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KARMA, CHARACTER, AND CONSEQUENTIALISM

Damien Keown

ABSTRACT

Karma is a central feature of Buddhist ethics, but the question of its classification in terms of ethical theory has so far received little attention. Granting that karma is foundational to Buddhist ethics and arguing that what is fundamental to the Buddhist understanding of karma is the *saṃskāric* modification of the agent, this article relates the doctrine of karma as understood in Theravāda Buddhism to Western ethical concepts and challenges the casual consensus that treats Buddhist ethics as a variety of consequentialism. The contrary argument, that Buddhist ethics is best understood in terms of virtue-mediated character transformation, is made dialectically through a critique of recent discussions of karma by Roy Perrett and Bruce Reichenbach and through an assessment of the plausibility of Philip Ivanhoe's concept of "character consequentialism."

ANY SYSTEMATIC ACCOUNT OF BUDDHIST ETHICS must before long make reference to karma. Belief in karma is a constant which underlies the philosophical diversity of the many Buddhist schools, and it is one of the few basic tenets to have escaped major reinterpretation over the course of time.[1] There now exists a voluminous body of scholarly literature on karma, from both Hindu and Buddhist perspectives (for a bibliography, see Potter 1980), but surprisingly, in view of the frequent references to karma as an "ethical" doctrine, almost no attention has been paid to how karma is to be classified in terms of ethical theory. There seem to be two families of Western theories to which karma bears a resemblance: consequentialism and virtue ethics.[2] The

[1] Of course, much effort and debate went into clarifying the nature of karma and its operation. However, there appears to have been no substantial revision or development in the basic concept. Some modification might have been expected from the *Mahāyāna* schools in the course of their revisioning of other basic teachings such as those on causation, nirvana, and the nature of the Buddha, but no significant developments seem to have taken place.

[2] The terms "consequentialism" and "utilitarianism" are used interchangeably in what follows. I think it will be clear that the account of karma and Buddhist ethics offered here is of a descriptive rather than a normative kind.

aim of the present enquiry is to determine which of these makes most sense as a theoretical explanation of karma.

Despite the lack of research into the question, a consensus of a kind may be found in the *dicta* of scholars writing throughout the greater part of this century, and the consensus is that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist.[3] Among early opinions may be cited that of J. B. Pratt who in 1928 described "the Buddha's ethic" as one of "utilitarian or (altruistic) hedonism" (1928, 32). He suggested: "The principle on which the good and evil forms of happiness are to be distinguished is explicitly stated. It is the principle of utilitarianism" (1928, 28). Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids took the view that "The Buddhist . . . was a hedonist, and hence ... his morality was dependent or ... utilitarian" (1974, *xci)*. Among modern scholars, David Kalupahana has noted that "The emphasis on happiness as the goal of ethical conduct seems to give the Buddhist theory a utilitarian character" (1976, 61). The most recent opinion is that of Padmasiri de Silva: "Buddhism may be described as a consequentialist ethic embodying the ideal of ultimate happiness for the individual, as well as a social ethic with a utilitarian stance concerned with the material and spiritual well-being of mankind" (1991, 62).

As is obvious from even these brief quotations, Buddhist ethical teachings have been associated with Western consequentialism on the grounds that (1) Buddhism defines the good hedonically in terms of worldly well-being; (2) the Buddhist agent acts in such a way as to ensure her or his own well-being in future lives (action is motivated by the desire for personal happiness); and (3) the Buddhist criterion of right action is conduciveness to increased happiness. It is worth noting what is assumed and what is overlooked in these somewhat patronizing judgments. These authors assume that the attention Buddhism gives to the inevitable consequences of deeds entails a view that individual agents act with utilitarian motives to secure pleasurable consequences. They also seem to assume a particular non-naturalistic theory concerning the mode of operation of karma—namely, its operation as a transpersonal causal chain in which future situations constitute the mechanically prescribed consequences of specifia-

[3] It is not easy to distinguish clearly where karma ends and ethics begins in Buddhism. In fact, it is doubtful that a clear conceptual distinction could be made between the two. We might, however, think of karma as that part of ethics concerned with the psychology of moral choice and the soteriological and hedonistic consequences such choices have for the actor. In this discussion, however, I will treat them as broadly equivalent to the extent that conclusions about the nature of karma will also apply to Buddhist ethics in general.

ble deeds—consequences that are, so to speak, visited upon the agent by inflexible external powers. In working from these assumptions, they overlook (or at least discount) the extremely important inter-relation of karma with the dispositions and character of the agent. More troubling still, these judgments seem to entail an imprecise under-standing of exactly what constitutes consequentialism in ethics. Consequentialism is not a simple prudential doctrine that actions have positive and negative consequences that an agent takes into account in making a moral decision; rather, consequentialism is a distinctive theory about what makes right acts right. The consequentialist criterion of right action is the criterion of utility or usefulness in bringing about some state of affairs that is felt to be highly desirable on other grounds. An act is right or wrong simply because it contributes to or fails to contribute to that state of affairs. Strictly speaking, the consequentialist therefore holds that motives are irrelevant to the determination of right action. Thus, if one wants to argue that Buddhist ethics is a variety of consequentialist ethics, it will not do to argue simply that agents are motivated to do good things by the desire for future happiness; on the contrary, one would have to show that future utility provides the sole criterion by means of which people differentiate right from wrong deeds and that consideration of personal intentions and motivations plays no role in moral assessments.

