

A Metaphysics of Morality: Kant and Buddhism

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Abstract:

Immanuel Kant's deontology seems to present a radically different approach to morality as understood in the Buddhist tradition (generally understood in the Mahāyāna perspective). Kant's metaphysics relies on the application of pure practical reason, whereas Buddhism's appeal is to compassion/karuna; thus the first is cognitive and the second affective, at least on a surface reading. I propose that the two can be brought into direct dialogue via an analysis and pragmatic critique of morality's ideal of universality. First I outline the key components of Kant's categorical imperative, and show that the kingdom of ends is a "natural development" from this moral command. Next I explore the impetus of the Buddha's search for the alleviation of suffering/duhkha, and explain that the bodhisattva is a "natural development" from the Buddha's insight/prajna. In both instances, the criterion of universality is an intrinsic and necessary feature for morality. Given this conclusion, I will endeavour to provide an affective element for Kant's deontology and a rational aspect for Buddhist compassion, thus bringing both approaches together as a demonstration of emotional rationality.

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“Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time *will* that it should become a universal law” (acceptable by all rational beings).

—Immanuel Kant

“The Mahāyāna has a nature of giving, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, wisdom and compassion...”

—Nāgarjuna

Immanuel Kant’s deontology seems to present a radically different approach to morality as compared to Buddhism’s Mahāyāna tradition. Kant’s metaphysics relies on the application of pure practical reason, whereas Buddhism’s appeal is to compassion/*karuṇā*—thus the former is cognitive and the latter affective, at least on a surface reading. I propose that the two can be brought into a direct comparative dialogue via an analysis and pragmatic critique of morality’s ideal of *universality*. First, I outline the key components of Kant’s categorical imperative, and show that the kingdom of ends is a “natural development” from this moral command. Next I explore the impetus of the Buddha’s search for the alleviation of suffering/*duḥkha*, and explain that the *bodhisattva* is a “natural development” from the Buddha’s insight/*prajñā*. In both instances, the criterion of universality is an intrinsic and necessary feature for morality. Given this conclusion, I will endeavour to provide an affective element for Kant’s deontology and a rational aspect for Buddhist compassion, thus bringing both approaches together as a demonstration of emotional rationality.

1. KANT AND THE MORAL LAW

In his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims that through his analysis of what we generally understand by morality that he can uncover that obligatory foundation upon which all moral principles ultimately depend. This is the moral law of the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is a completely absolute command and abstract idea; in addition, given its nature, it obligingly calls upon us (*qua* rational beings or persons) to follow our duty. For Kant then, an action is morally worthy if and only if it accords with and is done for the sake of duty.¹ The force behind our obligatory duty is grounded in the *a priori* structure of the moral law, meaning that the law is non-empirical, non-contingent, necessary, rational, abstract, obligatory, absolute, and formal. In other words, the moral law is *universal*—it applies everywhere, all the time, in the same way to everyone/rational being: “...Since moral laws ought to hold good for every rational creature, we must derive them from the general concept of a rational being...we must treat it independently as pure philosophy, *i.e.*

as metaphysic, complete in itself.”² This “derived” metaphysic provides the ground for the moral law.

Kant claims that the moral worth of an action stems from whether or not the motive/*maxim* for such an action is drawn directly from one’s duty (*rational obligation*) or inclination (desire, feeling, emotion, affect, sentiment—which may conform to duty, but not be morally worthy). An action’s moral worthiness is *not* determined by the purpose or end towards which it is directed, but rather it stems from *the principle of volition* or the maxim of *the good will* that motivates the acting agent. The implications of these two propositions (of duty) entail that an action’s moral worth is directly related to the reason(s) a person follows, and that the consequences of such an act should not be considered in evaluating the act’s merit. Now this is not to say that a person who is following the dictates of the Kantian moral law does not aim at producing specific and beneficial outcomes; instead, it is that such results stand beyond the free choice or autonomy of the acting agent and they cannot determine the act’s worth. For Kant, only persons who can act in an autonomous or free fashion can comport themselves in morally worthy manners. These elements are at the core of the deontological approach to the moral law.

