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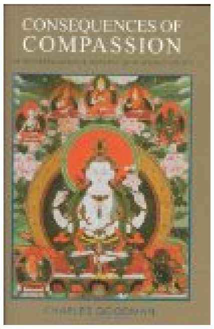
Charles Goodman. *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. viii + 264 pp. $74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-537519-0.



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Virtues as Consequences

In *Consequences of Compassion*, Charles Goodman sets out to define the theoretical structure of South Asian Buddhist ethics in order to demonstrate how Buddhist thought may contribute to ongoing theoretical and substantive projects in Anglo-American ethics. In service of this aim, Goodman draws on the conceptual resources of contemporary analytic philosophy to identify the forms of moral reasoning evinced in Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna texts. Contrary to the commonly held view that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of virtue ethics, Goodman argues that these traditions of thought fall within the family of a welfare-based, universalist consequentialism. Even if one is not entirely persuaded that consequentialism provides a fully adequate interpretive framework for Buddhist ethics, or that Buddhism's primary contribution to contemporary ethics lies in this direction, Goodman makes a compelling case that scholars of Buddhist studies and Anglo-American ethical philosophy alike have much to gain by attending to the sophisticated consequentialist strategies deployed in Buddhist texts.

One of the many virtues of the book is the clarity and precision with which Goodman deploys the conceptual distinction between *rule*- and *act*-consequentialism to illuminate subtle differences between the various Buddhist systems he examines. In their welfare, universalist forms, both rule- and act-consequentialism seek to promote the welfare of all beings; the former, however, simplifies the procedure by which the right is derived from the good by specifying a set of rules that, if followed by most people, would achieve this end. Act-consequentialism, in contrast, demands that one act to promote this end directly, even if this requires breaking rules or harming others. Both theories may require self-sacrifice, but rule-consequentialism tends to insulate the moral agent from more extreme forms of self-sacrifice. Goodman puts this distinction to good use, arguing (in chapter 3) that the respect for the precepts in Theravādin ethics resembles rule-consequentialism. Śāntideva's Mahāyāna ethics (sketched in chapter 5), in contrast, represents a robust form of act-consequentialism, committed to "balancing," the idea that some harm may be necessary in order to maximize the collective good. Because the earlier Mahāyāna thinker Asaṅga tends to justify the rare cases in which it is permissible to violate the precepts in terms of the welfare of the victim, Goodman places his thought (in chapter 4) somewhere in between rule- and act-consequentialism.

Goodman also shows that these various tendencies closely track the three types of compassion described in some Mahāyāna texts. Since rule-consequentialism depends on a distinction between persons, it represents the lowest form of compassion, compassion toward living beings; since Śāntideva, by contrast, justifies action in terms of the doctrine of no-self, he not only is fully committed to the agent-neutrality implicit in universalist consequentialism but also articulates a more sophisticated form of compassion–the kind that is directed at impersonal events. According to Goodman, the most sophisticated form of compassion, as well as the most defensible version of consequentialism, Buddhist or otherwise, is finally found in texts that frame action in terms of the doctrine of emptiness (chapter 6). Those (such as the bodhisattva Vimalakīrti) in whom compassion is united with the wisdom of emptiness behave as if they were act-consequentialists, but act spontaneously without following a consequentialist decision-making procedure. Goodman argues that this is the most defensible form of consequentialism because it allows for the self-subversion that consequentialism demands; the consequentialist agent must be prepared to give up any conception of himself *as* a consequentialist agent, and any attachment to consequentialist theory, in order to fulfill the substantive aims of consequentialism. In addition to this formal consideration, Goodman suggests that the great compassion informed by the wisdom of emptiness avoids the "compassion fatigue" associated with other forms of compassion; with the knowledge that there are no beings to be liberated, it does not have to "take itself seriously" (pp. 113, 130).

Goodman next shows (in chapter 7) how Buddhist forms of consequentialism may avoid common objections to consequentialist theories. One of the primary objections is that these theories are too ethically demanding–that they ask people to make sacrifices most are unable or unwilling to make. Another problem is that, in the hands of the imperfectly wise and altruistic, consequentialism may be used to justify self-serving actions. For these reasons, consequentialism seems to recommend the creation of a moral elite, a select group of individuals morally mature enough to make the sacrifices consequentialism demands. These elites must keep the consequentialist criterion secret, and deceive or coerce the less mature into promoting the good by providing some other theoretical justification for action. Moreover, if the immature do come to believe in consequentialism, their being responsible consequentialist agents requires that they adopt some other moral theory appropriate to their moral level. This is why Derek Parfit, as quoted by Goodman, has claimed that a consequentialist theory must be "partly self-effacing and partly esoteric" (p. 133); but as Goodman points out, many philosophers are uncomfortable with the image of colonial tyranny provoked by the notion of a deceptive, coercive elite, as well as with the idea of a self-effacing moral theory.