The view that the doctrine of karma is *not* a form of consequentialism has, so far as I am aware, been expressed only twice. The first time was in a passing remark by Rajendra Prasad in the context Hindu ethics:

> The law of *karma* is a retributive law, or one which presupposes a retributive theory of morality, because, according to it, whatever one deserves for having done an action, he deserves it simply because he has done it, and not because of its utility or disutility. It is thus opposed to consequential-ism or utilitarianism, according to which what one deserves is determined exclusively by the utility or disutility of his actions [Prasad 1989, 233].

Though Prasad did not elaborate on this insight, it is valuable because it suggests just how difficult it would be to argue that conduciveness to the good is the sole right-making characteristic in Buddhist thought.

The second occasion is in a recent book of my own, where I suggest at some length why the characterization of Buddhist ethics as consequentialist is unsatisfactory (1992, 107-28). I do not propose to repeat those arguments now; instead, I wish to approach the question primarily through a critique of the work of three writers who in recent years have discussed issues that are relevant to the inquiry. The first section discusses a 1987 article in which Roy Perrett suggested that

Buddhist ethics may not be susceptible to classification in terms of Western categories in view of incompatible metaphysical presuppositions. If this view is correct, our enquiry is at an end. I suggest, how-ever, that this view is mistaken and that karma can be analysed successfully using Western ethical concepts. Next I seek to clarify the nature and mode of operation of karma. Here, in the longest section of the article, I examine certain conclusions reached by Bruce Reichenbach in the 1990 monograph *The Law of Karma,* and I set out my own understanding of karma and its operation. In the final section, I consider an article by Philip Ivanhoe published in this journal in 1991, in which he applies the designation "character consequentialism" to early Confucian ethics. I consider the merits of this designation and with what success it might be applied to the doctrine of karma. By working dialectically against what might be called the consequentialist consensus—showing what it does not take into account—it is my intention to disclose the deep affinities between Buddhist ethics and Western forms of character ethics.

1. Ethics East and West

Can legitimate comparisons be made between Buddhist and Western ethics? L. S. Cousins has suggested that the subject matter of what is known in the West as "ethics" is handled by Buddhism in quite different ways and subsumed under different categories (1994, 252). A similar view has been expressed by Winston King: " 'Ethic' *[sic]* for Buddhism is psychological analysis and mind-control, not the search for a foundation of ethical principles, a hierarchical arrangement of ethical values, or an inquiry into their objectivity" (1964, 4-5). Given their very different historical and cultural backgrounds, it would be surprising if Buddhism and the West had not evolved intellectually in different ways. Perrett sees the distinctiveness of the two traditions in ethics as arising from their different metaphysical underpinnings. He suggests that certain features of Buddhist metaphysics "defuse" some of the antithetical categories of Western ethics: "It seems that certain familiar oppositions in Western ethical theory ... do not figure in Buddhist ethics. I shall discuss two such examples, arguing that the reason why this is so in these cases is the presence of certain distinctive metaphysical presuppositions" (1987, 71).

The first example Perrett discusses is the opposition between egoism and altruism. This contrast, he suggests, is predicated upon an understanding of the self that Buddhism does not share.[4] The Bud-

[4] This observation was first made by Karl Potter (1963, 259).

dhist account of the self seems to remove the basis for prudential egoism with the result that these two moral options collapse or form a synthesis:

> Insofar as egoism represents a threat to the rationality of morality, and insofar as the egoistic presumption is made plausible by a particular metaphysical conception of the self, then it is clear that the Buddhist view of the self challenges the rationality of the egoistic presumption and provides for a version of rational action that necessarily includes some dimension of altruism [1987, 77].

He offers the opposition between intentionalism and consequential-ism as his second example:

> Intentionalism is the view that the moral value of an action is a function of the nature of the agent's intentions; consequentialism is the view that the moral value of an action is a function of its consequences. (In Western ethics Kant's moral philosophy, with its crucial emphasis on the deontological purity of the agent's will, is a familiar example of an intentionalist position; utilitarianism is a familiar example of a consequentialist position.) How are we to classify Buddhist ethics in this respect? [1987, 78].

As with the case of the self, Perrett suggests that the distinctive meta-physical underpinnings of the karma doctrine mean that this opposition, too, has little meaning for Buddhism. "[T]he metaphysical doctrine of *karma,"* he writes, "undermines the opposition between prudential action and altruistic action, as well as the opposition between intentionalism and consequentialism" (1987, 81). This shows, he concludes, that there are certain unique features of Buddhist ethics that render Western typologies inadequate:

> To conclude then. Certain familiar oppositions in Western ethics just do not apply to Buddhist ethics. Two examples are the supposed oppositions between egoism and altruism, and between intentionalism and consequentialism. The reason for this phenomenon in these two cases is the presence of certain distinctive metaphysical presuppositions. The relevant metaphysical doctrines here are (i) a particular analysis of the nature of the self; and (ii) a commitment to the doctrine of *karma,* which in turn implies that all intentions have moral consequences [1987, 82].

As my purpose is not to discuss the nature of the self, I will not dwell upon Perrett's first example but will concentrate instead on the issues raised by the second.[5] While Perrett certainly seems correct in

[5] The conclusion reached applies to more than Buddhism. Buddhism is far from the only religion or philosophy to deny the existence of a self understood as "a uniform sub-

suggesting that neither intentionalism nor consequentialism are adequate characterizations of Buddhist ethics, it does not follow that all attempts to apply Western categories to Buddhism are misconceived.