How is such an all-encompassing universal law generated? And why does such a moral law have any obligatory force? The answers to these questions are bound to Kant’s understanding of autonomy. Only rational beings can act in an autonomous fashion, that is, only they can give themselves reasons (principles of volition) to act without being influenced by empirical and/or emotional concerns, such as inclinations and desires, for to do so is to act according to heteronomy. Heteronomy occurs when the person’s will is determined by contingent factors that are beyond the person’s control; in other words, such actions are not freely chosen. In contradistinction, “An agent acts autonomously to the extent that [she/]he frees [her/]himself from contingent determinations, that is, from mere preferences or from conventional considerations of status and tradition.”³ By acting freely and autonomously, Kant holds that rational beings generate *within* themselves the prescriptions of duty, that is, the moral law. According to Jurgen Habermas,

Kant characterizes freedom in general as an agent’s capacity to subordinate [his/]her will to maxims, that is, to orient [his/]her actions by rules whose concept [he/]she has mastered. Thus freedom of choice [*Willkürfreiheit*] enables one to adopt rules of prudence or skill depending on one’s inclinations and subjectively selected ends, whereas “freewill” [*freie Wille*] obeys universally valid laws that it has imposed on itself from a moral point of view.⁴

The ends or goals of such impositions are located *within* themselves, independent of their phenomenal effects and empirical consequences. Hence when each and every rational being gives themselves the moral law, they do so by creating a purely rational principle that is generated by *pure practical reason*.

To briefly digress, Kant's pure practical reason is one mode of the faculty of reason. Reason has two general functions: the first is epistemological; and the second is moral. In terms of the first, speculative reason aids rational beings in developing empirical knowledge about phenomenal experience, the world of sensory appearances, as well as abstract knowledge about metaphysics.⁵ The second mode of reason generates principles that tell rational beings how they *ought* to act. Thus, by pure practical reason, Kant is referring to that specific rational faculty of the mind; by pure, he means the *a priori* and abstract concepts with which this faculty constitutes (legislates) its principles; and the term practical is not meant in a pragmatic sense, but rather in the straightforward sense that the rational faculty *makes* the rational being *act*. Pure practical reason is then considered to be the *good will*, for it is good without qualification or any appeal to what it produces, that is, its consequences; it is good *within* itself. It is through this *internality* by which we can uncover the *universality* of Kant's understanding of duty.

Duty is the necessity of acting from *respect* (or *reverence*⁶) for the moral law as determined according to the *a priori* principles of reason. Respect is a feeling that is generated by reason before an action/event takes place—it is not an effect like other sentiments. Generally speaking, our experiences of emotional states follow from various causes—for example, say I strike the random person sitting next to me on the subway. Their reaction will probably be at first surprise, and then anger. The emotions follow from the cause; they are consequential effects. Kant's notion of rational respect functions in a different manner. Let us look at a key footnote from the first section of Kant's small text:

...Although respect is a feeling, it is not a feeling *received* through influence, but is *self-wrought* by a rational concept, and, therefore, is specifically distinct from all feelings of the former kind, which may be referred either to inclination or fear. What I recognize immediately as a law for me, I recognize with respect. This merely signifies the consciousness that my will is *subordinate* to a law, without the intervention of other influences on my sense. The immediate determination of the will by the law, and the consciousness of this is called *respect*, so that this is regarded as an

effect of the law on the subject, and not as the *cause* of it...Accordingly it is something which is considered neither as an object of inclination nor of fear, although it has something analogous to both. The *object* of respect is the *law* only, and that, the law which we impose on *ourselves*, and yet recognize as necessary in itself.⁷

This respect for the moral law is the reason/motive that obliges rational beings to create and give the law to themselves. At first glance, this seems a bit circular, but we necessarily give ourselves the law of morality, which we respect for itself, and this is indicative of our autonomy. “Only moral reasons...bind the wills of agents *unconditionally*, that is, independently of a given individual’s preferences even of the value-orientations of a given community.”⁸ The rational being does this because the moral law has an unqualified and universal worth that reason respects in and of itself. Pure practical reason generates what it respects, that is, the moral law, and the moral law evokes respect from its generator, urging its very generation (or legislation— see the discussion below).

