



## Introduction

### Why Ask about Madhyamaka and Ethics?

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This volume is a successor to our previous polygraph, *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* (Cowherds 2011). Just as that volume was our collective attempt to understand what it is to take truth seriously in the context of the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, this volume is our collective attempt to understand how to take ethics seriously in that metaphysical context. (Some interpret Madhyamaka as a *rejection* of metaphysics. Arguably, this is itself a metaphysical attitude. But at any rate, in what follows, when we refer to metaphysics, this is to be understood as including this possibility.) It is one thing to take the doctrine of the two truths seriously as providing an account of how the world *is*, and to assent to the claim that nothing is more than conventionally real. It is another to understand its consequences for an understanding of ethics and morality. The Cowherds have set themselves the tasks of working out those consequences in a way that does justice to the Madhyamaka tradition in the contemporary philosophical context.

Although Buddhism is manifestly concerned with ethics—with the character of a morally commendable life—it has become almost a commonplace to note how thin the canonical Buddhist literature is on explicit articulation of ethical *theory* or *metaethics*. Indeed, the scarcity of literature attending to the kind of ethical questions so often asked in the Western philosophical tradition in part explains

the large and contentious literature attempting to reconstruct the structure of Buddhist ethical theory (Clayton 2001, 2006; Finnigan 2011, 2015; Garfield 2010/2011, 2012, 2015; Gethin 1998; Gómez 1973; Goodman 2002, 2009; Hallisey 1996; Keown 2001, 2005; Siderits 2006, 2007, to name but a few). Nonetheless, despite the scarcity of *theory*, there is a lot of ethical discourse in the Buddhist canon, scattered among *sutta* and *sūtra*, *vinaya*, and *śāstra*. The richness and variety of that discourse both inform Buddhist moral thought and confound those who would easily systematize it.

Buddhist ethical thought begins in what is canonically regarded as the originary Buddhist teaching, the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*, the first discourse given by Siddhārtha Gautama after attaining awakening, at the Deer Park in Sarnath. This *sutta* presents an analysis of the human condition as profoundly unsatisfactory, together with a prescription for escaping that unsatisfactory state. The bad news is that life is characterized by *dukkha* (suffering, pain, discontent, unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, dissatisfaction, discomfort, anguish, stress, misery, and frustration). This is caused by *trṣṇā*, or powerful desire—also called *rāga*, an attitude of attachment, and *dveṣa*, an attitude of aversion—based in turn on a primal confusion, or delusion, regarding the way that things are (*avidyā*), and especially the illusion that there is a real self.

The good news is that one can get rid of this network of dysfunctional psychological attitudes, and hence of the *dukkha*. This is not easy, however, as it involves a fundamental transformation of our orientation to the world. The route to this solution is the noble eightfold path (*āryaṣṭāṅgamārga*): right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Following this path, and all the things this entails, is therefore the correct way to live. Of course, this is only an outline of an ethics, and a vast and scattered literature, including narratives, monastic codes, and some systematic moral texts, articulate the details in a variety of ways. Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*), for instance, develops a sophisticated Theravāda moral psychology (see Heim 2013).

Now, as we can already see in the four noble truths, Buddhist ethics—however it is to be understood—is closely connected to metaphysics as well as to psychology; and the Buddhist world has produced a variety of metaphysical theories, some resolutely realist and reductionist, some idealist, and some that are neither of these. Madhyamaka is of the last of these kinds. It was initiated by Nāgārjuna, and delivered one of the most sophisticated Buddhist metaphysical programs. While many previous Buddhist scholars provided candidate analyses of the fundamental nature of reality, Nāgārjuna argued that there is no fundamental nature of reality. Instead, everything, he

argues, in virtue of being dependently arisen, is empty (*śūnya*) of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). This analysis in terms of emptiness, or *śūnyavāda*, leads to a reconceptualization of the familiar Buddhist hermeneutical device of the two truths: in the hands of Nāgārjuna and his Mādhyamika followers, it becomes not only ontological (or perhaps meta-ontological), but apparently paradoxical: the ultimate truth is emptiness; nothing exists ultimately, even emptiness itself. Therefore everything exists only conventionally. This immediately raises the question of what kind of truth conventional truth is, and the question of what kind of existence conventional existence is. These are the questions we addressed in *Moonshadows*.