Perrett seems to assume that unless Buddhism can be characterized as *either* intentionalist *or* consequentialist, Western ethical predicates cannot illuminate it. As examples of ethical theories, these certainly provide a contrast, but is there nothing more on the Western menu than Kant and utilitarianism? It seems arbitrary to limit the choice in this way, and a broader understanding of Western ethics renders it less surprising that neither of these stark alternatives is fully appropriate to Buddhism. The failure of the experiment, however, need not be due to the fact that the theory comes from the West and the data from the East. This can be seen from the fact that the opposition in question is also absent from Aristotelian and traditional Christian ethics. Both emphasize motivation, but neither is deontological in the Kantian sense. Again, both are very much interested in the fruits of the moral life, but neither is consequentialist. None of this teaches any lessons for cross-cultural ethics; what it shows is only that the wrong theoretical models will not explain the data, irrespective of the cultures involved.

Perrett is certainly right that Buddhism can be described as a "strongly intentionalist ethic": the Buddha's identification of karma with intention (A.iii.295) puts this beyond dispute.[6] What leads him to the conclusion that Buddhism is also consequentialist? He reaches this conclusion following a discussion of the treatment of dream misdeeds in the *Vinaya* and other sources. The rationale offered by the texts is that misdeeds in dreams should be avoided because they create a tendency to perform the same misdeeds in waking life. Perrett characterizes this justification as "consequentialist":

> What is even more interesting, however, is that the rationale offered amounts to *a consequentialist* argument for avoiding dream misdeeds. They are said to modify the character and create karmic dispositions to perform such misdeeds in waking life as well as in dreams. And the per-

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stance that persists through time" (Perrett 1987, 73). Few modern philosophers or theologians would accept such a view, and the tradition of Western philosophy which looks back to Aristotle would also reject it. Thus any non-substantialist view of the self would (assuming the intermediate reasoning holds good) collapse the egoism-altruism polarity. The conclusion thus gives no reason to suppose there is anything unique about Buddhist ethics in this respect.

[6] Whether "intention" adequately captures the meaning of *cetanā is* a matter that calls for more careful examination than it has received to date (see Keown 1992, 210-22).

> formance of such deeds will bind the agent yet more strongly to the sufferings of *saṃsāra*. Thus while Buddhist ethics is strongly intentionalist, it is also strongly consequentialist [1987, 81, original emphasis].

The Buddhist understanding of karma certainly includes reference to future states of affairs that are brought into being through moral acts. However, I suggest it is one thing to accept that moral acts have consequences, and another to suppose that this commits Buddhism to a consequentialist ethics. Before we can pursue this question further, however, we need a clearer understanding of the nature of the consequences that karma produces.

2. A *Saṃskāra* Theory of Karma and Its Operation

Belief in karma is an almost universal feature of Indian thought. Few major religious or philosophical schools deny it, although there is much disagreement as to its precise mode of operation. According to Wilhelm Halbfass, the doctrine of karma and its corollary of cyclic re-birth *(saṃsāra)* were "fully established and almost universally accepted as a comprehensive world-view in classical and later Indian thought" (1980, 269). In the most recent monograph on the subject, Bruce Reichenbach speaks of the law of karma as "embedded in a body of philosophical and religious doctrines," of which five should be noted:

> 1. All actions for which we can be held morally accountable and which are done out of desire for their fruits have consequences. . . . 2. Moral actions, as actions, have consequences according to the character of the actions performed: right actions have good consequences, wrong actions bad consequences. . . . 3. Some consequences are manifested immediately or in this life, some in the next life, and some remotely. . . . 4. The effects of karmic actions can be accumulated. . . . 5. Human persons are reborn into this world (Reichenbach 1990, 13ff.).

In the sermons of the Buddha, belief in karma is presupposed, although not articulated as a formal doctrine. Instead, it forms part of the common religious heritage against which the Buddha defines his religious teachings. Frank Hoffman notes: "[R]ebirth may be viewed as part of the `background' against which other beliefs in early Buddhism are seen as true by believers. In support of this it can be pointed out that `there is rebirth' does not occur as a claim in any of the standard Buddhist schemas such as the four noble truths or the eight-fold noble path" (1987, 74-75).

For present purposes, I will draw attention to only three aspects of karma in Buddhism:

1. The Buddha is emphatic that moral acts *do* have consequences. In a stock passage in the Pali canon (M.iii.178—79), the Buddha states that he can see with his clairvoyant powers beings being reborn in various conditions due to their karma. He also rejects the views of six rival teachers who either denied karma or exhibited a faulty understanding of moral causation (D.i.47ff.).
2. The emphasis placed on the psychological springs of moral action is a feature which distinguishes Buddhist ethics from other contemporaneous doctrines. The connection between karma and intention is indisputable in Buddhism, and I have already made reference to the Buddha's virtual identification of the two. Buddhism also holds that karma can be produced by volitional action alone and that it is possible to "sin in one's heart" without the performance of a physical act.
3. The same act may have different results for different people. A good man who errs in a moment of weakness will not suffer the same consequences as a habitual evildoer who performs the same misdeed. This principle is explained by a simile: a small amount of salt in a cup of water will make it undrinkable, but the same amount of salt placed in the Ganges will have no effect on the purity of the water (A.i.250).