The moral implications for this internally generated moral law are far reaching. Each rational being generates the moral law that obligates dutiful action due to the respect that each has for the law itself. The moral law then is instantiated in each rational being. Thus each rational being is a respectful generator of the moral law, and since the moral law is worthy of unqualified respect, then each instantiation, each rational being, is worthy of such *respect* because of the law *within*. “[T]he capacity to act for reasons all the way down [that is, purely and internally] is defining of rational agency. Kant calls this autonomy. It is what we respect in respecting a person as an end-in-[him/]herself.”⁹ Given that the moral law is applicable and valid for every rational being, this rational emotion (*qua* feeling) of respect is necessarily and universally extendable (to every rational being). The *consequences* of Kant’s moral law culminate in the extension of his ideals into the *kingdom of ends*.

The moral law is *the categorical imperative* (the absolute command of necessary moral obligation): it states, “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time *will* that it should become a universal law”¹⁰ (acceptable by all rational beings). A will that functions in this manner acts according to rational principles that it gives itself; this is the good will or pure practical reason. The good will commands each person *qua* rational being to “So act as to treat *humanity*, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an *end-in-itself*, never merely as a *means*.”¹¹ Thus, in order to fulfill this duty, persons must be

accorded the same respect that one finds within oneself for the moral law; for to do otherwise is to, in essence, *disrespect* the other's autonomy, that is, the moral law as it is instantiated in each and every rational being. In other words, the categorical imperative obligates persons to not use others for selfish or egocentric goals—these would be heteronomous actions in any case. Every rational being “possesses a dignity (an absolute inner worth) whereby [she or] he exacts the respect of all other rational beings in the world, can measure [her/]himself against each member of [her/]his species, and can esteem [her/]himself on a footing of *equality* with them.”¹² Such an egalitarian duty points beyond the needs of the individual, bringing them into a rational synchronicity with all other rational beings. This is the will that is in harmony with *pure practical reason*, which is “the idea of the will of every rational being as a universally *legislative* will.”¹³ When each rational being exercises their good will, such wills will accord with the same *universal* principles generated by pure practical reason.

The practical implication of this ideal is that, in any given moral situation that calls for a choice or judgment, the acting moral agent legislates a universal law to which all other rational beings are subject; yet their roles may change, for when another moral agent acts in a similar fashion, the first then becomes subject to this other's legislated moral law. Thereupon, the moral law calls for the establishment of *the kingdom of ends*: this kingdom is a union of different rational beings in a system of common or universal laws as legislated by pure practical reason.¹⁴ Habermas describes this as when the ideal of freedom, one of the practical ideas of reason, receives its “concrete expression.”¹⁵ All rational beings fall under this ideal (utopian?) rubric. Each as an instantiation and generator of the moral law is sometime ruler/legislator, and sometime subject/citizen to the principles pronounced by pure practical reason.

In sum, Kant's metaphysics of morals relies, at its core, on the self-wrought rational emotion of respect. This affect, generated within, applies to every instantiation of the moral law found in each rational being. The full expression of this ideal culminates in the consciously and autonomously chosen recognition of the duties that each person *ought* to follow *with respect* to all other persons (and themselves). As Lara Denis claims in her recent introduction to Kant's *Groundwork*, “What matters morally is whether the maxim of the action is one *that shows proper respect* for rational nature. The notion that morality has essentially to do with *respect* for persons and their capacity to make choices for themselves is one of the most influential and compelling ideas in Kant's ethics.”¹⁶ In accordance with reason, then, all rational beings necessarily

participate in the greater ideal of the kingdom of ends that binds each and every individual to all others. However, we must acknowledge that human beings often fall short of such obligations, for very few can consistently hold to such demanding universal ideals. It is precisely in the Mahāyāna tradition of the *bodhisattva* that we find descriptions of moral exemplars who nonetheless attempt to do just this. While their motivations emphasize a different affect, they nonetheless aim to apply Buddhist doctrinal ideals in a universal fashion that parallels Kant's vision.

