Seeing Sentient Beings:
Śāntideva's Moral Phenomenology

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1.   Why Moral Phenomenology?

What do we gain from reading Śāntideva as a moral phenomenologist? For one thing, we avoid the procrustean strategy of locating him in the standard Western doxography of ethical positions comprising areteic, deontological and consequentialist ethics, and then having to explain away all of the differences between his views and the doctrines central to everyone else in each of those siddhāntas. I have argued elsewhere (2010/2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2015) for this understanding, and will not repeat those arguments here. More importantly, we open ourselves to a very different way of thinking about the content of ethics, about moral development than those dominant in Western ethical thought, and we find in classical Indian ethics a way of responding to some important contemporary moral issues.

In this essay, I will first explore a bit more deeply the idea of moral phenomenology and Śāntideva's account of moral cultivation. I will then turn to the use to which we can put moral phenomenology in thinking about phenomena like implicit bias, and I will conclude with a few remarks about how to imagine the bodhisattva vows in the contemporary world.

When I use the term "moral phenomenology," I have in mind an approach to ethics in which the principal object of concern and of moral evaluation is the way one *experiences* the world, including oneself, other moral agents and especially other moral patients. This contrasts with assessing dispositions to act, motivations for actions or the consequences of actions as basic moral goods, or with any focus on an agent's own well-being. When we approach ethics phenomenologically, we aim to

foster ethical growth not by instilling a sense of duty, not by teaching people to focus on the consequences of their actions, and not be accustoming them to *do* things, but by training people to *see* themselves and others in a better way, with the confidence that that experience will not only be more accurate, but will yield more effective engagement with the world in a host of situations. All of this might look like a straightforward particularism of the kind advocated by Dancy (2006) if one focuses only on actions, principles or states of character. Which of these is most salutary, or skillful, will indeed vary dependent on circumstances, and from the standpoint of standard Western ethical viewpoints they will appear irreducibly unpatterned.

Despite being particularist in this sense, however, there is a single principle of a sort that induces the variety that otherwise defies comprehension by any tight description: the proper way to act in any given situation, the proper rule to apply, and the proper emotion to experience are those which flow from the right kind of experience of that situation.[1] This of course involves two rather optimistic theses about human psychology, *viz.,* that to see the world aright leads inevitably to appropriate action, and that it is possible to transform our perceptual experience through practice. It also involves a commitment to a certain metaphysical view about reality that explains what the content of that correct vision is, *viz.* the Madhyamaka position. Any of these could be wrong, and we will talk a bit about the second. But I want to take them each for granted here to see where the doctrine takes us.

Moral phenomenology as an approach to ethics harmonizes very well with the path structure of Buddhist ethics generally and with that of the Mahāyāna tradition in particular, and with Buddhist psychology. From the beginning, Buddhist practice has been guided by the metaphor of path, with practice designed to advance one from an initial state to a goal of perfection. That initial state of samsara is one of bondage by psychopathological confusion about one's own nature and the nature of

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[1] There are obvious intriguing affinities here to the views of the British sentimentalists, especially Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Adam Smith and Hume. I explore these in (2017). But there are also unexplored affinities to Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics," a suggestive essay that deserves more attention.

the world around one, pathological attraction and egoism, and corresponding pathologies of aversion, manifested in hostility, fear and dysfunctional reaction. The path culminates (shorn of grandiose cosmology and hyperbolic accounts of the superhuman) in a state of awakened existence. That state is grounded in an understanding of one's own nature as a selfless, interdependent bein and that of the world as a matrix of interdependence in which one is inextricably embedded so internalized that it transforms one's perceptual experience, just as disciplinary expertise transforms the way one sees objects in one's domain of knowledge or skill. That perception and skilled engagement reduces the sense that one is at the center of the universe, and dislodges the pathologies of egoistic attraction and hostile aversion, allowing one to become less atavistically reactive and more humanely responsive. The path to liberation is hence simultaneously a path out of individual suffering and a path that allows one to become the agent of others' well-being.