The above three points suggest that Buddhism understands karma as involving both intentions and consequences. How are the two linked? The emphasis placed upon intention and the fact that the same action can have different results for different individuals both suggest that the connection is to be explained in terms of psychology rather than by reference to a transpersonal chain of cause and effect. There seems, however, to be some evidence that the consequences attributed to karma are not purely of a psychological nature. The distinction between these two is made using the term *phalas* to denote the future "fruit" of action and *saṃskāras* to designate the transformative effect that moral action has upon the character of the agent. Reichenbach explains these terms as follows:

> *Phalas* include all the immediate effects, visible and invisible, which actions produce or bring about. They are often referred to as the results or fruits of an action. *Saṃskāras* are the invisible dispositions or tendencies to act, think, experience, or interpret experiences in ways which are conducive to one's happiness or unhappiness, produced in the agent as a result of the action. They constitute, in effect, special modifications of the agent [1990, 25].

In the light of this, he suggests that karmic consequences are of *two* kinds, each with its own rationale. Reichenbach refers to these as "subjective" and "objective":

> There are, in effect, two stories, the subjective and the objective. According to the first, karma works through us, creating dispositions and tendencies, merit and demerit, which in turn affect our desires, passions, and perspective on the world. . . . Here the appeal to *saṃskāras* (or something similar) provides a reasonable basis for constructing a naturalistic account of the causal operations of karma. According to the second, our karmic acts affect the instruments of our experiences, from our own bodies to the world around us. They help determine, among other things, the kinds of bodies with which we are reborn, our social status, and how other persons and things in the environment act on us. . . . Here the *saṃskāric* account by itself is inadequate. Since both accounts are part of the tradition, an explanation of how karma affects objective as well as subjective conditions is necessary [1990, 31].

I suggest, however, that there are not really "two stories" in the sense of two separate causal chains, but one. What is fundamental to the Buddhist understanding of karma, I believe, is the *saṃskāric* modification of the agent. *Phalas* (referred to in Buddhism as *karmavipāka)* denote not the end product of a transpersonal causal chain but the effect of *saṃskāric* change as experienced by the actor. In other words, I am suggesting that a coherent account of karma can be given purely in terms of *saṃskāras*. This is an alternative reading to what I have described above as the "casual consensus" that understands karma in terms of consequentialism. If this alternative reading is correct, it will call for a significant reassessment of the structure of Buddhist ethics.

Reichenbach acknowledges the attraction of the *saṃskāric* account but discards it on the grounds that certain aspects of karma are inexplicable purely by reference to *saṃskāras*. He lists three objections (1990, *27-33),* which will be considered in turn.

The first concerns the apparent devaluation of deeds themselves that an emphasis on intention produces:

> First, if only *saṃskāras* have relevance, what is important in karmic considerations is what forms dispositions. Future dispositions or tendencies arise not from the results of the act, but from the dispositions or intentions out of which we acted. If so, what matter are the attitudes, desires, passions, dispositions, and general character with which we perform the action and not the actions per se and their general results. That is, the karma produced by an action is determined largely by the intentions, dispositions, desires, character and moral virtue of the agent [1990, 27].

He then suggests that Buddhism cannot understand karma purely in terms of *saṃskāras* since "such an emphasis on originating dispositions and intentions as determinative of moral quality implies that it matters little what we do. Consequently, with respect to our accumulation of karma it would mean we could do the most despicable acts, so long as our attitudes and dispositions were correct" (1990, 27).

This conclusion assumes that an account of karma in terms of *saṃskāras* entails the view that morality is reducible to psychology *in all respects.* However, the consequences which are *suffered* by one who does wrong and the principles which *determine* what is wrong are questions of a very different order. *A saṃskāra* theory of karma is not a normative theory but a theory about moral causation. It says nothing about moral axiology and does not require a commitment to the view that normative principles are reducible to psychological states. There is no contradiction in maintaining both that moral action has a transformative effect on the actor and that transpersonal criteria can be provided for right and wrong.[7]

Reichenbach's second objection to explaining karma solely in terms of *saṃskāras is* that such an explanation would seem to deny any role to the environmental effects of karmic action. The problem here, he says, is that if karma "works only subjectively," it is difficult to explain the impersonal effects that are attributed to it. Reichenbach notes that "[l]ength of life, health and sickness, handsomeness or beauty and ugliness, social position, wealth and poverty, the kind of body and intellectual ability acquired at birth, fortune and misfortune, all are believed to be caused by karma" (1990, 31). This statement seems to be based on a canonical passage where seven differences among individuals are explained as due to karma (M.iii.202—3):[8] (1) longevity *(āyu),* (2) infirmity *(ābādha),* (3) physical appearance *(vaṇṇa),* (4) whether a person's influence is great *(mahesakkha)* or slight *(appesakkha), (5)* wealth *(bhoga), (6)* family status *(kula),* and (7) intellectual ability (*paññā*).

Could a satisfactory causal explanation for all the factors listed above be given by reference to *saṃskāras?* I think it can. One of the

[7] Certain kinds of acts, for example, could be intrinsically wrong and punished by karma even if the agent supposed them not to be. The major Buddhist precepts provide examples of such prohibited acts. For a discussion of what makes an act wrong in Buddhism, see Keown 1995, 37—64; Harvey 1995.