One might be moved to claim that Buddhist ethics employs notions like *moral exemplars* and *virtues*, and that these fall within a different kind of philosophical category from the deontology of Kantian moral philosophy. While this is *prima facie* a valid claim, by no means is it clear that Buddhist ethics is limited to the Aristotelian category of a character based ethics, nor does Kant's approach rule out the moral worth of the virtues. In terms of the former, the ethical prescriptions of the Eight-Fold Noble Path certainly bear the marks of rules,¹⁷ that is, moral laws, as do the vows taken by monks and *bodhisattvas*; and with the cultivation of right *mindfulness* and *concentration*, the role of "correct" motivations is an important and intrinsic element to *karma* formation.¹⁸ As for Kant, the development of virtues (subjective talents) can be conducive to fulfilling the demands and obligations of the moral law.¹⁹ Thus we ought not to let this distinction (character vs. act) prevent the attempt here to contribute to the literature on comparative ethics.²⁰ Let us then proceed with *bodhisattva* compassion.

2. THE *BODHISATTVA* IDEAL

At the core of Buddhism is *karuṇā*/compassion for the *duḥkha*/suffering of the world. Siddhartha Gautama realized this compassion in the enlightenment experience when he achieved *nirvāṇa* as the Buddha. We all know the story of the prince destined to alleviate the world's ills and serve as the great healer. After leading a sheltered hedonistic lifestyle, Siddhartha came into contact with the reality of *duḥkha*: the suffering of destitution, sickness, old age and death. Motivated by his compassion to find a cure for these tragedies of life and existence, Siddhartha turned to the way of the *arhant*. This part of his journey led him down the path of denial in the attempt to root out the problems of desire. However, this lifestyle of asceticism only provided a transformed mode of suffering that mirrored that of pleasure. In hedonism the *ātman*/self is fed and cultivated; in asceticism the intention is to destroy and annihilate the *ātman*. Both ways of life assume the existence

of the self, though each attempts to treat it differently; and yet they both end by giving in to the demands of *trṣṇā*/desire. Siddhartha's great insight was to see through these extremes and find the middle way between them.

He realized this awakening over the course of a miraculous meditation in becoming the Buddha, whereupon he gained an understanding that showed him the truth of existence grounded in his *universal* compassion for all suffering beings. Nāgarjuna sums this up succinctly, "Compassion is a mind that savours only / Mercy and love for all sentient beings."²¹ About seven centuries later, Śāntideva asserts, "...one adopts that Spirit [of Awakening (and compassion)] with an irreversible attitude for the sake of liberating limitless sentient beings... to remove the incomparable pain of every single being...striving for the complete happiness of all sentient beings."²² We have seen unfurl over the historical course of Buddhism the conviction that "the Tathagata has taught [the *Dharma*] for the weal of beings who have set out in the best, in the most excellent of vehicle[s],"²³ that is, Mahāyāna. The Buddha's enlightenment as described in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature²⁴ is the "allayer of all suffering."²⁵

The truth of existence is taught in the four noble truths about suffering: there is suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path out of suffering. Suffering arises from desire and the attachment/*upādāna* to desire *and* the objects of desire. The object, that is, the complex phenomena that we have objectified, and which we most crave for, is an actually existent self, which we (mistakenly) believe to be real. This is obvious in hedonism, but in asceticism one needs to make the dialectical move to understand that the desire to obliterate the self implicitly relies on holding that the self actually exists as something that can be annihilated. "Thus neither self nor non-self / Are understood as real, / Therefore the Great Subduer rejected / The views of self and non-self."²⁶ The craving for the self drives these extreme views. To overcome the suffering endemic to such views, the noble truths teach of the Buddha's insights into *anātman*/non-self.

Anātman expresses the reality of *pratītya-samutpāda*/relational origination that explains the interdependence of all phenomena. The so-called self is actually a composite entity (the five-aggregates/*pañcaskandha*), named and identified with language. "So the conception of 'I' exists / Dependent on the aggregates, / But like the image [in a mirror] of one's face / In reality the 'I' does not exist."²⁷ Such denotation of the self as "I" is delusory for it covers over and hides the essentially dynamic and relational unfolding of experience by seemingly entifying and freezing desired phenomena into concrete and stable

structures. For our conventional needs (or truths) this is satisfactory, but when we reify and absolutize these existential claims, such as in the case of believing in and grasping after an actually existing self, then suffering (due to delusion) arises. In this vein, the Buddha's middle way aids us in avoiding such mistakes.²⁸ The cultivation of the middle way requires following the path out of suffering.

