the Eightfold Path, viz., Sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā. He outlines three ways that this relationship can be understood. The first way is linear; each part of the path is prior to the other and one follows the Eightfold Path sequentially. On this view, the proper ethical disposition must be developed before one can move on towards Samādhi (meditation). This, I think, is demonstrably false. One cannot be ethical in the right way without both meditation and insight. One does not have to perfect the other two stages first, but without some understanding and practice in them, the first stage of ethics will be lacking.

The second way the division of the Eightfold Path could be understood is this:

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While ethical values are instrumental to knowledge in the pre-enlightenment condition they are subsequently reinstated in an authentic form in the post-enlightenment state. Now it is the enlightenment experience which marks not the end but the beginning of moral potential by removing the afflictions of ignorance which fatally prejudice authentic moral conduct.\(^{51}\)

Keown notes that the first way and the second way are grouped together because they both put ethics in a position that is subservient to knowledge. The third possibility is that ethics and knowledge are both required and exist in the final goal, together.

Keown first discusses why Buddhism cannot be utilitarian. He notes that Buddhist theories of ethics, unlike utilitarian theories “[do] not define the right independently from the good.”\(^{52}\) In other words, for a utilitarian the only thing that matters are consequences which maximize utility and what is right is whatever promotes those consequences. Keown thinks that, given that the end goal of Buddhism is Nirvāṇa, only actions which have nirvanic qualities can be right actions. Keown writes that “An action is right or wrong from the moment of its inception – its nature is fixed by reference to nirvanic values and it cannot subsequently change its status.”\(^{53}\) A second reason Keown gives for the incompatibility of Buddhist ethics and utilitarianism is that Buddhist ethics considers the motivation of an act as part of its evaluation. He says that “An act is right if it is virtuous, i.e. performed on the basis of Liberality (arāga), Benevolence (adosa), and

\(^{51}\) Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*.

\(^{52}\) Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 177.

\(^{53}\) Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 177.
Understanding (amoha).” Keown further explains that in Buddhist ethics bad actions give rise to bad consequences; a consequentialist holds that actions which give rise to bad consequences are bad. For a Buddhist evaluation, a good action is simply any action that is motivated by states of mind that are rooted in the virtues of wisdom, which are actions rooted in non-greed, non-delusion, and non-aversion (or no-hatred).

Importantly, Keown says that “For utilitarianism, when one series of pleasurable states terminates another should be generated as quickly as possible; for Buddhism this grasping at what is impermanent is the root cause of suffering.” What this amounts to is that Buddhism is not concerned only with pleasurable consequences, it is also concerned with eliminating the root of suffering, which is ignorance of impermanence. Keown argues further that, “For Buddhists, the virtues are of value because they have a telos whereas the transient pleasures or satisfactions sought by utilitarianism do not.” In other words, the virtues of Buddhism, on Keown’s view, are sought for their own sake. Keown concludes by saying that Buddhist ethics “can only be characterized as utilitarian if it is accepted that ethics has no ultimate value, no intrinsic relation to enlightenment, and serves only as temporary insulation from suffering within which intellectual goods can be

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54 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 178.


56 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 182.

57 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 184.
pursued.” This is false on his view and he aims to show this in his discussion of Buddhism and Aristotle.

In the chapter “Buddhism and Aristotle”, Keown argues that Buddhism resembles an Aristotelian virtue ethics because both Aristotle’s ethics and Buddhism’s are teleological. For Buddhism, the \textit{summum bonum} is Nirvāṇa whereas for Aristotle the \textit{summum bonum} is \textit{eudaimonia}. Keown does say that they are not to be seen as “experientially identical” nor should they be seen as having the same “metaphysical or soteriological consequences.” Keown calls \textit{eudaimonia} a second-order end, which he defines as “a kind of umbrella covering a range or cluster of primary or first-order ends.” The first-order ends are anything that both contribute to and conform with the second order end. Keown summarizes Aristotle’s view as this:

\begin{quote}
Human action is goal directed; men pursue many and varied goals, but let us imagine there is one goal which constitutes the final good for man. What will this goal be like? It will not involve the random pursuit of multiple goods (a plurality of first-order ends), nor even one particular good amongst others (a dominant end). Rather it will include a number of good things (yet to be defined) in harmonious combination: this is how we are to understand \textit{eudaimonia} or human flourishing.
\end{quote}

Keown claims that Buddhism’s \textit{summum bonum} is, if it is anything at all, Nirvāṇa. He thinks this because, as he puts it “(a) [Nirvāṇa] is desired for its own sake; (b) everything

\begin{itemize}
\item[58] Keown, \textit{The Nature of Buddhist Ethics}, 184.
\item[59] Keown, \textit{The Nature of Buddhist Ethics}, 195.
\item[60] Keown, \textit{The Nature of Buddhist Ethics}, 196.
\item[61] Keown, \textit{The Nature of Buddhist Ethics}, 199.
\end{itemize}
else that is desired is desired for the sake of it; (c) it is never chosen for the sake of anything else.” With this much, I have no disagreement. However, where I disagree with Keown is his claim that Buddhist Ethics meets the Constitutivity Condition.

Keown supports his conclusions that Buddhist ethics meets the Constitutivity Condition by first challenging the notion that prajñā, knowledge or insight, is a dominant end in Buddhism. A dominant end is described by Keown as any end that is incompatible with other goods. This is distinct from a second-order end like eudaimonia because the latter allows for a plurality of goods to coexist. The distinction between a second-order end and a dominant end seems, at first glance purely nominal. If one holds power to be a dominant end, everything that frustrates that end should be forsaken. The dominant end is supreme and everything is subservient to it. If a good is incompatible with it then that good should not be pursued any longer. However, this seems to be the same definition given for a second-order end. Second-order ends “provide an orderly framework in the pursuit and attainment of subordinate or first-order objectives.” On Keown’s view of Aristotle’s virtue, the goal that humans are aimed at it not “one particular good amongst others (a dominant end),” but rather is multifaceted; it will include more than one good. The number of goods that the second-order ends versus the dominant ends allow for seem to be the major defining feature here. This is important for Keown’s argument because he

62 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 199.
63 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 196.
64 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 199.
wants to show that the *telos* in Buddhism is intrinsically related to the means used for obtaining it.

Keown disagrees with the idea that Buddhism is ultimately pursuing a dominant end, or one end among many other possible ones. His view is that Buddhism pursues a second-order end—i.e., Nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is a second-order end because it allows for a multiplicity of goods. Keown cites six virtues that Buddhists accept, known as the Six Perfections: Generosity, Morality, Forbearance, Courage, Meditation, and Insight. On the dominant end view, one should aspire to reach perfect insight and, if any other end frustrates that goal, then that one should be abandoned. This, however, does not reflect Buddhist beliefs. According to Keown, Buddhism’s primary end, Nirvāṇa, consists in achieving the plurality of goods just mentioned; furthermore, if any one should be held above the rest as most important, it is morality or *sīla*.