8 The source cited by Reichenbach is *Gradual Sayings* IV,XX,197. Here, however, the Buddha explains to Queen Mallikā the reason that women vary in their beauty, wealth, and influence, and there is no mention of length of life, health, or intellectual ability. In his reply to the queen, however, the Buddha makes absolutely clear the connection between *saṃskāric* factors and physiology.

most important functions of karma is to determine the conditions of rebirth. Both physical constitution and (especially in India) social status are determined at birth. A person's organic nature is thought to be directly determined by karma: for example, one can be reborn as a human or an animal, as a male or a female, according to one's deeds. It is thus clearly understood that biological nature is a manifestation of moral nature. If the biological and genetic constitution of individuals is determined by their moral conduct, it is not hard to see where an explanation might lie for karmic effects such as "length of life, health and sickness, handsomeness or beauty and ugliness . . . [and] the kind of body and intellectual ability acquired at birth." Buddhism certainly holds, for instance, that longevity is influenced by karma and that lifespan is determined at conception. The image used is that of an arrow shot from a bow: life will last until the karmic energy imparted at conception is exhausted *(Milindapañha 306; Abhidharmakośa* II.45ab). What the doctrine of karma seems to be asserting is that what we might call the "intransitive" effects of moral action (namely, those registered at the level of *saṃskāras)* manifest themselves in the physical reality of the new individual in his or her next existence. The self-transformation registered in terms of *saṃskāras,* therefore, modifies what might be termed the "moral DNA" of an individual, and this modified moral code in turn determines the physiology of the new being in the next rebirth. On this basis, karmic effects (1), (2), (3), and (7) above would be explicable by reference to *saṃskāric* modifications.

The factors I have not yet accounted for are the three "objective" ones, namely, (4) influence, (5) wealth, and *(6)* family status. The last two, however, are not difficult to explain. Karmic theory holds that like attracts like and that virtuous persons will be drawn to the company of others like themselves. The mechanism of rebirth operates on the basis of affinity such that karma inserts a being into a congruent environment. The virtuous Buddhist layman would thus have every expectation of being reborn into a "good family," that is to say, one enjoying a privileged status in terms of caste and wealth. This leaves only "influence" to account for. The standard commentarial gloss for this is "retinue" *(parivāra),*[9] which connotes respect and prestige. All three factors are thus related to social status, which, in turn, is closely determined by the circumstances of birth.'°

The third and final objection Reichenbach raises against what we might term the *"saṃskāra* theory of karma" is this: "the restriction of

[9] Pali Text Society Dictionary *appesakkha.*

[10] There is clearly also scope for a psychological explanation of how influence and wealth are created or enhanced.

karmic concerns to *saṃskāras* proves unsatisfactory in cases where the action bears fruit in ways which have no obvious connection with the action, or where the happiness or unhappiness experienced and its causes have nothing to do with dispositions or tendencies" (1990, 32). By way of elucidation, Reichenbach gives two examples: the first is of contracting malaria and the second is of a house burning down. In the case of malaria, he writes: "As an unpleasant experience, this must be the just recompense for some previous misdeed(s)" (1990, 32). In the case of the burning house: "Since this is a bad experience, the karmic theorist would appeal to some of my previous action(s) to explain why it burned" (1990, 32). But how, he inquires, can either of these things be explained by the *saṃskāra* theory of karma?

It must be pointed out that any force the above examples have depends on the assumption that every misfortune has a karmic cause. The Buddha, however, tells the wanderer *(paribbājaka)* Sivaka that this is not so:

> Those recluses and Brahmins, Sīvaka, who hold the view: "Whatever a person experiences that is pleasant *(sukha),* painful *(dukkha)* or neutral *(adukkhamasukha) is* caused by something done in the past *(pubbekatahetu),"* go beyond *(atidhāvanti)* what is rightly known *(sāmaṃ ñātaṃ)* and what is generally held to be true *(saccasammatta)*. I therefore declare those recluses and Brahmins to be wrong *(micchā)* [S.iv.230f.1.

The Buddha mentions in this context that suffering can be caused by factors which have nothing to do with karma, such as the action of bodily humors and the change of seasons. There is, therefore, no particular reason to suppose that a misfortune such as a house fire has a specific karmic cause. Since the Buddhist theory of karma does not rule out the possibility of accidents and adventitious misfortune, there is no justification for the demand that a karmic account be supplied in every case of good and bad fortune.[11]

The examples of malaria and the house fire are not taken from Buddhist sources, so there is little reason to dwell on them. However, it must be admitted that there appear to be examples in Buddhist literature where misfortunes are explained as direct retribution for misconduct in the past. Reichenbach refers briefly to two examples of such cases and one general example of a particular category of karmic cause and effect. The first example concerns an account, attributed to

11 We may note in passing that many illnesses have psychological causes and that many accidents are traceable to human error or negligence. The *saṃskāra* theory would therefore explain many cases of these kinds.

the Buddha, of Moggallāna's death, and the second, the death of a wealthy but miserly man from Sāvatthī. The third, more general, ex-ample is the connection between specific evil acts and certain forms of rebirth: a person who steals grain will be reborn as a rat, one who eats forbidden food will be reborn as a worm, and so forth.

I must provide a causal explanation in these cases since, unlike the examples of malaria and the burning house, we know that a karmic connection exists (in two of the examples we have the Buddha's word for it). Situations of this kind, where a specific cause is linked to a specific effect, are the most difficult for the *saṃskāra* theory to explain. The causal trail seems to go cold, and there seems no way that a connection can be established between specific deeds in one life and retribution through an external agency in another without introducing a transpersonal causal chain that links the two events. We are faced with a choice: either the theory is defective or the evidence is suspect in some way.

Although an exhaustive textual analysis cannot be undertaken here, it is worth examining the evidence in more detail. The first ex-ample concerns the explanation which is given for Moggallāna's death at the hands of highwaymen.[12] This fate is attributed to the fact that Moggallāna himself, in a previous life, slew his blind parents while simulating the sound of highwaymen to disguise his role in the affair. The first point to note is that the account in question is taken from a commentarial rather than a canonical source (the episode is narrated in the commentary to *Dhammapada* v.137). The explanation for Moggallāna's death, which is here attributed to the Buddha, is therefore a commentarial invention. This source, in fact, is replete with stories and tales of all kinds and is clearly composed for popular edification. Furthermore, the translator, E. W. Burlingame, notes that the story has an antecedent in the introduction to *Jātaka* 522 (v.125f.) but that there are "important differences" (1921, 304n.). One of these, significantly, is that in the *Jātaka* version, Moggallāna, "instead of killing his father and mother, relents at the last moment and spares their lives" (1921, 304n.).