According to Goodman, the rule-consequentialism of Theravāda and of the Mahāyānist Asaṅga avoids these problems by providing two sets of rules–lay and monastic precepts–with an overarching rule that one must choose between these sets according to one's ability and inclination. This establishes the monastic community as a morally elite class, but since both kinds of rule-consequentialist agents are needed to achieve the greatest overall welfare, there is no blame attached to choosing the less demanding rule. Goodman allows that in Theravāda Buddhism, the most advanced rule-consequentialist agents may act spontaneously in conformity with the rules without consciously following them. In Asaṅga's Mahāyāna, a similar level of advancement authorizes a practitioner to break the rules under certain conditions. In Buddhist act-consequentialism, the moral elite recommends rules to be followed by the less mature, but reveals the consequentialist character of the rules to these beings as they mature. Goodman clearly has the gradual training of the Mahāyāna path literature in mind here. His point is that this literature represents a thoroughgoing act-consequentialism according to which it is not a form of deception or coercion to withhold the real, consequentialist basis for action from those who are not ready to handle that; it is, rather, a form of education. Here Goodman includes monks and nuns in the elite applying the direct act-consequentialist test, but choosing to follow the rule is constitutive of monastic life. Thus, as a purely normative matter, these consequentialist agents would seem to fall somewhere in between the ignorant masses and the elite who apply the consequentialist test directly. This, however, is a minor point and does not detract from Goodman's general argument.

The lesson for the Western ethicist is that Buddhist thinkers afford several strategies for presenting a compelling and demanding conception of moral sainthood within the structure of consequentialist ethics, without any deception or impugnment of those who "are unable or unwilling to pursue" this ideal (p. 143). Insofar as they contribute to the project of maximizing the good by following rules appropriate to their level of maturity, even the morally average can be effective consequentialist agents, and can become more perfect in the process. Even while Goodman thus argues that Buddhist ethical theories are generally consequentialist, he accommodates Buddhist interest in the intrinsic value of virtues by counting virtue (along with happiness) as constitutive of the objective good these theories seek to promote. Thus they are forms of "character consequentialism."

As is evidenced by his effective deployment of the distinction between rule- and act-consequentialism to differentiate between Buddhist ethical theories, it should be clear that Goodman's methodological approach has much to recommend it. If it has a drawback, it is that it tends to efface elements of Buddhist ethics that do not fit neatly into the consequentialist model. This is in part by design. Goodman admits that an “insouciant pluralism” might have the advantage of explaining “all the data: any form of ethical evaluation that may seem to be present in Buddhist texts,” but thinks it better to aspire to theoretical unity (p. 59). This seems a reasonable hermeneutic strategy, but it is also fair to ask if we might learn more from Buddhist texts when we let ourselves be confounded by their resistance to our theoretical assumptions. A case in point is the question of whether Buddhist ethics is best understood in terms of a consequentialist or virtue ethics–something that may not be an either/or proposition.

The primary reasons Goodman cites against a virtue-theoretical interpretation are that virtue ethics: justifies actions in relation to the agent’s own welfare; draws a strong connection between right action and happiness or self-interest; does not aim to articulate principles that decide what is right in all cases; is agent-relative; and defines virtue in terms of some intrinsic function or essence (namely, human nature). All of these features of virtue ethics require revision in light of the doctrines of no-self and emptiness, and I think Goodman is right to push back against Damien Keown’s assertion that “to pursue the issue of the ultimate ontological constitution of individual natures in [the context of ethics] is to confuse ethics with metaphysics” (p. 96);[1] Goodman demonstrates that these metaphysical doctrines do indeed have important normative implications. Nevertheless, agent-relative considerations, such as those central to virtue ethics, also play a central role in Buddhist ethics. For example, when a person lacks the insight to determine what he should do, he is advised to follow the wise as in the *Kālāma Sutta*. Although Buddhist texts deny a permanent self and/or intrinsic essences, they show a deep understanding of human moral psychology and a rich array of technologies to cultivate its perfection relative to individual inclinations and capacities. I do not think Goodman means to deny this; his point is only that agent-relative facts or interests cannot, on the Buddhist view, serve as the ultimate justification for moral action.