Finally, Keown classifies Aristotelian ethics as ultimately *teleological* and says the following:

In Aristotle’s virtue ethics, unlike in consequentialism, the end or *telos* is intrinsically related to the means through which it is pursued. If a moral theory’s *telos* is intrinsically related to the means of obtaining it, then the theory requires that one embarks on a continual expansion of [one’s] individual capacity towards the goal of complete perfection, rather than the generation of a single transient utility.


A key difference between Goodman’s strategy and Keown’s emerges at this juncture. I agree with Keown’s strategy insofar that he addresses the Constitutivity Condition, a feature which I am taking to be a necessary component of virtue ethics. However, whereas Keown thinks that Buddhism meets the Constitutivity Condition, I disagree. This will be argued in chapter three. In order to come to a proper understanding of what kind of ethical theory Buddhist ethics most resembles, I propose that what needs to be established is what kind of relationship obtains between the goal and the means used to reach this goal. In what follows, I will offer a detailed analysis of the Noble Eightfold Path and an account of its relationship with the goal of Nirvāṇa. If we are able to determine this relationship, we will be closer to having a clear conception of the true nature of Buddhist ethics.
Chapter 2

Understanding the Eightfold Path

§2.1 The Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa

If we are to understand what kind of ethical theory Buddhism most resembles, we must understand the Eightfold Path, for it contains the three ethical factors which in turn inform the rules and precepts that many follow in Buddhist practices. Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Buddhist monk and Pali scholar, talks about the Eightfold Path in *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering*. He notes there that the path is typically divided into three components: ethics, followed by concentration, and eventually wisdom. This division helps in the practice of developing a wholesome basis from which to begin following the path to liberation from suffering.

It is important to note that this order is inconsistent with the way the path is frequently enumerated in the suttas. The first two components listed are *right view* followed by *right intention*, which would fall under the category of wisdom. The reason the suttas enumerate these first is that both right view and right intention are crucial for

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embarking on the rest of the path; without them one would likely fall into confusion and misdirect one’s efforts. In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, in a sutta titled *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* (*The Great Forty*), the Buddha goes over what noble right concentration is, along with its “supports and its requisites, that is right view…right mindfulness.” He goes on to say that right view comes first in the path towards developing right concentration. Right view is ultimately responsible for supporting the rest of the path; without it, one would be operating under each of the subsequent factors of the Eightfold Path with an unskillful basis. So right view must be developed first. But how must one develop it? According to the Buddha one must make an effort to “abandon wrong view and to enter upon right view: this is one’s right effort.” The process becomes complicated because each factor depends in some way on another. The same process applied to right view is also applied to right intention, right speech, right action, and right livelihood. One must understand wrong intention as wrong intention and right intention as right intention (and so forth for the other factors). Doing so requires one to have mastered right view. And to do that, one must apply right effort and right mindfulness. But, again, to apply those factors properly, one must have right view.

Given the interconnected nature of the path, it seems difficult or perhaps even impossible to start. This is why, as Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, one must start somewhere

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69 *Majjhima Nikaya* 117. 3. In Ēnānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 934

70 *Majjhima Nikaya* 117. 9. In Ēnānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 934
and the ethical factors give one this foundation. In order to begin the process of training to end suffering one must start with moral discipline because it prevents one from unwholesome dispositions. Bodhi advocates the idea that “the path evolves through its three stages, with moral discipline as the foundation for concentration, concentration the foundation for wisdom, and wisdom the direct instrument for reaching liberation.” With some rudimentary mastery over the ethical component, one can move forward with confidence in one’s ability to practice with wholesome intentions.

To master the ethical stage, a few different tactics can be used. First, it is understood and presupposed by the Buddha that one will be coming into the path with already established dispositions and inclinations. There are a plethora rules in the *Tipitaka* that one can follow in a purely deontological or consequentialist manner, in order to get the process started. However, this does not accurately characterize the entirety of the Eightfold Path nor does it give us an accurate understanding of how the Path relates to the end goal of Nirvāṇa—the topic of our present inquiry. In order to shed light on this, I will now examine the Eightfold Path in some detail. The following exegesis will show that the factors of the path are inextricably intertwined. In chapter three, I will use this to show that Buddhist ethics fails to meet the Constitutivity Condition by giving evidence that leads me to believe that the Eightfold Path is distinct from Nirvāṇa, thus rendering Keown’s conclusion unlikely.

§2.2 Right View

And what is right view? Knowledge with regard to stress\textsuperscript{72}, knowledge with regard to the origination of stress, knowledge with regard to the cessation of stress, knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called right view.\textsuperscript{73}

Early on in the \textit{Majjhima} Nikaya, the Venerable Sāriputta, one of the Buddha’s right hand disciples, is asked questions about right view from a group of bhikkhus. In order to elucidate this aggregate, he provides a detailed list of things to which right view pertains. These include: (1) The Wholesome and The Unwholesome, (2) Nutriment, (3) The Four Noble Truths, (4) Aging and Death, (5) Birth, (6) Being, (7) Clinging, (8) Craving, (9) Feeling, (10) Contact, (11) The Sixfold Base, (12) Mentality-Materiality, (13) Consciousness, (14) Formations, (15) Ignorance, (16) and Taints.\textsuperscript{74} What these categories are will not affect the outcome of the present inquiry. What is important is the function right view plays in the entirety of the Eightfold Path. In order to obtain right view, one should seek to understand the category itself, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation. To understand what this might look like, Sāriputta gives the formulation of right view pertaining to the Four Noble Truths and says the following:

“When, friends, a noble disciple understands suffering, the origin of suffering, the

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\textsuperscript{72} Stress here comes from the word ‘duḥkha’. While this is commonly translated as suffering, no one English word will do this Sanskrit word justice. In the Vaman Shivaram Apte dictionary, ‘duḥkha’ is translated as “Sorrow, grief, unhappiness, distress, pain, agony.” I take this slight divergence away from convention to be inconsequential for my argument, given that the argument does not rely on any particular translation of duḥkha.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Digha Nikaya} 22. 5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, \textit{Access to Insight}.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Majjhima Nikaya} 9. 3-68. In Ŋānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 132-144.
cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering, in that way he is one of right view…and has arrived at this true Dhamma.”