The version of the story in the *Dhammapada* commentary narrates how heretics *(titthiyā),* envious of the honor and respect *(lābha-sakkāra)* enjoyed by the Buddha, plot to kill Moggallāna, whose magical activities they regard as the principal cause of the Buddha's prestige. The heretics hire a band of thieves to go to the elder's dwelling and kill him, whereupon the story continues as follows:

12 Reichenbach appears to borrow the example from McDermott 1984, 13n.

> The Elder, knowing that his place of abode was surrounded, slipped out through the keyhole and escaped. The thieves, not seeing the Elder that day, came back on the following day, and again surrounded the Elder's place of abode. But the Elder knew, and so he broke through the circular peak of the house and soared away into the air. Thus did the thieves attempt both in the first month and the second month to catch the Elder, but without success. But when the third month came, the Elder felt the compelling force of the evil deed he had himself committed in a previous state of existence, and made no attempt to get away. At last the thieves succeeded in catching the Elder. When they had done so, they tore him limb from limb, and pounded his bones until they were as small as grains of rice (trans. Burlingame 1921, 304-5).

Apart from being uncanonical, the above account contains a number of far-fetched elements, and it would therefore be unwise to regard it as an authoritative teaching on karma. Even allowing for the popular nature of the source, however, it is apparent from the account that the retribution which befell the Elder was not due simply to the operation of a blind karmic force. On the contrary, his own free choice and con-duct played a key role in his demise. His death would not have occurred as it did were it not for the fact that he "felt the compelling force of the evil deed he had himself committed in a previous state of existence, and made no attempt to get away." If a theory of karma is sought to explain his death in these circumstances, it must surely be one which emphasizes psychological causation. But what explanation could there be for the symmetry between crime and punishment? It might be suggested that Moggallāna was not in any sense *destined* to be killed by thieves and that the decision to deliver himself into the hands of thieves was his own. This decision, however, would almost certainly have been due to remorse—triggered by the appearance of the thieves—for the evil he himself had done in similar circumstances in the past.

Reichenbach's second example is taken from a canonical source (S.i.91–93) which recounts how the Buddha receives a visit from King Pasenadi. The king gives the Buddha news concerning the recent death of a rich financier *(seṭṭhi)* who was a resident of Sāvatthī. The king then goes on to comment on the contrast between the man's great wealth and his frugal lifestyle; although a millionaire, he dressed in rags and ate food left over from the day before. The Buddha explains this contrast by reference to an episode in a previous life where the financier did good and evil almost simultaneously, giving alms to a Paccekabuddha but then immediately repenting of the gift. On account of the gift to the Paccekabuddha, the man was reborn in heaven seven times, and because of the residue of merit left over

(vipākāvasesa), he became wealthy seven times in Sāvatthī. By repenting of the gift, says the Buddha, "he inclined his heart to denying himself excellent food, clothes, carriages, and the enjoyment of the five sense-desires."

Again, this situation seems perfectly explicable in terms of a *saṃskāra* theory of karma. The Buddha spells out the psychological connection when he explains the man's austerity as due to the particular way he had "inclined his heart" *(cittaṃ namati).* The subject in question was clearly ambivalent: we might say he had a "complex" about wealth which manifested itself in the ability to create it but the inability to enjoy it.

Turning finally to Reichenbach's last group of examples, we see that the principle they illustrate is once again compatible with an account of karma in terms of *saṃskāras.* That an animal rebirth should come about as a result of bad moral conduct is in accordance with the principle that moral choice determines physical being. But why should the theft of grain be linked to rebirth as a rat as opposed to, say, a monkey? I suggest that in these examples allowance must be made for appeals to the popular imagination. Since stealing grain is an activity, commonly associated with rats, it is logical that rats should be chosen to illustrate the likely animal rebirth of a grain-thief. The connection between certain vices and particular animals in these cases is thus a popular illustration of the karmic principle that one becomes what one does.

Objections can be raised on many grounds to Reichenbach's examples, and even taken at face value, all fall a long way short of demonstrating that a supplementary theory of transpersonal *phalas is* required to explain the data in Buddhist sources. Such a hypothesis raises intractable problems in causal theory and explains so little that cannot be otherwise explained that there seems little justification for resorting to it. If the three examples above are the strongest scriptural evidence against a *saṃskāric* interpretation of karma, then the theory survives unscathed. None of the evidence considered so far is inconsistent with the view that karma in Buddhism is properly understood purely in terms of *saṃskāras.*

3. Character Consequentialism

We have seen that consequentialism comprises a particular under-standing of the good, a distinct theory concerning the reasons and goals of agents, and a distinctive criterion for discriminating right acts from wrong acts. We have also noted that the view that moral acts have consequences does not itself necessitate a consequentialist eth-

ics. We have distinguished between moral causation and moral axiology. The analysis of the doctrine of karma that I have offered establishes that we need not impute to it the ambiguity that both Perret and Reichenbach take to be intrinsic to Buddhist forms of thought. There is, however, a broadened conception of consequentialism that might prove, after all, to be compatible with the account of karma as character modification that I have developed here, and it deserves our close attention. This is the interpretation of consequentialism developed by Ivanhoe in connection with his study of Confucianism.

