

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

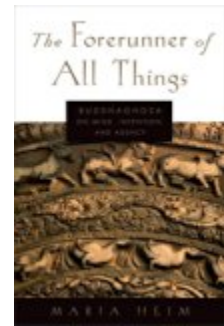


Maria Heim. *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 272 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-933104-8; \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-933103-1.

Reviewed by C. W. Huntington (Hartwick College)

Published on H-Buddhism (December, 2014)

Commissioned by Thomas Borchert



Maria Heim's book is, first and foremost, a joy to read. The writing is elegant, mellifluous, and keenly intelligent. Moreover, she somehow manages to credibly challenge a lot of previous scholarship without falling into polemics. It is a thoroughly satisfying book by any standards.

I suspect that part of the reason Heim writes so well is because she knows that language is not simply a mechanism for delivering ideas, as if ideas were a valuable cargo that existed altogether apart from the relatively unimportant writing used to haul them from one location to another. Rather, as is abundantly clear from her analysis of the Pāli materials, for Heim content and style cannot be separated: ideas are inextricably enmeshed in literary genres, where the writing is integral to the meaning of a text, and meaning—like living—is itself much more than a mere gathering together of concepts. This understanding is one of the indisputable strengths of Heim's book, and one of the primary ways in which her perspective on Theravāda ethics can be distinguished from earlier work on this subject. As she writes in her introduction, which serves as a sort of methodological manifesto: "This book is as much an exercise in learning how to read different kinds of Theravāda literature as it is a quest to understand intentional action, for the latter cannot occur without explicit attention to the former" (p. 4).

Heim has honed her sensitivity to the textuality of ideas by following the lead of her mentor, the great fifth-century scholar Buddhaghosa, who taught her "to see the ways meaning can be expanded upon, how a single passage may lead in many directions, and how the process of exposition is itself a creative engagement with the endless possibilities of the teaching and with the endless pos-

sibilities of human experience that the teachings explore" (p. 13). This is a hermeneutical sword that cuts equally in both directions, for she is obviously inviting us, as readers, to approach her subtly tuned writing with the same degree of open-ended creativity she applies to the study of classical works. In this respect, her book offers much more than a simple exposition of Theravāda ethics; it is as well a highly original and cautionary investigation into the way influential ideas move through time and are slowly but constantly transfigured, like a river carving a path through the continually changing landscape of culture and language.

As the book's subtitle suggests, Heim is principally concerned with what she calls "intention," its relationship to issues of moral agency and—ultimately—to issues of agency in the broadest possible sense. The central Pāli term in this context is *cetanā*, which is commonly translated as "volition," a translation that immediately engulfs *cetanā* in a web of related terms—among them will, choice, and decision—all of which are freighted with Christian associations dating back to Augustine. "In this [Western] conception," she points out, "moral agency occurs as the individual consults his or her conscience and makes 'free' choices accordingly. This is a very particular conception of human nature that has its own religious and intellectual history, and it may not have direct analogs outside the West; it is not, I argue, present in the Pāli sources" (p. 24). According to Heim, the principal objection against viewing *cetanā* through this heavily tinted lens is simply that *cetanā*, as the central factor in directing goal-oriented action, always nevertheless operates only according to the law of dependent origination, where it works in tandem with a complicated set

of forces. *Cetanā* is—like all *dhammas* (mental factors)—nothing in itself, and certainly no sovereign will, lording it over all creation through the power and freedom to choose. All of this raises difficulties for any possible English translation of *cetanā*. While acknowledging these difficulties, Heim settles on intention as the best available alternative. With its phenomenological overtones, “intention” in this context “refers to the complex ways the mind actively interprets (and indeed constructs) its objects” (p. 29).

This much is discussed in some detail in the lengthy introduction to the book. How *cetanā* actually accomplishes its work is the subject of the remaining four chapters, each of which provides a richly nuanced analysis of the way the word is treated in the main genres of Theravāda literature. In what follows, I can only touch on a few particularly intriguing details.