This instructional form is the same for each of the sixteen categories enumerated above. Thanissaro Bhikkhu offers commentary on how exactly one should understand the Four Noble Truths, which I think sheds light onto the purpose of holding right view. He believes that the first noble truth is to be understood, the second noble truth is to be abandoned, the third is to be realized, and the fourth is to be developed. If one has right view pertaining to the four noble truths, one will know exactly how to treat each noble truth. Conversely, if one lacks right view, one may not realize that the third noble truth is to be realized. Right view is the cornerstone to the Eightfold Path as it provides a clear lens with which to view the world; without right view all the other components cannot be fully understood because they will be seen through a foggy lens.

That said, while right view is an important component to reaching the goal of the Eightfold Path, it cannot on its own alleviate suffering. The Buddha likens right view to a seed. He says: “Just as when a sugar cane seed…is placed in moist soil, whatever nutriment it takes from the soil & the water, all conduces to its sweetness, tastiness, & unalloyed delectability.” Similarly, if one acts from a foundation of wrong view, then all


actions will be tainted regardless of their results. This should be kept in mind as the
purpose of the Eightfold Path is to put an end to suffering. Furthermore, questions about
how to obtain right view still persist; how does one simply understand that suffering
exists? In order to elucidate the answer to this question, understanding the rest of the
Eightfold Path is necessary. With this in mind let us turn to an examination of right
intention.

§2.3 Right Intention (Resolve)

And what is right resolve? Aspiring to renunciation, to freedom from ill will, to
harmlessness: This is called right resolve. 79

Right intention is the second factor in the wisdom division of the Eightfold Path.
Essentially, right intention involves making a commitment to avoid harming others,
including oneself, and to aspire towards anything which leads to Nirvāṇa, in this case the
renunciation of sensual pleasures, abstention from ill will, and the promotion of
harmlessness. Right intention should become a prerequisite for all of one’s actions. The
Buddha explains, when talking to an inquirer named Rāhula, that all actions must be done
only after reflection: “An action with the body should be done after repeated reflection;
an action by speech should be done after repeated reflection; an action by mind should be

78 A question which initially seems simple to answer, but is really not. The first noble truth asks
us to have more than just a simple acknowledgment that suffering exists. The knowledge one
must have is deep and pervasive and takes time to cultivate.

79 Digha Nikaya 22. 5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, Access to Insight.
done after repeated reflection.” When reflecting on an action one wishes to partake in, one must reflect in order to decide what kind of source is motivating the action; is the source unwholesome or is it one motivated by right intention? If the action is motivated by one of the three defilements, viz. greed, hatred, or anger, then the action is motivated by an unwholesome source and should be abandoned. The Buddha goes on to explain what repeated reflection should look like. While contemplating performing an action, while performing an action, and after performing an action, one must discern whether or not the action is motivated by right intention. If the answer is no, one should not perform the action. If the answer is yes, then one should feel at ease and know that the action is a wholesome one. This is important to the discussion in chapter one and will be addressed later in chapter three with more detail. Right intention, however, gives us good evidence for thinking that the consequences of an action are not the only feature one must evaluate, according to the Buddhist view. This further supports my contention from chapter one that we should not be too quick to assimilate Buddhist ethics to consequentialism.

In the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta, the Buddha talks about two kinds of thoughts. The first kind includes thoughts of sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty; the second kind includes thoughts of renunciation, good will, and non-cruelty (the second kind are clearly

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81 An action here refers to an action of body, speech, or mind.

the elements which should be sought, according to the second factor in the Eightfold Path). The Buddha puts thoughts of sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty through the process of reflection as explained above and finds that these kinds of thoughts lead to suffering. He teaches that thoughts of sensual desire (as well as thoughts of ill will and cruelty) “lead to my own affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbana.” It is important to note how much of this analysis is based on one’s own personal reflection. It is not uncommon in Buddhist philosophy to rely on personal experience and reflection in order to inform one’s decisions. If one has gained some understanding of the first factor in the Eightfold Path, viz. right view, and one can see clearly that something causes suffering, then one should aspire to put an end to the cause of suffering. Whether sensual desire truly causes suffering or not will not factor into this present inquiry. What is important is that in order to alleviate one’s suffering, one must formulate right resolve. This requires a proper understanding of how things are (right view); in this case one must understand that one’s wrong intentions can lead to suffering. If one truly understands that an intention leads to suffering and is already on board with the project at hand, viz. alleviating suffering, then one should immediately abandon the thought.


84 Majjhima Nikaya 19. 3. In Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 207.
§2.4 Right Speech

And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, & from idle chatter: This is called right speech.\(^{85}\)

Right speech falls under the ethics division of the Eightfold Path. Like other factors in the path, this factor is expressed in order to eliminate causes of suffering. It is plain that speech can be a cause of suffering: a child is easily moved to tears when made fun of by their peers; wars can be started over harsh and divisive speech; marriages can be torn apart from hateful words. Right speech, then, is speech that does not cause another or oneself to suffer. The Buddha says:

Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless & unfaulted by knowledgeable people. Which five? It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will.\(^{86}\)

If one speaks with these things in mind, one will be acting in accordance with right speech. If any one component of right speech is lacking, then one runs the risk of causing harm. Notably, it is possible to speak with each one of these factors and still cause suffering. However, one can rest assured that it will not be directly because of one’s own speech. How another reacts to one’s words is out of one’s control. If a friend has an important presentation coming up, and hours before they ask you if you are coming, to which you say no, it is possible that they will react poorly to this. However, it can be

\(^{85}\) *Digha Nikaya* 22. 5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, *Access to Insight.*

argued that you spoke at the right time, you spoke the truth, you spoke it with affection, you spoke it beneficially, and you spoke it with a mind of good-will. Their reaction may not correspond with the way in which you spoke or even with the content of your speaking. Furthermore, it would not have been better to lie, as this would likely have displaced the suffering to a slightly later time, and possibly resulted in a greater suffering from being deceived.

§2.5 Right Action

And what is right action? Abstaining from taking life, from stealing, & from illicit sex. This is called right action.\(^{87}\)

Right action, the second of the three moral prescriptions in the Eightfold path, is also fairly simple to explain. Right action is defined by avoiding taking life and refraining from stealing and partaking in illicit sex.\(^{88}\) These prescriptions are geared toward ending suffering. This can be understood if one sees that these actions have at the very least the potential for giving rise to suffering. For instance, keeping in mind that the Buddhist view often takes, as an assumption, that common to all living beings is a desire for life and a fear of death and harm, the first kind of wrong action (taking life) is wrong because it will universally cause suffering. What is important is not whether living beings should feel this way, viz. that life is good and death is bad, but the fear of death is a basic state

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\(^{87}\) Digha Nikaya 22. 5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, Access to Insight.