The Mahāyāna version of the path to liberation that structures *Bodhicāryāvatāra* adumbrates progress as the development of six moral perfections: generosity, mindfulness, patience, perseverance, meditative skill and wisdom. We will discuss each of these in what follows. But for now, the point is that each of these is characterized in the text as a mode of skilled engagement, a way of being in the world. The path of the bodhisattva is a path to liberation in a very specific sense: liberation from psychopathology to psychological health, with wisdom as the crowning achievement that permits the internalization of understanding so as to permit spontaneous engagement.

These analyses of the path to perfection are underwritten by a distinctive psychology developed in detail in the Abdhidharma literature and taken for granted in all Buddhist ethical thought. That is a psychology with no center, no individual agent, but rather a constantly evolving set of interdependent perceptual, conceptual and conative processes that can be shaped by impaired by error and illusion, shaped and improved by training, and made increasingly effective. Perceptual processes on this account, are already pregnant with purpose, intention, conceptualization, affective response and action-readiness. Anyone familiar with the psychology of

Tolman or Gibson, or with Sellarsian epistemology, or with the phenomenology of Bhattacharyya, Merleau-Ponty or Heidegger will recognize this account of perceptual experience as deeply implicated with embodiment, attention, desire and intention, and as far from passive reception of data to be passed on to independent cognitive processes.[2]   As we will see, recent literature on implicit bias provides striking confirmation of this view, and of its moral significance.

Moral phenomenology fits perfectly with this account of psychology and of path. The moral phenomenologist sees ethical achievement as the achievement of a set of perceptual and action skills, as a transformation of the nature of embodied experience and the replacement of instinctive reaction with spontaneous responsiveness. This is precisely what Buddhist psychology claims distinguishes the bondage of samsara from the liberation of nirvana, and is precisely the kind of change that characterizes the path and the possibility of which is explained by Abhidharma psychology.

Consequentialist and deontological ethical theory, on the other hand, see moral development in terms of coming to know and to conform to obligations—either obligations given by universal maxims or by utility calculations. While conforming to moral principles or maximizing utility may sometimes be the right thing to do, they are not always the most skillful ways to navigate morally charged situations, and they do not exhaust the moral domain. Moreover, one still needs the skill to *see* when these considerations are called for, and *how* to bring them to bear, as well as a motivation and personal comportment that will enable one to be effective. And each of these frameworks implicates a sense of the autonomy and unity of the moral agent that a Buddhist psychology suggests is illusory.[3] An areteic account emphasizes the active, the objective, and does not do the same justice to the subjective or perceptual aspect of moral development, while at the same time subordinating morality to individual flourishing as opposed to the benefit to the

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[2] See Thompson 2007, 2014 or Garfield 2015 for more detail.
[3] See Garfield (2014) for a discussion of Buddhist agency in the absence of a free agent.

world at large. It is natural, therefore, that Śāntideva advances a moral phenomenology.

Śāntideva's emphasis on the role of introspective attention and vigilance regarding one's mental states (*smṛti* and *samprajaña*), jointly constituting what has come to be known as *mindfulness,* is a central aspect of his moral phenomenology. Ethical practice, he emphasizes at the beginning of chapter V, is grounded in the ability to monitor and to sustain salutary states of mind (as opposed to dispositions to act, or commitments to duty, to utility, etc..)

> V:1   One who wishes to guard his training
> Should carefully guard his mind.
> If the mind is not guarded,
> It is impossible to guard one's training.

> V:2   Wild mad elephants do not
> Cause as much harm as
> The elephant of the mind
> Causes in Avici hell!

> V:3   But if the elephant of the mind
> Is restrained by the rope of attention,
> Then all fear vanishes
> And all virtues develop.

In these three opening verses, we see Śāntideva emphasizing the central role of cognitive states in vice and in virtue, and the clear assertion that the foundational moral practice is the attainment of control over one's mind. He emphasizes the central role of the deliberate transformation of experience and attitude in ethical life a few verses later, taking first generosity and then patience as examples. Each of these might be thought, *ab initio,* to be virtues manifested primarily in action and in speech. But Śāntideva insists that they are instead states of mind, and modes of experience:

> V:9   If the perfection of generosity
> Eliminates all poverty,
> Given that there is still so much destitution,
> How could it be that the protectors perfected it?