As is well known, in the *Āṅguttara-sutta* the Buddha baldly equates intention (*cetanā*) with *kamma* (Sanskrit *karma*: action bound to suffering), and then adds: “Having formed an intention, one performs *kamma* with body, speech, and mind” (A.iii.415). This passage has provided a locus classicus for modern scholars wishing to link Buddhist ethics with the Western notion of a morally autonomous agent, and it is the subject of extended discussion in chapter 1, which investigates the role of intention in the *suttas* and their commentaries. As distinct from earlier readings, Heim’s exposition stresses the radically conditioned nature of *cetanā* in “the gathering together and animating of other mental factors [*dhamma*] in the construction of experience through action” (p. 42). The *suttas* set *cetanā* in close association with another key term, *saṅkhāra* (predispositions); both are portrayed here as contributing to a “psychological process that occurs quite a few steps before choice and decision making” (p. 52). So the ground is prepared for a certain kind of choice long before any actual choice is made, and it is deep in this soil—the soil of saṃsāric suffering—that we find the roots of what eventually manifests as will, volition, and choice. This is the reason why no choice is ever really free, and why the cessation of *cetanā* and *saṅkhāra* is linked so closely to the achieving of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Heim’s finely crafted exploration of the no-man’s land between the realms of the mundane (*lokiya*) and the supramundane (*lokuttara*) becomes a recurring theme in the book, but it is here in the *suttas* that ethical concerns collide directly with the demands of soteriology. As she points out, “We are ... alerted to shifting scales

of value; sometimes from a soteriological perspective—when texts are interested in the pursuit of *nibbāna* [liberation] or trying to communicate the Buddha’s level of insight—workaday ethical concerns of good (*kusala*) and bad (*akusala*) action get minimized” (p. 54). The author is acutely aware of the enormous semantic burden placed on these two terms as they are pressed into service to guide us along a path that leads from bondage to liberation. In considering a commentary on the *Majjhima-nikāya*, she coins the expression “intention for abandoning” to characterize “a type of intentional action that involves abandoning morally good and bad intentions, actions, and their fruits” (p. 61). Such action—referred to as *kiriya-kamma* (functional action)—“involves abandoning the habits and constructions of accumulating and gathering experience” (p. 63). *Kiriya-kamma* is, then, a peculiar kind of action that brings an end to the cycle of suffering caused by attachment to the results of action in the world. All of this is by way of addressing a perennial problem found at the most rarefied stages of the path, where self-centered desire for *nibbāna* must itself be relinquished. This is, without a doubt, obscure terrain. The Mahāyāna solution, famously set forth in the *Lotus Sutra*, involves compressing both *kuśala* (Pāli *kusala*: skillful) and *akuśala* (Pāli *akusala*: unskillful) into the single doctrine of *upāyakaśalya* (skill in means)—a kind of antinomianism that amounts to a thoroughgoing relativization of ethics in the service of soteriology. As Heim succinctly puts it, “The path to *nibbāna* is *not* paved with good intentions” (p. 61).

Despite the fact that Heim is primarily concerned with ethics (and not soteriology), I still wonder why she consistently translates *kusala* and *akusala* as “good” and “bad” action—a translation that obscures one important way morality and liberation (*nibbāna*) are linked in Theravāda Buddhism. It seems to me that a lot of potential confusion could be avoided by rendering the two words as “skillful” and “unskillful”—etymologically based translations expressing an action’s relative capacity for reducing suffering (*dukkha*). An etymological translation would make it clear that in the different contexts of ethics and soteriology the reduction of suffering involves different sorts of “skills.” In any case, it must be acknowledged that the task of harmonizing the distinct realms of *lokiya* and *lokuttara* is not an easy one and may well be impossible at the conceptual level. Certainly the problems involved go to the heart of Theravāda doctrine, where *cetanā* lies directly on the troublesome interface between action that leads to rebirth and action that does not. It sometimes seems like the authors of the Pāli literature