In this volume, we turn our attention from the implications of Madhyamaka for metaphysics and epistemology to its implications for ethics. The connection between ethics and metaphysics is not an innocent one, nor is it one that Nāgārjuna and his followers ignored. After all, just as we can ask whether to be conventionally real or conventionally true is good enough to ground real ontology and real epistemology, or whether it degenerates into cheap relativism in those domains, we can ask whether an ethical doctrine expressed merely in the register of convention can be taken seriously as a genuine theory of value, or whether it inevitably degenerates into either moral anti-realism or relativism.

Indian Mādhyamikas (and their Tibetan followers) took these problems seriously. Nāgārjuna himself takes up the problem of the implications of emptiness for the four noble truths in the 24th chapter of his *magnum opus*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*), arguing that, while it might appear that the Madhyamaka analysis undermines the force of the truths, in fact it is the only way to make sense of them. In *Ratnāvalī* (*Garland of Jewels*) he addresses ethical concerns directly, providing moral advice to a king that, he claims, is grounded squarely in a Madhyamaka analysis of reality. Nāgārjuna's direct disciple, Āryadeva, develops his ethical theory directly on the basis of the doctrine of emptiness in his *Catuḥśataka* (*Four Hundred Verses*). Candrakīrti's commentary on that text is a fascinating example of the development of ethical ideas in the medium of narrative (Lang 2003), following the tradition of *avadāna* stories (explored in detail in Rotman 2008). And Śāntideva, in perhaps the most extensive treatment of Mahāyāna ethics by any Indian scholar, explicitly connects metaphysics, psychology, and ethics in great detail in his *Bodhicāryāvatāra* (*Engaging in the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, or How to Lead an Awakened Life*).

Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva figure prominently in this volume, whose task is the examination of Buddhist ethics in the context of Madhyamaka metaphysics. Our exploration is explicitly philosophical: that is, we are concerned primarily to answer questions about the structure and cogency of



Madhyamaka ethical theory, and the degree to which it is grounded in, or undermined by, the doctrine of emptiness. So, for instance, one question we address concerns the status of the attitude of *karuṇā* or “care” (sometimes translated as “compassion”). Some have argued that the centrality of care to Mahāyāna ethics rests directly on Madhyamaka metaphysics; others (particularly Williams 1998, 2000) have argued that Madhyamaka metaphysics makes it unintelligible. We are also concerned with whether Madhyamaka ethics inevitably degenerates into relativism, given its inescapably conventional status.

We begin our investigations in Chapter 1 with a survey of the multiple approaches to ethics in the Buddhist tradition, in an effort to situate the tradition with which we are most concerned—the Madhyamaka—not only in the general landscape of Buddhism, but in the more specific context of Buddhist (and Western) ethical reflection. This sets the context for addressing some of the foundational texts on their own terms. In Chapter 2, we consider how to read Nāgārjuna’s ethical theory as it is articulated in *Ratnāvalī*, using Greek ethical thought as an entrée. Then, in Chapter 3, we turn directly to the problem of relativism that arises from at least one plausible reading of Candrakīrti’s understanding of conventional truth, building on the analysis of this problem in *Moonshadows*. Considering the ethical implication of relativism that arises from one plausible reading of Candrakīrti draws our attention to the danger of degenerating into moral relativism, as we argued in the last chapter of *Moonshadows*. Whether emptiness really forces us to fall into the relativistic pit or not, it is important to recall the argument advanced in that volume and to remind ourselves that an articulation of Madhyamaka ethics is not a straightforward matter.