\(^{88}\) Illicit sex is any kind of sexual interactions which causes suffering.
that all beings naturally possess. This does not mean, however, that all things one prefers become the guiding factor for right action. Peter Harvey, in “Theravāda Texts on Ethics,” suggests that “Theravāda Buddhism sees an action as reprehensible if one would not like it inflicted on oneself, and as expressing a volition that is rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion, which three states are sustained by unwise attention.” There are, then, limits on what makes an action wrong: understanding that an action rooted in one of the three root causes of suffering, one should refrain from acting this way. If one takes another’s life, a root cause of suffering is likely involved.

In contrast to Goodman’s consequentialist reading of Buddhist ethics, a large part of what makes a wrong action (as well as wrong speech and wrong livelihood) wrong, is intention. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that “The "taking of life" that is to be avoided is intentional killing, the deliberate destruction of life of a being endowed with consciousness.” What is it about intention that determines the moral weight of an action? According to the Buddha, action (kamma) is born out of volition (cetana): “It is volition (cetanā), monks, that I call karma (kamma). Having willed, one performs an action by body, by speech, by mind.” It follows then, that if one can purify one’s


91 Peter Harvey, “Theravāda Texts,” 376.
intentions, which are a part of cetanā, then one’s actions will become wholesome. This is not a guarantee, of course, as many factors are involved in any particular event; it is not only one’s own intentional states which affect the outcome of an action. One could have pure intentions and act in a way that is entirely free from greed, hatred, and delusion, and yet something bad may still happen. However, in this case, one would not have committed a wrong action; the situation would be viewed as unpleasant and suffering may be involved, but its cause would not be directly from any actions done out of wholesome intention. Imagine that Adam agrees to help his friend Daniel move by driving a moving truck. Adam ponders his motives and concludes that they are free from greed, hatred, and delusion and thus agrees to do so. As he is driving across an intersection, another car runs a red light, smashing into the moving truck. All occupants get out safely, but the truck burns and explodes, consuming all of Daniel’s possessions in a fire. Has Adam committed a wrong action? The Buddhist would answer no. If his intentions were wholesome, which we have stipulated they are, then he takes on little negative karma because his actions were done out of good intentions. This does not align with a consequentialist evaluation.
§2.6 Right Livelihood

And what is right livelihood? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood: This is called right livelihood.92

Right livelihood, the third factor of the ethical portion of the Eightfold path, has a few functions. First, it operates in a similar fashion as the other two ethical factors. One’s means of earning a living must fall in line with the same restrictions as one’s actions and speech, i.e. it must not be a source of suffering. Because of this, the Buddha says the following: “A lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in human beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison.”93 Each of these five kinds of business can obviously bring about harm and suffering: the dealing in arms can lead to war; selling humans beings violates an individuals freedom and causes great suffering; business in meat involves the taking of animal life; selling intoxications leads to a variety of health problems such as alcoholism; and business in poison can only be geared towards harm. Thich Nhat Hanh says, in his work Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism, that “great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature.”94 Right livelihood is a crucial part

92 Digha Nikaya 22. 5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, Access to Insight.

93 Anguttara Nikaya 5. 177. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, Access to Insight.

of the path because so much of one’s life is spent doing work. If the work one engages in is not aligned with the Eightfold Path’s commitment to end suffering, one will be unable to fully realize the final goal.

\[\text{§2.7 Right Effort}\]

...a monk generates desire... for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen: This is called right effort.\(^{95}\)

Right effort is a crucial part of the path. As we have seen throughout the preceding exegesis, every component of the path requires one to act, and thus to put forth some kind of effort. In right action, one must make a mental effort in screening one’s motivations; if one finds that one’s actions are motivated by an unskillful roots, then one needs to put forth an effort to eliminate these roots. Thus, when examining right effort, the interconnected nature of the Eightfold Path begins to become more apparent. In the Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha says “One tries to abandon wrong view & to enter into right view: This is one's right effort…”\(^{96}\) He says the same thing for right intention, speech, action, and livelihood.\(^{97}\)

\[^{95}\text{Digha Nikaya}\ 22.5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, Access to Insight.\]

\[^{96}\text{Majjhima Nikaya}\ 117.9. In Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 934.\]

\[^{97}\text{Majjhima Nikaya}\ 117.9,15,21,27,33. In Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 934-938\]
Right effort is further explained in the Sona Sutta. In this particular sutta, Sona is contemplating leaving the life of a contemplative and going back to the householder life to enjoy sensual pleasure and wealth. The Buddha comes to Sona and explains to him why his practice has not yet brought complete cessation from suffering. The Buddha says “over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence, attune the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there pick up your theme.”98 Once hearing this, Sona’s practice is reinvigorated. He realizes that he needs to apply the faculty of right effort in order to balance out the other factors in the path. If one applies too much effort towards following the Eightfold Path, one risks cultivating attachment towards the goal and greed aimed at liberation. Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that right effort can be both wholesome and unwholesome. He holds that, “The same factor fuels desire, aggression, violence, and ambition on the one hand, and generosity, self-discipline, kindness, concentration, and understanding on the other.”99 Right effort is the factor that directs one’s energy.

§2.8 Right Mindfulness

...a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself — ardent, alert, & mindful — putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves — ardent,


alert, & mindful — putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. This is called right mindfulness.  

Right mindfulness is the practice of focusing one’s attention on the body, feelings, and mind in order to understand them as they really are. In analyzing this factor, just as in the analysis of right effort, we find that the Eightfold Path is a web of dependencies. Right view, which was explained at the outset of this exegesis, was said to be a crucial part of the path because it provides a clear foundation from which to operate throughout the Eightfold Path. If one does not have a foundation in right view, then all other factors will be tainted by a wrong view. With that in mind, what does one do in order to develop right view if one does not yet have it? The answer is to practice right mindfulness. In order to develop right view, which pertains to the impermanent nature of all things, one must practice right mindfulness and contemplate the qualities of all things in order to discern this.

Take, for example, an instance of practicing right mindfulness with regard to one’s own feelings. The Buddha says that “There is the case where a monk, when feeling a painful feeling, discerns, 'I am feeling a painful feeling.' When feeling a pleasant feeling, he discerns, 'I am feeling a pleasant feeling.'” The Buddha goes on to say that one should remained focused on these phenomenon with regards to be their origination & passing away, in order to determine the true nature of feelings in general, as well as these

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100 Digha Nikaya 22. 5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, Access to Insight.
particular feelings. In order to understand the nature of something like feelings, one must practice right mindfulness, and this entails careful mental observation. One must isolate the object of meditation and focus only on it—nothing else. For instance, if one wishes to observe the qualities of pain, then one must look at pain and only pain. Imagine that you are sitting in a meditation posture, legs-crossed and eyes closed, and a cramp arises in your leg. If you are to apply right mindfulness to this pain, you will observe the pain in your leg and nothing else. To be sure, other things will certainly arise; you will find negative emotions coming into the forefront of your focus, perhaps old memories, desires to adjust in order for the pain to subside. All of these things are likely to happen and should not be paid any attention to; the practitioner must focus on the pain itself.