> V:10 The perfection of generosity is said
>   To be the intention to give everything
>   Along with the fruits of that act, to all beings.
>   Therefore, it is simply a state of mind.
>
> V:13 Where is there enough leather
>   To cover the surface of the earth?
>   But the entire earth is covered
>   Just by the leather of my shoes.
>
> V:14 Just so, I am unable to control
>   To control external phenomena;
>   But if I can control my own mind,
>   Why would I need to control anything else?

These last two verses are particularly apposite. To put on my shoes instead of covering the earth is simply to change the way I experience the world, instead of changing the world. The centrality to moral practice of such control of experience is the hallmark of the Buddhist moral phenomenology Śāntideva recommends.

2.   Aspirational and Engaged Bodhicitta

The distinction between aspirational and engaged bodhicitta that Śāntideva draws early in chapter I reflects this orientation. Aspirational bodhicitta is the attitude of one at the beginning of the bodhisattva path, when emptiness and selflessness are not yet realized. It is the attitude that enables one to begin the transformation of one's consciousness from an experience of the world in which one is the egoistic center of experience and agency, and others are reduced to objects whose interests are subordinate to one's own into an experience of the world that is decentered, absent self-grasping, in which others are experienced as of equal subjective standing with oneself, in the attitude of *upekṣa* (non-egocentricity or impartiality) that enables *metta* (beneficence), *karuṇā* (care) and *muditā* (rejoicing in the success and virtue of others). It is only when this state of mind is cultivated that one achieves *engaged bodhicitta.*

Śāntideva characterizes this difference in explicitly phenomenological terms, as the difference between a conceptual and a perceptual engagement with the world and with others:

I:15.   In brief, one should understand that
        Bodhicitta has two aspects:
        Aspirational *bodhicitta*,
        And engaged *bodhicitta*.

I:16.   The wise understand these two,
        Just as one understands the difference
        Between one who desires to travel and one who has traveled,
        Recognizing the differences between them and the order in which they arise.

I:17.   Aspirational bodhicitta brings about great results,
        Even as we continue to circle within saṃsāra;
        Yet it does not bring about a ceaseless stream of merit,
        For that requires engaged bodhicitta.

One who has cultivated aspirational bodhicitta knows conceptually what kinds of perceptual states she aims to achieve; one who has cultivated engaged bodhicitta perceives the world directly through emptiness and its ethical corollaries. Śāntideva expands on this theme at the opening of the eighth—the meditation—chapter. Here, he argues that the fundamental psychopathologies of egoism, aversion to others and confusion about the nature of reality, one's own nature and one's position in the world arise naturally when one is distracted, and that they can be eliminated by meditative practice.

VIII:1   Having thus increased one's efforts,
         One should place one's mind in meditation.
         For if one's mind is distracted
         Lies in the fangs of psychopathology.

VIII:2   By secluding the mind and body,
         Distraction is prevented from arising.
         Therefore, one should, abandoning the world,
         Completely relinquish conceptual thought.

VIII:3   Because of such things as desire and attachment,
         The world is not renounced.
         Therefore, in order to renounce these,
         The wise practice as follows:

VIII:4   Having understood that one can completely destroy psychopathology
         By deep insight achieved in mental tranquility,
         One should first seek tranquility and then
         Without desire for the world, destroy the pathology.

The reason that meditation is an ethical pursuit, and the reason that such a long chapter in *Bodhicāryāvatāra* is devoted to meditation is that it is the central method of moral cultivation. The reason for this distinctive positioning of meditation as an ethical practice—something we see in no principal Western ethical system—is that meditation is the technique by means of which one can transform what one *knows* into what one *sees,* conviction into experience, and it is moral experience that constitutes the engaged bodhicitta in which moral perfection consists. The extent to which this is possible is far from clear, but if it is possible, this kind of transformation can have far-reaching implications.[4]