More problematic is Goodman’s insistence that Buddhist ethics is not eudaimonistic. Buddhist texts regularly claim, in this regard, that to benefit others is to benefit oneself; Goodman is aware of this (see, e.g., pp. 48, 75), but does not see benefit to oneself as figuring in the theoretical justification for action. He is right to say as much, but I am not sure he does so for the right reasons. Goodman claims that heroic self-sacrifice (pp. 54-55), giving away merit (pp. 75-76, 91), wishing that others’ bad karma might ripen in oneself (p. 92), wishing that others attain Buddhahood before oneself (p. 106), and the Tibetan practice of Tonglen (p. 107), all argue against the notion that right action always coincides with one’s own happiness and virtue. Insofar as other-regarding virtues are among the most powerful antidotes to the self-clinging tendency that is the root cause of suffering, it is difficult to see how even heroic forms of compassion and generosity would not benefit oneself. The more immediate problem seems to be that justifying other-regarding actions in terms of benefit to oneself is a self-defeating strategy: it diminishes one’s own virtue and one suffers as a result. The fact that Buddhists take virtue to coincide with happiness seems to suggest that consequentialism, even character consequentialism, may not be fully adequate to the complexity of Buddhist ethics. Moreover, in terms of what Buddhist ethics has to offer to the West, this insight into human moral psychology seems to provide a more immediate solution to the nagging problem of “compassion fatigue” than acting within the field of emptiness.

Some scholars have argued that Buddhists cannot be consequentialists because they hold the intrinsic quality of an action–namely, the intention with which it is done–and not its karmic consequences to determine its wholesomeness. Against this view, Goodman argues that an action is wrong according to whether an agent can reasonably expect it to produce bad consequences for himself and/or others, and that this is why it generates “bad karma” (p. 189). Leaving aside Goodman’s infelicitous use of “karma” to refer to the *results* of action, he is right to note that intended benefit or harm plays a central role in determining the quality and result of action; Buddhists do, however, cite other factors as well, such as the defilement and faith with which an action is performed; historical circumstances, such as whether it is something done habitually; and even its objective consequences, as also determining its result.[2] These features of action have little to do with the agent’s assessment of consequences. Goodman claims it is the latter that determines whether an action is right or wrong to avoid the problem inherent in objective act-consequentialism–the problem that an action that appeared to be right may turn out to be wrong in light of consequences the agent may not be in a position to know (p. 184). Goodman takes such factors as motive to be significant owing to the effect they have on character (p. 187). To avoid the implication that this would amount to objective act-consequentialism, Goodman claims that these factors pertain to the evaluation of the *agent* rather than of the *action*, but it is not entirely clear how these two sets of criteria are supposed to relate to each other. Goodman also seems to be forcing a distinction and order of explanatory priority that is not found in Buddhist texts. The category of wholesome/unwholesome (*kuśala/akuśala*) is broader and more complex than (but also inclusive of) the category of what is right/wrong in light of an agent's assessment of potential benefit or harm.[3] This seems to argue in favor of a broadly virtue-theoretical interpretation of Buddhist ethics with consequentialist elements, rather than the other way around.

In the final chapters of the book, Goodman considers the implications of Buddhist consequentialism with respect to free will (chapter 8) and punishment (chapter 9), and as a response to Immanuel Kant (chapter 10). Space does not permit me to do justice to all three chapters here, but the latter two draw heavily on the first of the three. Thus, in chapter 8, Goodman offers a compelling analysis of the ways in which Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva deploy the view of no-self to undermine morally reactive attitudes like anger and resentment. He claims that Buddhists are hard determinists who happily reject free will and moral responsibility. Goodman is right to suggest that the Buddhist critique of fatalism does not amount to a rejection of determinism, that karma does not imply moral responsibility, and that Buddhists do not endorse the agent-causation typically associated with libertarianism. But it is not clear (nor does Goodman demonstrate) that Buddhists are indeed causal determinists. In fact, both Vasubandhu and Buddhaghosa (whom Goodman cites with respect to their views on self) show a profound ambivalence toward (if not complete lack of interest in) the question of determinism.

Despite an occasional tendency to rely too heavily on the taxonomies available in Western philosophy, Goodman has produced an important work that is a valuable addition to the field. In addition to making contemporary ethical theory intelligible to the Asian specialist and making Buddhist philosophy intelligible to the Western ethicist, Goodman has provided the most comprehensive and philosophically rigorous treatment of Buddhist ethics to date–not to mention some powerful arguments for the contemporary relevance of Buddhist ethics.

Notes

[1]. Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 19, quoted in Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*, 96.

[2]. These factors are discussed in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya chapter on karma. Buddhists clearly hold a range of views on action, but Vasubandhu probably stands with the majority of South Asian Buddhists in taking a variety of factors in addition to intended benefit or harm to determine the quality and result of action.

[3]. Georges Dreyfus makes this point in "Meditation As Ethical Activity," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2 (1995), <`http://www.buddhistethics.org/2/dreyfus.html$>$`. Unfortunately, Goodman does not address Dreyfus's arguments for a virtue-theoretical interpretation of Buddhist ethics.

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