What is it like? Does it burn, sting, or feel cold? Does it feel cramped, sharp, or numb? What mindfulness is meant to do is help one realize is that pain, just like all other things, is not lasting and will change. The sensation of pain can be isolated and one can learn that the sensation of feeling in one’s leg and the experience we characterize as pain are actually separate. The idea is that if one can experience reality as it actually is—in this

\footnote{Majjhima Nikaya 10. B. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, \textit{Access to Insight}.}

\footnote{What it means to experience \textquotedblleft reality as it actually is,	extquotedblright is admittedly a mystery to me. The general idea, however, seems to be that the reason we suffer and experience \textquotedblleft pain\textquotedblright as opposed to simply experiencing a \textquoteleft\textquoteleft particular leg sensations,\textquoteright\textquoteright is because we are ignorant of how things really are. We wrongly associate pain with the particular leg sensations because we identify the leg as part of our self and the pain as something that can threaten the self. This is based on an illusion, though, because one of the central claims of Buddhism is that there is no substantial, permanent self. If we could see reality as it actually is, which requires understanding impermanence, then pain would not be \textquoteleft\textquoteleft pain,\textquoteright\textquoteright but just impersonal changing phenomena and would not cause us misery.}
case, particular leg sensations—then one will be able to see that one’s experience of pain is separate from the sensation in the leg. The effect of this realization is the dissolution of false views and attachments.

§2.9 Right Concentration

…a monk...enters & remains in the first jhana [which is] accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhana [which is accompanied by] unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation...With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhana...With the abandoning of pleasure & pain — as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress — he enters & remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is called right concentration.¹⁰³

Finally, we come to the last factor in the Eightfold Path, viz., right concentration. Right concentration, like the previous two factors, shows up just as entangled with all of the other factors of the path. To understand right concentration, I will to first give a brief explanation of the jhanas. The definition of right concentration given above, which comes from Digha Nikaya, centers around jhanas or meditative states characterized by stillness and concentration. In a state of right concentration, the mind can be directed clearly and intently onto any object the meditator desires. This is useful for one who wishes to understand oneself to the fullest degree. And for one who is on the path to enlightenment, this is meant to aid in the curing of suffering. The jhanas, of which there are four, help one progress from a lower degree of awareness to a higher degree. The first

¹⁰³ Digha Nikaya 22. 5d. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, Access to Insight.
Jhana is characterized by the ability to direct one’s thoughts so that one can clearly evaluate them, the second is characterized by an awareness free from directed thought and evaluation, the third jhana is characterized by an equanimous and mindful state which “permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills [one’s] body with the pleasure divested of rapture,” and the final jhana is characterized by a purity of equanimity and mindfulness that comes with neither pleasure nor pain.104

Right concentration is inseparable from the other factors in the Eightfold Path. The Buddha says in the Majjhima Nikaya that “Any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, & right mindfulness — is called noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions.”105 For right concentration to be executed properly, it takes all of the seven factors to be developed. If right concentration requires the seven previous factors in the Eightfold Path in order to be executed, then it seems clear that one should just go ahead and develop those first. However, concentration is a quality which has the function of aiding in and supporting the development of right view and right resolve, which in turn support the other factors of right speech, action, and livelihood. Furthermore, if one wishes to practice right speech, right action, and right livelihood, one also needs to


105 Majjhima Nikaya 117. 3. In Ñanamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 934
develop right effort and right mindfulness, and these in turn require right view and right resolve as well as the ability to utilize right concentration.

What should be clear at this point is that the Eightfold Path is a complicated, interconnected web of qualities that one must somehow develop simultaneously. Having gone through the Eightfold Path in some detail, we are now in a position to ask an important question: What is the overall purpose of the Eightfold Path, including the ethical commands, and what kind of relationship does it bear to the goal that it aims at achieving? In the following chapter, I will argue that the Eightfold Path, and subsequently Buddhist Ethics, is used a means for reaching the end of Nirvāṇa. This much can be seen from the aforementioned exegesis. Each factor in the path is concerned primarily with the alleviation of suffering. If something truly leads to the cessation of suffering, it seems that the Buddhist view would be required to accept it. However, I will argue that what this shows about the theoretical structure of Buddhist ethics is less than both Keown and Goodman were hoping to show. What we end up with is ultimately a limitation on what we can know about Buddhist ethics and its theoretical structure.
CHAPTER 3
THE LIMITS OF OUR UNDERSTANDING

§3.1 Neti Neti: Neither Virtue Ethics nor Consequentialism

Determining what kind of ethical theory Buddhism turns out to be is a tricky puzzle. One possible way to approach this problem is by categorizing the available theories on the basis of what question they take to be primary. Consequentialism defines right action as any action that promotes the good and then says that a good life is one that is lived in accordance with right action. Virtue ethics, by contrast, defines a good life first and then says that right action is whatever promotes *that*.

Buddhist ethics resembles virtue ethics in that its entire system is designed to alleviate one’s suffering. This is so precisely because living a life without suffering is what it means to live a good life. The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path give one guidelines for living a good life. Instead of calling the end goal flourishing, as a virtue ethicist would, the Buddhist refers to her end goal as Nirvāṇa. If one reaches Nirvāṇa then one’s life will be completely void of suffering. One will become completely equanimous, being able to remain wholly balanced in the face of both catastrophe and great fortune. In addition, living a life that aims at achieving this goal is a worthwhile way to live and right action is defined in terms of achieving this goal. Furthermore, in addition to answering the question concerning the way in which one should live one’s
life, the Buddhist system holds that certain “virtues” are inherently good. Things such as
friendship, knowledge, and life are good in and of themselves.

Not only does the Buddhist ethical structure resemble virtue ethics in respect of
which question it takes as primary, it also diverges from consequentialist conclusions
when confronted with particular scenarios. One way we can work out the limits of the
Buddhist ethical system is to consider a thought experiment that is used to determine the
nature of other ethical theories. Consider Goodman’s wilderness medical outpost
scenario:

In this case, a doctor operates a small medical clinic that serves a vast, thinly
populated region of northern Alaska. One day, a young man staggers into the
clinic yard, leading a dogsled on which are piled the bodies of five severely
wounded people. Before collapsing from exhaustion, this man explains to the
doctor that he and his friends were out on a trek in the wilderness when they
suffered a grave accident. One of his friends has suffered severe damage to both
his kidneys; another is going into liver failure; still another has suffered major
lung damage; and so on. The doctor realizes that if he carves up the one uninjured
man for spare parts, he can save all of his friends. No other course of action could
save any of the injured people from inevitable death. What should the doctor do?