wanted to have their cake and eat it too: on the one hand, in its intimate association with *saṅkhāra*, *cetanā* epitomizes “the relentless accumulation of experience in *samsāra*” (p. 61); and on the other hand, “the particular function of *cetanā* to accumulate is restricted only to intended action that involves amassing karma (and thus excludes *kiriya-cetanā* and *maggacetanā*” (functional intention and path intention, respectively) (pp. 103-104). All of which appears to be saying that the most essential function of *cetanā* is the accumulation of experience—except when it’s not. Laboring, as she is, within the constraints of her classical sources, Heim is perhaps to be forgiven for a certain lack of clarity on this issue.

Such equivocation (if that’s what it is) is part and parcel of the *suttas*, but it is gone in Abhidhamma, which is exclusively concerned with the supramundane. In chapter 2, the discussion focuses on the intricacies of mental life as described in this highly technical literature, where “Theravādin thinkers trained their energies on ... the deep, complicated, and nitty-gritty psychological factors and their interrelationships that lie beneath choice and virtue” (p. 130)—a realm “below the radar” of Western systems of ethics and “quite removed ... from our ordinary conceptions of experience.” Nevertheless, as Heim rightfully stresses, Abhidhamma “is a type of moral phenomenology in the sense that it names phenomena available, at least in theory, in direct experience: it is based on the Buddha’s first-person account of direct experience, and this account is, according to the tradition, available directly through meditation practice” (p. 88). Which is to say, *vipassanā-bhāvanā* (cultivation of insight) accesses a level of conscious experience (*citta*) more basic than desire or choice or reason, where *cetanā* operates “in a complex web of causal factors that come together in ever-changing moments in almost infinitely diverse combinations” (p. 129). The problem of reconciling ethical and soteriological concerns disappears in the Abhidhamma for the simple reason that at this level of experience there is no longer even a provisional self to struggle with right and wrong, and therefore there is no concern whatsoever with issues of control. Here things are not “done,” they simply *happen* within an intricate nexus of mutually conditioned factors that is itself ultimately unconditioned and, therefore, totally free. Theravāda Abhidhamma opens a window into “the experiences of arhats, awakened ones, whose actions are not characterized in terms of *kusala* and *akusala*” (p. 92). To locate intention this far down is to abandon all discourse that turns to reasons, desires, or beliefs for explanation of moral or immoral action. As Heim puts it, “I may be free to choose

what I will, but what makes me will what I will?” Abhidhamma offers an answer to this question, and it is an answer “that represents a significant departure from our modern expectations of what intentional action is about” (p. 129).

Chapter 3 deals with “disciplinary culture in the Vinaya,” and once again we find no conflict between the ethical and the soteriological, the mundane and the supramundane—this time because Vinaya is exclusively concerned with the workaday world (*lokiyadhamma*). “Technical or absolute language, such as talking about the aggregates, invoked to dismantle the self (appropriate to Abhidhamma discourse) is not going to be helpful to those who need to hear about everyday moral actions such as those that cause us shame and embarrassment, that embody different kinds of love for others, or that involve knowing appropriate gifts to give. For these purposes, the Buddha teaches in a conventional fashion” (p. 135). As always, Heim draws our attention to the significance of the writing itself: “The fact that these discourses are highly contextual and particularized should not be taken as a matter of inconvenience for us, in which we must sift out the particulars to get to the bare facts or general principles of the rule, but rather as constituting the very subject of our inquiries” (p. 150). The Vinaya is rooted in the kind of problems most of us encounter in day-to-day life: “The people involved in the [Vinaya] narrative are complex human beings, vulnerable and dependent in their relationships with others—in other words, real human beings in very real and often not fully resolvable predicaments” (p. 157).