3.   Moral Perception and Implicit Bias

The psychological demonstration of the pervasiveness of implicit bias, of its resistance to introspection, and of the possibility—albeit the difficulty—of its extirpation is one of the most important empirical discoveries about our moral psychology ever made. By now the data are familiar, and so I will merely recall some of the most important facts in brief. In the United States, when people perceive African-American faces and Caucasian faces on a screen they have a much more difficult time responding with a positive evaluation to a pleasant object when the response key is on the side shared by the African-American face, and a much harder time assigning a negative response when the negative key is on the Caucasian side then when the faces are reversed.[5] (Dovidio et al 2002) Objects are more likely to perceived as threatening (guns, as opposed to keys) when in the hands of African-Americans than when in the hands of Caucasians. (Blascovich et al. 2001, Kubota and Ito 2014, Gawronski and Bodenhaus 2014) There are many tests for implicit bias, and their results converge powerfully.

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[4] The textual history of *Bodhicāryāvatāra* is complex, and it is clear that chapter VIII moved as the text evolved, and that a considerable amount of material was added to this chapter as the text achieved its present form. But I here read the text as we have it, not as it originated. See Cowherds (2015) for more on this issue.

[5] This is not unique to the United States. Implicit bias effects are found everywhere, differing from one another in response to divergent cultural norms.

For present purposes, a few further disturbing facts deserve note. First, the pervasiveness of implicit bias is overwhelming. (Hart et al. 2000) Second, it develops very early. (Castelli, Zogmaister and Tomelleri 2009, Newheiser and Olson 2012, Rutland et al. 2005) Third, it is present every bit as much in those ideologically committed to and involved in anti-racism issues and social justice movements, and is entirely invisible to introspection (Nardo, Knowles and Monteith 2003); taking an implicit bias test can be a sobering experience, one I recommend to everyone who has not done so. Finally, while it is possible to mitigate implicit bias with training, it is difficult, and if training is not repeated regularly, the effects appear to be only short-lived. (Burgess et al. 2007, Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001, Joy-Gaba and Nosek 2010)

The impact of implicit bias is also pervasive and disturbing. It shows up in policing, in often fatal ways when African-Americans are perceived as armed or as threatening in much greater proportion than are Caucasians (Correll et al., 2014, Plant and Perruche 2005); it shows up in the judicial system: African-Americans are much more readily perceived as guilty, are perceived as responsible for criminal behavior to a much higher degree than are Caucasian suspects against whom similar evidence is adduced, and receive disproportionately longer sentences than do Caucasian defendants. (ABA 2014, Bennett 2010, Clemons 2014, Eberhard et al. 2006, Sommers and Ellsworth 2001) It shows up in the medical system when African-American patients are much less likely to be prescribed pain killers than Caucasian patients, and much less likely to be offered experimental treatments. (Betancourt 2004, Blair et al., 2014, Haider et al. 2013) It shows up in the educational system in which African-American students are more likely to be seen as impaired or as disruptive and less likely to be seen as gifted than white students of comparable ability and who exhibit comparable learning styles and behavior. (Hannon, De Fina and Bruch 2013) And it shows up in employment when identical resumés are treated differently if the name at the top is apparently African-American. (Ross 2014, Sen 2014) You and I have undoubtedly behaved unjustly many times in the past because of implicit bias. (Beattie, Cohen and Maguire 2013)

Why am I talking about implicit bias in this context? Because, while explicit racist (or sexist, or homophobic, or... fill in the blank) ideology plays a very great role in social oppression and immorality, implicit bias probably plays the greatest role, and is the most invisible and most recalcitrant source. But for present purposes, the reasons to focus on implicit bias are twofold. First, it makes it clear just why moral phenomenology is so important and fundamental to ethical training and to ethical theory, and secondly, because, as Śāntideva saw correctly, it operates at the level of *perception*—before we engage in any conscious deliberation, or engage our explicit beliefs, we have committed ourselves to wrong view and the roots of wrong action in our spontaneous perceptual engagement with the world.