A hardline consequentialist would arguably have to agree that the best thing to do is carve
up the healthy person, so long as no one else will find out about the killing of the
innocent, uninjured man. If Buddhist ethics truly resembles consequentialist ethics, it
seems that it too would have to answer in a similar way. However, it is clear that the
Buddhist has many ways out of this dilemma. Buddhist ethics will rely on the nature of
one’s intentions in order to make an evaluation of one’s actions. If the one’s intentions are
wholesome, then one’s actions will likewise be wholesome. In wilderness medical outpost scenario, it is possible to imagine more than one acceptable course of action. Given the Buddhist’s commitments regarding rebirth and karma, the doctor could justify killing the man by claiming that the man who was killed to save his friends died a good death and will receive good karma for doing so. In this case, the doctor’s intentions are good and the act would be considered good as well. On the other hand, one could imagine the doctor taking seriously the vow to abstain from consciously killing living beings and resolving to do nothing in this scenario, letting the injured people die. While the consequences are arguably worse in the second scenario, the action would still be considered wholesome, so long as it was motivated by the right intention. The Buddha says in *Nibbedhika Sutta* that “Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, & intellect.” Kamma, which is translated simply as action, is viewed as a direct result of intention. Thus, if the intention is good, the action is good.

The above example gives us good reason to think that Buddhist ethics resembles virtue ethics, which holds that virtues, phronesis, and flourishing are more important than consequences. In the wilderness medical outpost example, what is most important for the Buddhist evaluation does not solely depend on the outcome of the scenario. It is more important to consider how one comes to make one’s decision. Does the decision come

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106 It is of course of issue whether or not killing and letting injured people die amount to the same thing. In this particular example however, the point is to show that either way the Doctor acts, that act could be considered the right action insofar as the intentions are rightly oriented.

from a place of ignorance or wisdom? Is the decision backed by wholesome intentions? Is one utilizing the Eightfold Path as fully as possible? These considerations are more than just about the right way to act; they fall under the question that is addressed by virtue ethics, concerning what the best way to live is.

However, as I have argued in chapter 1, both consequentialism and virtue ethics take the relationship between the means used to reach the end goal to be important. It is the striking difference between them on this very point that make these two ethical theories mutually incompatible. Consequentialism holds that there is more than one way to achieve the best consequences and that any action that yields good consequences will be acceptable. If we agree that saving lives is a good thing, then the action of one who saves fifty people from drowning by throwing them all life preservers will be considered a good one. If one saves fifty people from drowning by stealing a boat and no one finds out about the stolen boat, the action is equally good. Furthermore, if one prevents fifty people from drowning when in reality they were attempting to expedite the process, the consequentialist would again view this action as a good one. For a consequentialist, the means merely need to achieve the ends and there can be multiple ways of doing so. For the virtue ethicist, however, consequences are not the most important aspect of an action when determining its value. What is most important is doing something in the right way, with the right motivations. Thus, saving fifty people when, at heart, one intends their demise would not be a good action. For a virtue ethicist, a good action is characterized by the right kinds of motivations; without these motivations, the action cannot be right,
because the motivations are part of the goal of achieving eudaimonia. Virtue ethics posits a *constitutive* relationship between the path and the goal.

§3.2 The Problem with Understanding Nirvāṇa

If it is possible to determine what kind of relationship Buddhism posits between the path and the goal, then we can get clear on what ethical theory Buddhist ethics resembles most. In chapter two, I mentioned that the Eightfold Path is merely a means to Nirvāṇa. If this is true, and it is acceptable to use other means to achieve this goal, then Buddhist ethics is not a kind of virtue ethics. If, by contrast, the Eightfold Path is constitutive of Nirvāṇa, then Buddhist ethics is not a version of consequentialism.

To address this issue, let us consider a popular sutta that discusses the Eightfold Path and compares it to a raft. The Buddha asks his followers to imagine a man on a journey who comes to the bank of a river. On the near shore there is danger and on the far shore there is safety. Furthermore, there is no way to cross the river, so the man must collect materials in order to build a raft. The Buddha goes onto say:

And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore. Then, when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing should be done with that raft?  

The answer is of course that one should leave the raft behind. This teaching has an obvious bearing on the doctrine of suffering and its relationship to attachment. One interpretation is that this simile teaches us that we should remain unattached to the path. The path, just like anything else, can also be a source of suffering, if not understood and utilized properly. However, I want to suggest that another interpretation is available—not incompatible with the first. I propose that this sutta gives good evidence for the idea that Buddhism specifies the end from the means. In this sutta, the teaching is compared to the raft and the shore is Nirvāṇa. What this suggests is that the Buddhist teaching allows using alternative routes to reaching Nirvāṇa. Now, it may be the case that no other route is actually possible—a possibility that I will discuss shortly. However, for the purpose of understanding the theoretical limits of Buddhist ethics, it does not matter whether another way is possible. What matters is this: If one were possible, would it be acceptable for a Buddhist to use? If the perfection of the Eightfold Path is not the same thing as Nirvāṇa but simply leads to it, then it is possible that other ways could lead to it as well.

To lend further support to this interpretation of the raft simile, consider what the Buddha says concerning Nirvāṇa in the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta. In this sutta, he discusses Nirvāṇa with Vaccha who asks the Buddha where one goes when one reaches enlightenment. The Buddha counters Vaccha’s question with another by asking where a fire goes when it is extinguished, to which Vaccha replies that it does not go anywhere, it
simple goes “out.” The Buddha then says that this is what reaching Nirvāṇa is like. He says:

So too, Vaccha, the Tathagata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathagata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump: done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathagata is liberated from reckoning in terms of material form, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean. The term 'reappears' does not apply, the term 'does not reappear' does not apply, the term 'both reappears and does not reappear' does not apply, the term 'neither reappears nor does not reappear' does not apply.109

The Buddha says that this same understanding should hold for any feeling, perception, mental fabrication, and state of consciousness that might be used to describe a Tathagata. This leads to the strange conclusion that even though the Buddha is enlightened, is literally “one who knows”, it stops making sense to talk about the Buddha as one who has mental states such as right view or right intention, in the same way that we might say an unenlightened being’s mental states are aligned with right view or right intention. The dispositions that one should strive for that are given by the Eightfold Path no longer serve any purpose to an enlightened person because that person is no longer bound by, among other things, the limitations and faults of wrong understanding. The Eightfold Path is an instructional manual that should be used to help one shift one’s epistemological state concerning the nature of reality. What the above passage suggests is that once that goal is achieved, the Path no longer has any foothold and can no longer apply to such a person. An enlightened person comes to be constituted in a way that is radically unlike the

109Majjhima Nikaya 72. 20. In Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 593
unenlightened. In the accordance with my interpretation of the simile of the raft, we may conclude that the Eightfold Path is for the unenlightened, not the enlightened, and that the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa are distinct. The relationship between the two is thus not constitutive.