The concern here is no longer with the profound intricacies of mental actions; Vinaya deals with acts of body and speech, with “how action, as experienced by others, may be represented, controlled, and mastered” through the implementation of a sophisticated ethical education (p. 134). In fact, as Heim points out, the technical term *cetanā* seldom even appears in the Vinaya: “where intention comes up, the word used is *thought* (*citta*) or some variant of it” (p. 135). What counts here is “the very conscious awareness one has while constructing and performing an action”—so much so that there is a very real sense in which an unwittingly immoral act does not even count as an action (p. 180).

And yet, in Heim’s reading of Buddhaghosa, despite the Vinaya’s “this worldly” tone, its rules nevertheless serve as a foundation for the soteriological path and are in this sense of a piece with the *suttas* and the Abhidhamma. Moral restraint—as “the presence of absence”—is

indirectly linked to the cultivation of *samatha* (calmness), leading through non-remorse to joy and delight, then to calm, and from there all the way to *nibbāna* (pp. 138-139). Does this mean that there is a seamless continuum between ethics and soteriology? Maybe, and maybe not. Vinaya “does not instruct on meditation or reflect on the highest echelons of religious awareness, but it is the entry point to a path that can go to them” (p. 139). The answer all depends on how you interpret “entry point” and “can” and “go to them.” Once again, there are hairs to be split, and we may not be able to achieve any definitive resolution to the question.

In chapter 4, Heim focuses on the Jātakas and Dhammapada commentaries, turning her attention to the “distinctive exegetical potential” of stories (p. 182). In my opinion, this section of the book offers some of her most original insights. As she makes clear, narrative stresses the intersubjectivity of intention as it functions in ordinary people, and therefore the intersubjectivity of identity itself. In this literature, intention is not “something inside someone’s head” but rather an inherently mysterious, constantly fluctuating stream of events conditioned by interactions with other human and nonhuman beings, events that unfold over stretches of time that include past and future lives. What we learn here is that intention is a narrative/dialogic construct: the intentions of ordinary people “are collaborations with or reactions to others in which the possibility of an autonomous agency or personhood is denied. Their intentions stand in for the intersubjective relationship itself” (pp. 212-213).

Heim’s sensitivity to the importance of genre and literary style is especially pertinent in this chapter. The Jātakas and other early Buddhist stories are often read as if they were nothing but moralistic tales for children and unsophisticated adults; Heim helps us to appreciate the inherent power of stories as something that cannot be realized in any other form of writing—much less reduced to a simplistic moral lesson. “The narratives provide a different rubric of self-work than the more systematic literatures do and have to be read differently, even as they are complementary modes of knowledge and were developed in the same context that produced the three *piṭakas* [baskets] and the exegeses. Stories reflect on action in particular ways and value a particularism that does not necessarily lead to universals or to grand theory. They are open in important ways to multiple interpretations, and they place value on the *process* of puzzling through the opacity of human action” (p. 214). Among other things, we learn from reading these stories that one’s intentions are fundamentally enigmatic not only to others

but even to oneself, since “past and future trajectories are inaccessible to ordinary people” (p. 205). One never knows who among us acts from pure motive: “stream-enterers number among their ranks young women who elope with inappropriate men” (p. 200). Again and again we see how stories offer monastics and scholars—the self-styled moral and intellectual elite of the Buddhist world—an opportunity to cultivate a bit of old-fashioned humility. Perhaps most important, stories force us to look at ourselves and others as more than mere collections of abstractions to be worked on and shaped by other abstractions. Stories work through affect. And they are not simply *about* feelings; stories also *evoke* feelings by opening us up to the sorrows and joys of others: “The reader’s subjectivity and autonomy are compromised by these tales in ways that are, we might say, potentially ethically productive” (p. 214). In Heim’s reading, there is something here for all of us, something vitally important. Through the medium of stories we learn empathy.

As I have already mentioned, I found this section of the book filled with original and provocative insights. But that is not to say that I agreed with everything Heim writes. Her discussion of arhats and other spiritually advanced beings left me scratching my head.