In (2010/2011) and (2015) I emphasized the role that fear plays in moral motivation in the opening chapters of *Bodhicāryāvatāra.* Śāntideva argues that fear—and in particular he has in mind fear of *death*—motivates vice. The amelioration for fear through meditation that embeds the view of selflessness is, he argues, the path to virtue. *And,* he emphasizes, that fear is universal, and hard to notice; *and,* its content, while psychologically powerful, runs counter to our explicit beliefs about ourselves and our lives. Now, Śāntideva is not talking explicitly about implicit bias: he is worried about our innate and unconscious fear of death, and its role in motivating self-grasping, and he is as worried about the explicit psychopathologies to which we are as heir as he is about the implicit one. Nonetheless, Śāntideva is identifying a more general moral psychological phenomenon of which implicit bias is an important instance: the driving of our conscious beahviour, speech and thought by unconscious, but morally charged perceptual judgments.[6]

Perceptual processes themselves involve appraisal, and that appraisal is not morally neutral; moreover, that appraisal constitutes the affective and conative horizon of confusion, attraction and aversion that grounds all other immorality. That is why moral phenomenology is the most important level of moral intervention and the most important locus of moral practice, and why there is hope, as indicated by some

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[6] For similar thoughts in the modern medical community see Teal, et al. 2012).

studies that show some effectiveness of meditative and other practices for ameliorating implicit bias.[7] (Kang, Gray and Dovidio 2014, Xiao et al. 2014)

That is also why the fifth chapter—the mindfulness chapter—and the eighth chapter—the meditation chapter—are so important in the project of *Bodhicāryāvatāra.* Mindfulness and meditation are not part of the Western moral landscape in *any* major moral tradition, and that is because of the West's general inattention to moral phenomenology. Even Hume, that great sentimentalist, can recommend "carelessness and inattention" as salutary attitudes. But if you think that how we *see* makes a great difference in our moral lives, then the cultivation of moral responsiveness requires first a cultivation of awareness, and then a cultivation of responsiveness, followed by control, of those very automatic perceptual processes, and that requires the cultivation of mindfulness and meditative discipline, with that meditation focused on the eradication of egoism and partiality. And if you think that implicit bias is an important issue, you have to take seriously the task of reorganizing your perceptual processes; and if you take that task seriously, mindfulness is important.

In chapter V, following the introductory verses we discussed earlier, Śāntideva recommends the following mental discipline directed to resisting the impulses deriving from psychopathological sets or reactions:

> V:48   When one sees that one's mind
> Is desirous or angry,
> One should neither act nor speak.
> One should remain like a block of wood.
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> V:49   When one's mind is
> Agitated, deprecatory,
> Arrogant, vain,
> Or deceitful…

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[7] Although, as I noted above, there is reason to think that these interventions must be repeated regularly in order to be effective. Of course, it may well be that long-term meditative practice of the kind that Śāntideva has in mind may have far greater effect, and that that effect may be more durable.

V:50   When one is devoted to self-promotion,
And the deprecation of others,
When one is abusive or scornful,
One should remain like a block of wood.

V: 51   When one seeks profit, honours or fame,
Or desires to have servants,
Or wants others to venerate one,
One should remain like a block of wood.

V:52   When one's concern for others' ends vanishes,
And concern for advancing one's own ends grows,
When the desire to speak arises,
One should remain like a block of wood.

V:53   When impatient, lazy or fearful,
Impudent or rude,
Or partial to oneself
One should remain like a block of wood.

To remain like a block of wood is to pause, to refrain from acting on the basis of psychopathology, on motives that one recognizes to be immoral, and which one explicitly renounces. But the first step to this achievement is recognition of those motives, and of the ways of seeing that generate them. That is why this passage occurs in the fifth chapter. Any of the attitudes Śāntideva repudiates here can be an unconscious mental set that enframes the way we perceive others and that drives our behavior, speech and reasoning in ways of which we are unaware, as an implicit bias. While Śāntideva does not mention racial or gender prejudice explicitly—kinds of prejudice hardly thematized as problematic in eighth century India—the deprecation of others, scorn and fear certainly are central components of that kind of prejudice. Only rigorous attention to our own phenomenology can prepare the way for the task of transformation of our mode of engagement with the world, a task that is of paramount importance.