Earlier, I described the formation of *saṃskāras* as an "intransitive" effect of moral action. It may be noted, however, that moral actions commonly have effects of a transitive as well as an intransitive kind. While the intransitive aspect of moral action affects only the agent, the transitive aspect (what is actually *done)* affects other parties. In-deed, one of the most significant features of moral action is its effect upon others (if I break the First Precept, *someone* is killed). It is noteworthy, however, that discussion of karma in Buddhist literature almost invariably focuses on the *intransitive* effects of karma. What is emphasized is the way moral deeds enhance or prejudice the personal circumstances of the actor, and little is said about the effect of moral action upon the world at large. Most forms of consequentialism, on the other hand, make reference to the *overall* net happiness produced. This discrepancy does not mean that karma cannot be understood as consequentialist: it would suggest, however, that it must be a form of ethical egoism in terms of which each individual calculates the goods to be produced with reference to himself alone.[13]

What, then, *are* the goods that karmic deeds produce? Or, in the terminology of consequentialism, what is the utility that is maximized by moral action? It seems this must be one of two things. Either it is the moral self-transformation which comes about through the performance of virtuous deeds, or it is the contingent experiential consequences of these deeds such as longevity, health, social status, and wealth. Since the latter can only be secured through the former, however, the moral imperative for the karmic consequentialist in either case would appear to be "maximize personal moral development."

In a previous issue of this journal, the term "character consequentialism" was coined by Philip Ivanhoe to describe an ethical theory not dissimilar to that sketched in the preceding paragraph. Although Ivanhoe makes no reference to karma (his subject is early Confucian

13 Although such a depiction is a gross distortion of Buddhism, which constantly emphasizes compassion and concern for *others,* it has been entertained seriously by several authorities as representing the Buddhist position (see Keown 1992, 1-23).

ethics), the content of his argument is of considerable interest to students of Buddhist ethics in that much of what is said about the theoretical aspects of Confucian ethics could be applied almost directly to the doctrine of karma as I have described it above.[14] I suggest that while Ivanhoe's essay describes the essential theoretical features of the two systems, the features he describes are not those of a consequentialist theory. In other words, the label "consequentialism" has been misapplied.

Ivanhoe suggests that character consequentialism avoids many of the familiar problems of consequentialism, and he distinguishes three central features which make it distinctive:

> First, character consequentialism concentrates on the future fruits rather than the immediate results of actions. It assumes a perspective which is less concerned with what is best to do *now* and focuses its attention on the cumulative effects of actions. Since individuals carry and manifest the cumulative effects of actions, character consequentialism is primarily concerned with the formation of character [1991, 55].

So close is the similarity to Buddhist ethics that if "karma" is substituted for "character consequentialism," this statement could well de-scribe the theory of karma I have outlined above.

The next feature of character consequentialism "concerns the 'basket of goods' it sees as central to judgments of moral value. Character consequentialism includes within its basket of goods certain `goods' which are often left out of Western forms of consequentialism" (1991, *56).* It is certainly true that the goods aimed at by both Confucianism and Buddhism are commonly omitted from Western forms of consequentialism. In the case of Confucianism, one of these goods is kinship relations. What would the Buddhist "basket of goods" include? Above, I noted references to such karmic effects as health, wealth, and longevity, but these are regarded by Buddhism very much as side effects of the moral life. What is aimed at directly is enlightenment, and enlightenment embraces two general categories of human good which are commonly summarized as knowledge *(prajñā)* and compassion *(karuṇā).* Under these rubrics are found many virtues, such as gener-

14 Of course, the particular goods which are sought through the pursuit of the moral life are characterized differently in each of the traditions. It is well known that Confucianism places great emphasis on family and social relationships. Buddhism, on the other hand, seems to lack a clear "social gospel" and may be considered the mirror image of Confucianism in this respect. However, we are concerned here not so much with the particular vision of human good which each of the traditions holds out as with the manner in which it is to be attained.

osity *(dāna),* respect for moral norms *(śīla),* forbearance *(kṣānti),* courage *(vīrya),* and meditation or contemplation *(samādhi)*.

The third feature Ivanhoe associates with character consequentialism "concerns the means one must employ in pursuing certain goods, specifically, those additional psychological goods character consequentialism recognizes as of central performance in our calculation of con-sequences. It seems that certain goods, particularly human virtues, cannot be pursued directly for their consequences; they must be pursued as worthy goals in themselves" (1991, 56). The same is true of karma, and good karmic consequences can only be secured through the practice of the virtues. Here, however, we note a difference between Buddhism and Confucianism: whereas the doctrine of karma holds that good deeds will inevitably be rewarded and evil deeds punished, no such guarantee is available in Confucian ethics. "Character consequentialism," notes Ivanhoe, "recognizes that the possession of certain virtues *usually* leads to the realization of certain good consequences above and beyond the possession of the virtue itself. But these good consequences are not guaranteed to one who pursues or possesses the virtue" (1991, 56).