Given my conclusions that the Eightfold Path does not stand in a constitutive relationship to Nirvāṇa, it follows that the path is purely instrumental. The Buddhist path thus appears to be closer to consequentialism in terms of the relationship between the ends and the means. However, it should be noted that there are restrictions on just what kinds of ways one should strive to reach the ending of suffering. For instance, if Buddhist ethics falls under the consequentialist model and, as I have indicated earlier, Buddhism defines right action as action that ends suffering, one may come to the conclusion that it would be best to end everyone’s life as quickly and painlessly as possible, perhaps by pushing a big red button that incinerates the entire planet. Of course the immediate, traditional rebuttal to this is that on the Buddhist view rebirth must be factored in. Killing everyone would not truly end suffering and thus not be considered right action.  

Aside from limitations imposed by rebirth, Buddhism clearly values things other than just the consequences of one’s actions (e.g. intentions) and limitations such as these draw us back away from the consequentialist interpretation.

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110 One further problem is this: the Buddhist view on rebirth has been considered non-essential by some major figures, e.g. the Dali Llama. Given the possibility that rebirth may not really be a thing, the consequentialist model would lead one to the conclusion that killing everyone may be the best route to take, if one is truly concerned only with ending suffering.
What we are left with, then, is an ethical theory that, unlike consequentialism values more than merely the consequences of one’s actions, but which resembles consequentialism in that it specifies the ends independently of the means. This makes Buddhist ethics incompatible with both Goodman’s interpretation and Keown’s.

However, this entire discussion rests on an assumption that is open to question—namely, that it is possible to determine the relationship between Nirvāṇa and the Eightfold Path. In the Mahāyāna tradition, it is believed the Nirvāṇa is the same thing as samsara. In Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakakarika, he says “There is not the slightest difference between cyclic existence and Nirvāṇa. There is not the slightest difference between Nirvāṇa and cyclic existence.”[111] This statement from Nāgārjuna suggests that, at least within the Mahāyāna tradition, the Eightfold Path is actually constitutive of Nirvāṇa because samsara is no different from Nirvāṇa. This leads to two interesting points.

The first is that while Goodman concludes that both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism are both consequentialist, he ultimately focuses on the Mahāyāna tradition. Given Nāgārjuna’s examination of Nirvāṇa, Goodman’s view seems to be falsified, because the necessary conditions for a consequentialist theory include being able to specify the means independently from the ends. However, this interpretation of

Nāgārjuna’s work is imprecise. When Nāgārjuna says that there is no difference between samsara and Nirvāṇa, he is making a metaphysical distinction. Jay Garfield notes that “[t]o distinguish between samsara and Nirvāṇa would be to suppose that each had a nature and that they were different natures. But each is empty, and so there can be no inherent difference.” 112 A more precise understanding of Nāgārjuna would be that according to the Mahāyāna tradition, because everything is inherently empty, including Nirvāṇa, all things having something in common. This makes not only the Eightfold Path constitutive of Nirvāṇa, but also my teapot, the chair I am sitting in, the sun, and everything else that exists. It becomes trivially true that the Eightfold Path is constitutive of Nirvāṇa because everything is constitutive of Nirvāṇa, if indeed everything is empty. Garfield also explains that “Nirvāṇa is only samsara experienced as a buddha experiences it.” 113 His conclusion is that the difference between being in Nirvāṇa and samsara is an epistemic one. When one becomes enlightened, one is still fundamentally made up of the same stuff, but one’s understanding of the world has changed.

Second, in the Theravāda tradition, Nirvāṇa and samsara are distinct. In Thomas Love’s article “Theravāda Buddhism: Ethical Theory and Practice,” he asserts that, “according to Theravāda Buddhism, [Nirvāṇa] may be realized by means of meditation

112 Nāgārjuna, The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, 331.

113 Nāgārjuna, The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, 333.
founded on morality.”¹¹⁴ Love’s view is that ethics and meditation are stepping stones to Nirvāṇa. This view runs counter to Keown’s interpretation which primarily centers on Theravāda ethics. If Nirvāṇa and samsara are distinct, then it remains possible that the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa are distinct. As I have shown, this interpretation receives substantial support from the relevant texts.

However, I want to argue for the further conclusion that the relationship between Nirvāṇa and samsara, as well as the relationship between Nirvāṇa and the Eightfold Path, is privileged knowledge. According to Hammalawa Saddhatissa, Nirvāṇa is impossible to define.¹¹⁵ Saddhatissa points out that “constant association and intimacy with the lovely, the morally good, is a means of progress to Nirvāṇa.”¹¹⁶ This is noteworthy because he phrases being morally good as a means to reaching the end of Nirvāṇa but does NOT equate the two. In addition, Walpola Rahula, in his book What The Buddha Taught, writes “Truth is. Nirvāṇa is. The only thing you can do is to see it, to realize it. There is a path leading to the realization of Nirvāṇa. But Nirvāṇa is not the result of this path. You may get to the mountain along a path, but the mountain is not the result, not an effect of the path. You may see a light, but the light is not the result of your eyesight.”¹¹⁷ Rahula also


¹¹⁵ Saddhatissa, Buddhist Ethics, 154.

¹¹⁶ Saddhatissa, Buddhist Ethics, 155.

¹¹⁷ Walpola Rahula, What The Buddha Taught, 40.
makes a point to separate Nirvāṇa from the path used to achieve it. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh asserts in his book *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching* that the Buddha has said many times, “My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon.”¹¹⁸ This too, gives us reason to avoid equating the Eightfold Path with its end goal. Without being able to understand what it is like to have reached Nirvāṇa, there is no way to establish a firm connection between it and anything else. This should give us good reason to think that we cannot make any strong theoretical connections between Buddhist ethics and any theories which clearly define the relationship between their specified goals and means used to achieve those goals.

Now, it might be that it is *metaphysically* impossible to reach Nirvāṇa without following the Eightfold Path. But, as we just noted, only a select few are able to know this. The rest of us, who are unenlightened, must work within epistemological limits of understanding about the nature of the Buddhist path. For us, it seems *epistemically* possible for there to be other ways of reaching Nirvāṇa. For instance, we might imagine that Pfizer invents something they dub the Arahant pill.¹¹⁹ This pill, once taken, fast-tracks one straight to enlightenment.¹²⁰ The existence of such a pill would be completely

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¹¹⁹ I am indebted to Dr. Michael Byron for contributing this thought experiment to my thesis.