4.   Cognitive Illusion and Introspection

Earlier in chapter five, Śāntideva emphasizes that this kind of awareness of our own cognitive and affective states, while crucial to moral development, is not easy. As he notes, anticipating the data concerning the pervasiveness and cognitive opacity of implicit bias, even those who are deeply committed to morality, and who are really

smart, fail to make moral progress due to failures to be aware of their implicit biases:

> V: 26   Even scholars with faith
> And great perseverance
> Through the vice of introspective inattention
> Fall into unfortunate states.

> V: 27   Having been robbed by the thief of introspective inattention,
> As a consequence of the fall from introspective attention,
> Even if one has accumulated merit,
> That theft makes life in a fortunate realm impossible.

> V:28   Therefore, one should never remove
> Introspective attention from the doorway.
> And if it has gone, with Hell in mind,
> One should restore it to its place.

But it is not only the sheer difficulty of introspecting the deeply buried and only implicit that stands in the way of moral progress. Cognitive illusion is also an obstacle, and a feature of our phenomenological structure that is, while pervasive, difficult to appreciate and acknowledge. (Nisbett and Wilson 1977) It is not a specifically moral failing, Śāntideva notes:

> VI: 67   Since some harm because of delusion, and
> Others become angry when deluded,
> Who should we say are guiltless,
> And who should we say are guilty?

Who is guiltless? Who is guilty? Everyone and no-one. Cognitive illusion, like optical illusion, is pervasive, built into the very structure of human subjectivity, and impossible to escape entirely. Just as we are convinced perceptually that the two lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion are of unequal length, we can be convinced introspectively of our own *upekṣa,* or of our own immunity to implicit bias. Nonetheless, although we cannot be faulted for succumbing to the visual illusion of taking the lines perceptually to be unequal, we are responsible for knowing that that is just an illusion, and for believing them to be equal, and to engaging that belief, and not the illusory appearance, in our reasoning and our action.

In the same way, although we cannot be faulted for misperceiving our own cognitive, affective and conative states in introspection, we are responsible for becoming aware of the cognitive illusion that pervades our introspective awareness, hiding our own implicit bias and its effects from us, and for forming a more accurate survey of our own psychology, through reflection and consultation with others, or through taking online implicit bias tests, and for using that more accurate survey, as much as we can, to guide our action, our speech and our deliberations. (See also Fitzgerald 2014.) Knowing that we live like fish, in the fangs of delusion, Śāntideva admonishes us, it is both irrational and immoral to do nothing about it.

> VII: 11 Since you are terrified
> By living like a fish,
> How much more suffering will you experience,
> When you end up in hell due to vice?

And what we are called upon to do is not to *act* differently, not to adopt different *principles,* not to transform our *character,* at least not primarily. We are called upon to work first to understand how we in fact see the world, then to correct for the distortions we know we impose upon our perception of ourselves and others, and finally, to transform the nature of that experience. For all else flows from our spontaneous experience.

## 5.	The Bodhisattva vow

Bodhicāryāvatāra closes with an extended version of the bodhisattva vow (X:51-56). In light of this analysis of Śāntideva's approach to ethics as moral phenomenology, it is worth reflecting on some of the content of that vow. Śāntideva begins by resolving to recollect, or to attend to (*smṛti/rdan pa*) past lives, that is, to maintain and to be guided by an accurate awareness of the determinants of his cognitive state. He then vows to maintain strength, and resolves to *see Mañjunatha* in all of his deeds, that is, to experience the world through insight and discernment, not through delusion, and finally for the suffering of the world to ripen on himself—that is, to genuinely *experience* the suffering of others, not merely to conceptualize it, and so to be *moved*

by it in virtue of an absence of egocentricity; for *karuṇā, maitri* and *mudīta* to arise spontaneously from the achievement of *upekṣa*, that is, for attitudes of care and love to emerge from coming to see the world not as my object, but as my home. That resolution to transform experience is the entrance to the bodhisattva path. As I have suggested, aspirational bodhicitta may require that we take immediate action to transform our experience.

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