I suggest that what has been described above with respect to Confucianism, and by extension karma, is not a consequentialist ethic but a virtue ethic. Ivanhoe is aware of the "tension" between the two but does not believe they are as deeply at odds as is sometimes made out, particularly in Confucianism, where the individual and public good are so closely intertwined (1991, 69n.). I have no expertise in Confucian ethics, but believe the gap between consequentialism and an ethic of virtue is unbridgeable in any context. A consequentialist reading of Confucianism (or Buddhism) can only be made plausible by leaving opaque the distinction between virtues and their consequences. Ivanhoe speaks not just of the *consequences* of virtues as valuable (for example, the social cohesion they promote) but also the virtues themselves. "Because the virtuous life is believed to be the *only* way to realize a certain highly prized form of life," he writes, "the virtues are thought to be worthy goals even in those cases where other associated good consequences are not forthcoming" (1991, 56). This amounts to the suggestion that a means (in this case virtue) is inherently valuable because it is the *only* way to secure the utility sought. But for consequentialism no *means* can have inherent value. A wrench may be the only tool which will get the job done, but it is still only a tool. For consequentialism, *nothing* has inherent value other than the utility produced.

That the view of the virtues as means to an end is mistaken can be seen by reflection upon the goal to be attained. What is the end to

which virtues are the means? In Confucianism, apparently, it is "social well-being" (1991, *57)* or a "good society" (1991, *67).* The meaning of these terms is not clearly defined, but it is difficult to conceive of "a good society" as anything other than a society of virtuous individuals. It is not easy at this point to make a conceptual distinction between the end and the means. If we take away the virtues, we take away social well-being; if we take away social well-being, we take away the virtues. The end is, in this case, nothing more than an epiphenomenon of the means, just as the balls which move through the air are an epiphenomenon of the juggler's skill (Ivanhoe 1991, *57).* In the same way, it might be claimed that virtuous individuals are not the *means* to a good society, they *are* a good society.

Ivanhoe fluctuates between regarding the end as (1) the enhancement of individual moral character and as (2) social well-being. This is understandable, for the two can hardly be disentangled. He states that "individuals with flawed characters go on to cause severe damage to society, as well as to themselves" (1991, *63).* He points out that the "bad act" both affects the agent and causes "direct and indirect harm to society" (1991, *63).* What is lacking here, however, is any clear definition of what counts as "damage" or "harm" by the standards of character consequentialism. Is "harm" to be measured primarily in terms of an action's negative moral effects on one's character or by reference to the action's impact on society at large?

One of the attractions of consequentialism is that it appears to offer an objective, impartial, and systematic method for making moral judgments. Presumably, then, in a situation of moral choice, the Confucian consequentialist would weigh up the competing alternatives in terms of their ability to maximize the desired utility. It is here that the ambiguity between virtues and the ends they promote becomes critical, for certain choices may corrupt moral character yet have beneficial consequences for society. For example, an emperor may choose to deceive the people in order to promote social harmony. If he succeeds in his aim and takes the knowledge of his lies to the grave, will he have done right or wrong by the standards of character consequentialism? If he is considered to have acted rightly, then character is always subordinate to social good and has no intrinsic value. If he is considered to have acted wrongly, then consequences have no priority in moral judgments, and all reference to "consequentialism" can simply be dropped.

Beneath this ambiguity in the utility sought lies the deeper methodological problem of the incommensurability among the items which

constitute the Confucian "basket of goods."[15] The Confucian concept of human flourishing, like the Buddhist, embraces many virtues. If a choice must be made, which virtues should be developed? Consequentialism maintains that competing choices can be netted and aggregated on a common scale, yet how would one begin to weigh one virtue against another? How much courage has to be produced to outweigh a given quotient of justice? How much filial piety, to outweigh a given amount of benevolence?

Ivanhoe is understandably skeptical of consequentialist procedures that involve calculating outcomes and maximizing utilities, and the resemblance to classical utilitarian methodology in his account is vestigial. He lists many telling objections to consequentialism in its standard form. So telling are these objections that it is difficult to understand why he retains the label "consequentialism" at all. Nevertheless, if the principle of consequentialism is to be retained, some method of weighing, comparing, and deciding among competing alter-natives must be found. On the other hand, if the computation of con-sequences does *not* function to regulate choice, then decisions are in practice taken on non-consequentialist grounds, and the claim to be a form of consequentialism must be given up.

In rejecting the characterization of Confucian ethics as consequentialist, I reject the characterization of karma as consequentialist for the same reasons. All forms of consequentialism propose a computation of some kind, and all offer a criterion in terms of which one projected outcome is to be preferred to another. But how would moral choices be made on a consequentialist reading of karma? How could the amount of knowledge *(prajñā)* to be gained through course A be calculated and weighed against the amount of compassion *(karuṇā)* to be produced by course B? The fundamental methodological problem in the way of any consequentialist reading of karma is that Buddhism recognizes a plurality of incommensurable values which cannot be aggregated, netted, boiled down, converted, or expressed in any intelligible way in terms of one another. There is simply no yardstick against which the constituent elements of the Buddhist vision of human good can be measured and compared.

Ivanhoe is right to draw attention to the teleological dimension of the Confucian virtues, and both Confucianism and Buddhism are centrally concerned with personal actualization and self-realization. Karma in Buddhism proclaims the potential of every moral agent for teleological self-directed change. Such a program, however, is one

15 On the question of incommensurability, see, for example, Grisez 1978; Foot 1985; and Perry 1985.

which cannot be accommodated within the framework of consequentialist ethics. In following Confucian principles, writes Ivanhoe, "I bring to full realization my Heavenly endowed nature" (1991, *65).* Through karmic transformation one does the same, the difference being that it takes a little longer.

It must be concluded, therefore, that the doctrine of karma *can* be classified in terms of Western ethical categories; that a reading of karma in terms of virtue, character and *saṃskāras is* consistent with the texts of Theravāda Buddhism; and that, contrary to the dominant consensus, karma is not consequentialist.

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