Chapter 4 continues to develop this historical foundation, addressing the problematic but inescapably important passage from the eighth chapter of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, introducing and explaining each of the three readings represented in canonical and modern literature, each of which will play a role in later chapters in the volume. Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is among the most influential and important Indian texts on Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. It virtually defines the Tibetan ethical landscape. One of the central philosophical discussions of *karuṇā* occurs in Chapter VIII (roughly, vv. 90–103), where Śāntideva defends the importance of this moral attitude. But this argument is susceptible to multiple readings; and how one reads it inflects the way one reads the remainder of this text. So, part of understanding the content of Madhyamaka ethics, as articulated in this important philosophical source, requires us to engage with the important passage. In Chapter 4 we articulate the three most common readings of this passage. A fourth reading emerges in Chapter 7.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the Śāntideva passage directly. In the fifth chapter we consider one of the three principal readings of the passage—the rationality reading—and connect it directly with Buddhist ethical thought grounded in the eightfold path, and to the early Madhyamaka ethics of Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva. Chapter 6 builds on that analysis, investigating the *ālambana*, or intentional object, of *karuṇā*. This question arises naturally, once one takes seriously the framework of emptiness and of the two truths: how are bodhisattvas, or ethical agents more generally, to regard themselves and others in the context of an attitude of care? As conventional persons? As instances of emptiness? This chapter also serves as a pivot in our dialectic, initiating a move from more historically grounded to more explicitly systematic reflections.

The seventh and eighth chapters move to metaethical ground. In Chapter 7, we ask to what extent it makes sense to systematize Buddhist ethical thought, and into what kind of system it might be systematized. The chapter also considers the charge that the Śāntideva passage, as read by Prajñākaramati, is inconsistent with the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness. Chapter 8 articulates one way that Buddhist ethics might be systematized as a coherent metaethical framework—as a family of consequentialist theories.

Chapters 9 and 10 address the connections between metaphysical accounts of the structure of action in Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka and ethical thought. Karma—the theory of action and its results—has always played an important role in Buddhist ethical reflection. But the Buddhist doctrine of radical momentariness and the doctrine of selflessness raise puzzles regarding the mechanisms by which karma is transmitted both within and between lives, and regarding the attribution of moral responsibility over time. In the ninth chapter, we consider the often-neglected, but critical role of the metaphysics of momentariness in Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka for thinking about the relation between action and its consequences, and so for the account of karma so central to much Buddhist ethical thought. Chapter 10 continues this discussion, investigating the ways in which Tibetan scholars understood this account of karma in the context of conventional truth.

The final two chapters of the book are more general philosophical investigations of the relationship between metaphysics and ethics in Madhyamaka. They are less textually grounded, and more concerned with rational reconstruction. The eleventh chapter develops an account that meets the challenge we considered in the Chapter 3, re-reading Candrakīrti in light of the results of the intervening chapters so as to provide a non-relativistic foundation for the ethical project, and arguing that that is precisely the foundation which Śāntideva employs. We conclude in Chapter 12 with an argument

that a metaphor from the *Avatamsaka* or *Huayan* (*Flower Ornament*) *Sūtra* which became popular in China as an illustration of the phenomenon of interdependence—that of the net of Indra—may provide the best underpinning of all for the attitude of *karuṇā* central to Mahāyāna moral thought.

An appendix provides a new, and we hope authoritative, translation of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* VIII.90–103 with the commentary by Prajñākaramati. Since this passage plays a central role in many of our discussions, it will be useful to the reader to consult this influential Indian commentary.

The reader will note that individuals or sets of individuals are associated as authors with each chapter. We do take individual and joint responsibility for each chapter, though we do not claim unanimity on all points. This historical material is far from univocal, and reasonable cowherds can disagree about how certain texts and doctrines are to be interpreted, even while agreeing about the broad framework of the two truths and about the fundamental commitments of Buddhist ethics. But we do present what we take to be a cogent, sustained, and collegial examination of the issues raised in Madhyamaka ethics. We have commented extensively on one another's work, have responded to comments, and have often revised our views in light of our fellow cowherds' critique. While individual chapters may reflect the views of their authors to a greater degree than they do the views of the collective, the volume as a whole is our joint product, and we offer it to you in that spirit: a spirit in which insight emerges best from productive interchange among scholars.