The path out of suffering is the Eight-Fold Noble Path, wherein we find the core of Buddhist ethics and morality. According to David Keown, the noble path has three main legs, like a tripod: wisdom, mental discipline, and ethical practice.²⁹ The scope of the present study does not permit the exploration of the various virtues and their interpretations in the different Buddhist traditions;³⁰ rather, I will confine myself here to the general Mahāyāna evaluation and deployment of the noble path. In the Mahāyāna tradition we find the development of the *bodhisattvacarya*, the ideal or way of the enlightened being. According to G. M. Nagao,

...[T]he term Bodhisattva itself is to be understood in two ways: the one is Bodhisattva as a Buddha-to-be (ascending, from *sattva* to *Bodhi*) and the other is Bodhisattva as a celestial being, or a Bodhi-being, such as Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and so on. The activities of such celestial beings, who come down from the state of Buddhahood, which is inactive and immovable, are seen in this world as the activities of a Bodhisattva.³¹

These two aspects of the *bodhisattva* are complementary: the ascending practitioner is guided by the enlightened wisdom (and virtues) of the celestial beings, whereas the celestial beings save others from suffering through their perfected inactivity. The *bodhisattva*, as found in *samsāra* aiming to ascend, is an enlightened practitioner who seeks, but refuses to take that final leap into *nirvāṇa* based solely on his/her universal compassion for all suffering creatures: "Through his [the *bodhisattva*'s] great compassion he feels pain / For the world and so stays in it long."³² As my colleague Wing-Cheuk Chan once wrote, "For Mahayana Buddhism, in order to become a Buddha, one has first to be a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is a person who has already been Enlightened. But for the benefit of the other, the Bodhisattva does not enter Nirvana by himself/herself. Rather, a Bodhisattva will only enter Nirvana when all the other sentient beings become Enlightened."³³ We find this ideal in *Hua-yen* Buddhism expressed by Fa-Tsang: "Even though [the *bodhisattva*] has the ability to freely extinguish the obstacles of defilements from the first stage on, [s/]he *deliberately* retains them and

does not extinguish them. Why? In order to nourish rebirth and attract and convert others.”³⁴ To this effect, the *bodhisattva* takes a vow, which *The Diamond Sutra* describes thusly: “As many [living] beings as there are in the universe of beings...all of these I must lead to Nirvana, in the realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana.”³⁵ This latter statement exemplifies the *bodhisattva*’s insight into the emptiness/*sūnyatā*? of all temporal beings,³⁶ their non-self-existence/*niḥsvabhāva*: “Remaining in the cycle of existence for the sake of those suffering due to delusion is achieved through freedom from attachment and fear. This is the fruit of emptiness.”³⁷ But it is the former statement from *The Diamond Sutra* that holds our concern here, for the *bodhisattva* *deliberately chooses* to aid all others and will continuously strive to do so, based on his or her compassion for their suffering.³⁸ “The Bodhisattvas through their compassion / Lead these limitless sentient beings / Out of suffering and establish / Them definitely in Buddhahood.”³⁹ This establishment in Buddhahood will be taken up in the conclusion, but we must realize that the *bodhisattva* motivated by compassion consciously makes this decision, which is seemingly rational in character. Compassion has a universal scope for it applies to all sentient beings who are subject to *duḥkha* and whose number “has no limit.”⁴⁰ Śāntideva echoes this sentiment: “So may I be in various ways a source of life for the sentient beings present throughout space until they are *all* liberated.”⁴¹ Yet this is coupled with the recognition that “While I have promised to liberate beings throughout space...I have not liberated even myself from mental afflictions.”⁴² These mental afflictions/*kleśas* are indicative of the *karma* such persons continue to produce. Ultimately the *bodhisattva* understands that these afflictions are empty, just as the self “is”.⁴³ But can we say that this choice and promise by the *bodhisattva* to liberate all those who suffer have a rational character or component (even if only secondary in character)?