For Heim, arhats are beings whose intentions are insulated from the “messy conditions” of samsara and thus “emblematic of an autonomous agency they alone possess” (pp. 191, 213). As she puts it, “Given what we know about arhats’ intentions from the more systematic genres—that is, that they are *kiriyaetanās* and thus are not conditioned or conditioning—pure intention is constitutive and emblematic of arhatship. They are thus sealed off from the entanglements with others and over time” (p. 198). She seems to have borrowed this idea of “sealed off subjectivity” from Stan Royal Mumford, an anthropologist who writes on Gurung shamans in Nepal, but—for me, at least—it is as if, in these final pages of the book, the very “sovereign will” that Heim so decisively exorcised in earlier chapters comes back to haunt her with a vengeance in the form of an arhat who operates independently of all relationship with others. Clearly Heim is struggling to solve a real problem here, and—as I have already suggested—it is a problem that goes all the way back to the classical sources. Still, there must be a better way to square the apparently competing demands of *lokiya* and *lokuttara*. To speak of “shifting scales of value” makes perfect sense; but to completely insulate the soteriological goal of Theravāda Buddhism from all reference to the web of relations that governs every other aspect of its moral, epistemological, and ontological framework

seems to be unnecessarily extreme.

In fact, there does appear to be an option more in keeping with the leitmotif of Heim’s work—her dominant concern with the irreducible conditionality of moral agency, and it is an option she herself seems to sense in her discussion of how stories work to evoke real, human feelings, and how such feelings—feelings of empathy, in particular—are linked with wisdom. As she puts it, “Abhidhamma insights—that is, the most abstract distillation of the truths about mind and reality that we have—are matured in the concrete and particular narratives of the Bodhisatta’s life” (p. 184).

In the conclusion to the book, Heim quotes Iris Murdoch: “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at.” She invokes Murdoch in this context to illustrate how it is that “the arhat’s freedom is expressed not through choices, but through a spontaneous and fully awakened awareness of the world.” Again, in Heim’s words: “Freedom is acting with a kind of spontaneity ... in response to the way the world really is, where one is not poised between choices that can only arise (that is, that are constructed) from a deluded and conflicted nature” (p. 222).

So here is my (modest) proposal: Instead of talking about the intentions of arhats as “sealed off”—an expression that conjures up the Mahāyāna caricature of an arrogant, self-centered recluse—why not understand their intentions and their spontaneous activity as intention and action operating in perfect accord with the intersubjectivity of every situation? After all, isn’t it the ordinary, “deluded and conflicted” person who wrongly construes himself as isolated and alone, and who is therefore out

of synch with the ultimate reality of things and in need of moral instruction? To be an arhat is above all to see that *no one* is autonomous. There is no hermetically sealed control booth, no all-powerful homunculus (not even an “enlightened” one) pulling the levers, making things happen. Insofar as an arhat directly experiences this fact about “the way the world really is,” his intentions and actions are in harmony with the deepest truths of the Abhidhamma. The arhat has no selfish motives because he no longer thinks of himself as occupying an absolute, quarantined individuality. Rather he feels himself to exist as an individual only provisionally, within an infinitely complex network of intimate, meaningful relationships. In this context, then, “freedom from conditionality” could be understood as the fully matured expression of ordinary empathy, that is, as the arhat’s capacity for what I am going to call “unconditional love,” which—it seems to me—could never be grounded in deliberate, rational choice. Arguably, even in its most refined expressions, morality is conditioned—that is, subject to a kind of calculus (a “disciplinary culture”)—but love is certainly not. If my proposal here appears far-fetched, it may be due in part to how deeply the modern, scholarly understanding of Theravāda soteriology has been influenced by Mahāyāna polemics.

Notwithstanding my quibbles, I want to emphasize how much I enjoyed Heim’s book. I read it through two times in succession, and probably learned more on the second read than on the first. She has given us a deeply informed, perceptive, and challenging piece of scholarship. Not everyone will agree with everything she writes, but no one could put her book down without being compelled to approach the Pāli materials with a more appreciative eye.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: C. W. Huntington. Review of Heim, Maria, *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. December, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42531>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.