¹²⁰ One could imagine the side of the box saying, “Side effects may include: universal compassion, freedom from form, freedom from formless, and non-returning.”
acceptable to the Buddha, given the goals and limitations that he sets out. This is consistent with the claim that such a pill, or any other alternative route to enlightenment, is metaphysically impossible. Perhaps the specific make-up of both humans and the universe make it so the only way to achieve enlightenment is to follow the Eightfold Path. However, in order to know this, one would need to be enlightened. This makes defining the kind of connection between the goal and the means used to reach that goal impossible for those who have not reached enlightenment. Without knowing what enlightenment is like we cannot confidently say anything about its relationship to the Eightfold Path, other than that it is a path which offers a way to reach the goal of enlightenment. Beyond that, if we try to make the claim that the Eightfold Path is constitutive (or not) of Nirvāṇa, we have claimed more than we are in a position to know.

§3.3 A New Approach

The the preceding chapter, I have argued that Goodman’s consequentialist interpretation ultimately fails because it lacks the distinctive feature of placing the value of an action solely on the consequences. Furthermore, I have presented evidence that we have good reason to believe that Buddhist ethics fails to meet the Constitutivity Condition because the relationship between the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa is an

\footnote{The four noble truths are: (1) All life is suffering, (2) Suffering comes from craving, (3) The cessation of suffering is possible, (4) The Eightfold Path leads to the end goal. The five precepts are (1) do not kill, (2) do not steal, (3) do not commit sexual misconduct, (4) do not lie, and (5) do not take intoxicants. A pill that makes one enlightened could certainly avoid breaking rules such as these, especially if one spent a little time formulating right intention.}
instrumental one. Most significantly, however, I have given reason to believe that we are not able to draw the strong connections between Buddhist ethics other ethical theories because we are fundamentally limited in our knowledge. This I believe gives way to a new, albeit simple, approach. In order to understand Buddhist ethics we must learn how to analyze it in its own right, without reducing it to other theories. Until we have conclusive evidence about the nature of the relationship between the ends and the means, we must resist the temptation of making positive claims such as Buddhist ethics is best understood as consequentialism.
CONCLUSION

In the chapter one, my goal was simply to give an outline of the more recent debate concerning the nature of Buddhist ethics. In looking at two works, one by Charles Goodman and one by Damien Keown, it became clear that something was amiss; the authors derived conclusions that were mutually exclusive. After offering a set of necessary conditions for virtue ethics and consequentialism, I then showed that both Keown’s and Goodman’s readings of Buddhist ethics fail. In chapter two, I analyzed the Eightfold Path in detail and concluded that whatever the relationship between Buddhist ethics and the end goal of Buddhism was, the same relationship would exist between the end and the Eightfold Path as the ethics is inseparable from the Eightfold Path.

In my third chapter, I concluded two things. First, contrary to what Goodman has said, the consequentialist understanding of Buddhist ethics is insufficient. His main tactic was to offer versions of act consequentialism or rule consequentialism as interpretive possibilities for Buddhist ethics. I argue that this fails because more than just the consequences matter in the evaluative process for Buddhist ethics. In particular, one’s intentions in performing action are a crucial determinant of its moral value. Furthermore, Buddhist ethics takes as primary living a good life and defines right action in terms of that. It does not hold that right action is to end suffering and a good life is aimed towards ending suffering; rather, it holds that to live a good life is to live a life without suffering.
and thus right action is defined in terms of what a good life is. This structure clearly resembles virtue ethics and not consequentialism.

Second, I concluded that Keown’s reading of Buddhist ethics also fails. While similarities between virtue ethics and Buddhist ethics do exist, such as offering an answer first to the question what is a good life and then defining right action in terms of that, Buddhist ethics diverges in an important way. I have given evidence that the relationship between the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa fail to satisfy the Constitutivity Condition, according to which a theory can only be considered virtue ethics if the means constitute the end. Virtue ethics defines eudaimonia in terms of the perfection of the virtues, which are just what one needs to have in order to be in a state of flourishing. Buddhism, however, does not define Nirvāṇa in terms of the Eightfold Path. The path is simply a way to reach the end goal.

What’s more, there is a dispute concerning whether or not we can truly know anything about Nirvāṇa without experiencing it. My answer is that we cannot. As a result we (the unenlightened) have no warrant for making any claims one way or the other regarding what kind of relationship obtains between the means and the end in Buddhism. Thus, I conclude that Buddhist ethics cannot conclusively be considered a kind of virtue ethics like Keown suggests because in reality we cannot say for certain whether or not Buddhism satisfies the Constitutivity Condition unless we have experience Nirvāṇa.
By making Buddhist ethics out to be one kind of theory or another, e.g. consequentialism or virtue ethics, one runs the risk of making Buddhist ethics into something it is not. Furthermore it seems antithetical to the process laid out by the Buddha to pin Buddhist ethics down as one kind of theory or another. In the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Buddha says that when he speaks about the tathagata-garbha, often translated as “the womb of the buddhas” or “repository consciousness,” he will sometimes calls it “‘emptiness,’ ‘formlessness,’ or ‘intentionlessness,’ or ‘realm of reality,’ ‘dharma nature,’ or ‘dharma body,’ or ‘nirvana,’ ‘what is devoid of self-existence,’ or ‘what neither arises nor ceases, ‘ or original quiescence,’ or ‘intrinsic nirvana,’ or similar expressions.” 122 All of these phrases call to mind different images and ideas. It can further be argued that they do not even have the same sense: emptiness can be understood as the lack of any intrinsic existence whereas intentionlessness can be understood as a lack of intentional mental states. However, the Buddha was aware that his teachings were not the same across the board and this was intentional. He tailored his teachings depending on the tendencies and attachments of his students. Thus, it is not surprising that such radically different interpretations regarding Buddhist ethics have arisen.

While I have said much about how Goodman and Keown have failed in their conclusions more can be said about what this failure amounts to. One motivation for searching for common ground between a Western theory of ethics and Buddhist ethics is

to further our understanding of Buddhist ethics. Another reason is that when trying to understand an ethical system that is culturally foreign to us, one way to effectively do this is by understanding it through the lens of a familiar system. If we could effect a reduction of Buddhist ethics to virtue ethics or consequentialism, that would say a lot about the theoretical structure of Buddhist ethics. However, even though I argue that this reductive project fails, I contest that we have not lost anything, and in fact we have gained important information. What we are now in a position to do is proceed with a more accurate understanding of Buddhist ethics and see it for what it really is: a unique system of ethics that should be evaluated as such. Instead of debating whether or not it is virtue ethics or consequentialism, we can simply note that similarities exist and then move on to other inquiries, e.g. does Buddhist ethics offer viable solutions to the ethical problems that we face today.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