Perhaps an *analogy* with an example from the Western Tradition can help illustrate the rationale behind the *bodhisattva*’s thoughtful judgment; and since this is only an analogy, there is no exact equivalence implied. During the trial of Socrates, Plato recounts part of Socrates’ defence in the *Apology*:

But you have just admitted that the good do their neighbours good, and the evil do them evil. Now is that a truth which your superior wisdom has recognized thus early in life and am I, at my

age [of almost 70 years], in such darkness and ignorance as not to know that if a man with whom I have to live is corrupted by me, I am very likely to be harmed by him, and yet I corrupt him, and intentionally, too? That is what you are saying and of that you will never persuade me or any other human being.⁴⁴

In other words, it makes no sense to intentionally promote and teach evil ways to others because those others will reciprocally turn around and harm and corrupt the very same instructor. What is more sensible, that is, *rational* is to teach (or exemplify) good and beneficial behaviour, for this will provide “a positive feedback loop,” if you will. Yet, where the instructed good will benefit the teacher in its own turn (and here is one of the limits of the analogy), the *bodhisattva* ought to “Provide help to others / Without hope of reward.”⁴⁵ Taking this even further, Śāntideva proclaims, “For the sake of accomplishing the welfare of all sentient beings, I freely give up my body, enjoyments, and all my virtues of the three times.”⁴⁶ He also examines the role of introspection in this regard: “The perfection of generosity is interpreted simply as a state of mind due to the intention of giving away everything, together with the fruits of that, to all people...When the mind of renunciation is obtained, that is considered the perfection of ethical discipline.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, he states, “I am unable to restrain external phenomena, but I shall restrain my own mind.”⁴⁸ These assertions are similar to Kant’s propositions regarding duty, for a dutiful act’s worth is independent of the consequences that result from such a deed; yet, in this case, the giving away of “the fruits of that” means that the effects of this virtue are also important for they can lead others out of suffering.⁴⁹ This goal is achievable through moral practice, as well as meditation and the development of wisdom.

Though the aforementioned deontological ideal seems to mirror the Buddhist doctrine, there is a more pragmatic understanding intrinsic to the *bodhisattva*’s position: “Therefore knowing how actions / And their effects agree, / For your own sake help beings / Always and so help yourself.”⁵⁰ In doing such, as Socrates foresaw, the moral path is the intelligent path. Śāntideva warns that mindfulness ought never to be displaced: “When one intends to move or when one intends to speak, one should first examine one’s own mind and then act appropriately with composure”⁵¹—and, we can add, compassion. We can hear the Buddhist spin on this in Nagarjuna’s rhetorical question: “Who with intelligence would deride / Deeds motivated by compassion...?”⁵² To aid and be concerned for others is the most meritorious (and intelligent) fashion by which to cultivate selflessness under the Mahāyāna ethos. In aiding

others, lessening their suffering, even if it means taking such upon oneself,⁵³ and espousing the *Dharma*, the *bodhisattva* practitioner moves others and themselves towards enlightenment: "...one should always strive for the benefit of others. Even that which is prohibited has been permitted for the compassionate one who foresees benefit,"⁵⁴ that is, the liberation from suffering. In this context, it is the *bodhisattva*'s conduct that is indicative of their personal commitment to compassionate action: "I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. I should take care of others because they are sentient beings, just as I am a sentient being."⁵⁵ In this vein, Buddhist *śīla* is illustrative, for it "represents an internally enforced ethical framework around which any Buddhist practitioner might structure his/her life. From this perspective, *śīla* is an enormously rich concept for understanding individual ethical conduct,"⁵⁶ though for the *bodhisattva* such comportment aims at both individual and universal (social) enlightenment. Thus the universal extension of *karuṇā* becomes the vehicle for *nirvāṇa*.

The *bodhisattva* ought not to follow these ethical guidelines simply because they are accepted dogma, nor simply because they satisfy some secret desire that makes one happy for helping others, or masochistically allows one to revel in the self-sacrifice called for in doing without reward. "You [the *bodhisattva*] should always well analyse / Everything before you act, / Through seeing things just as they are / You will not rely on others."⁵⁷ This would agree with Cook's straightforward statement about *Hua-yen*, "to act compassionately means to act in accordance with reality."⁵⁸ Reality must be herein approached with the right attitudes, intentions and understanding; in this sense, both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are *śūnya*. Śāntideva admonishes the adopters of the "Spirit of Awakening": "(A)lways vigilantly strive not to neglect [one's] training. Although one has made a commitment, it is appropriate [to reconsider] whether or not to do that which has been rashly undertaken and which has not been well considered"—for while one has promised to liberate all sentient beings, one may not have liberated even oneself from mental afflictions.⁵⁹ Thinking before acting seems primary and practical, for there are cognitive (relational) conditions to the *bodhisattva*'s ethical actions. We saw this also with the Kantian categorical imperative, for the legislation of a universal law via an act of the will necessitates the construction of *a priori* principles of volition, which determine the moral worth of the act. Likewise the *bodhisattva* is admonished to think for him/herself without relying on or being unduly influenced by heteronomous (to use Kant's language) factors imposed by the world,

others, or his/her own desires and empirical natures.⁶⁰ This point requires clarification: the *bodhisattva* who views the world through compassion and right understanding is experientially aware of, and open to, the emptiness of the *dharmas* that flow in *saṃsāra*. In other words, the *bodhisattva*'s insight into *pratītya-samutpāda* entails the recognition that there is nothing but non-self-existent (*niḥsvabhāva*) heteronomous elements of experience. These are all empty of self-existence, which does not accord with Kant's notion of autonomy that requires the existence of an agent *qua* transcendental subject. Thus while the *bodhisattva* acts from the (non-) perspective of *anātman* and *karuṇā*, the Kantian agent acts from the perspective of an ideal self and pure practical reason. Furthermore, the freedom that the *bodhisattva* experiences is that of *mokṣa* from *duḥkha*, whereas Kant's freedom is that of an autonomous subject giving itself the moral law unadulterated by phenomenal experience.

The ethical actions performed by a *bodhisattva* can be refined over the course of "recurring and unending experience,"⁶¹ such that "Through not wavering you [the *bodhisattva* to be] will attain awareness, / And intelligence through thinking; through respect / You will realise what the doctrines mean, / Through their retention you will become wise."⁶² Though we should not conflate this use of respect with Kant's conceptualization, the intent is clear enough: wisdom will be supplemented (as it is one leg in the tripod of the noble path—see above), and even gained through the consistent deployment of thinking and acting in virtuous, ethical and moral manners. This thinking is associated with intelligence, which implies a rational character; however, this intelligence is not meant to be equated or identified with Kantian rationality *per se*. "Bodhisattvas also who have seen it thus, / Seek perfect enlightenment with certainty, / They maintain a continuity of existence / Until enlightenment only through their compassion."⁶³ *karuṇā* in this regard is deployed *universally*, and it is this characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*) that drives this comparative project. The recognition that suffering is universal is a rational understanding.

We have thus seen that the *bodhisattva* is moved by his/her compassion to aid all who suffer, doing so with intelligence. The extension of compassion as a universal ideal parallels the universality of the Kantian moral law that is grounded in the rational emotion of respect. But should we then conclude that Buddhist *karuṇā* functions in an analogous fashion as Kant's pure practical reason?

3. CONCLUSION

I described above how Kant's kingdom of ends unfolds from the deployment of the categorical imperative. As the universality of the moral law is put into practice, a union of rational beings occurs, wherein they ought to treat each other as free and autonomous agents worthy of respect because they are all instantiations of an identical moral law. Comparably, we find in the Mahāyāna tradition the ubiquity of Buddha-nature: "Sentient beings have the best portion of emerging qualities of a Buddha. One should honour sentient beings in accordance with that share."⁶⁴ Likewise we find the *bodhisattva* aiming at a social ideal similar to the kingdom of ends, the creation of "harmonious Buddhafields," here explained by E. Conze:

A Buddhafield is a part of the world in which a Buddha matures beings. As a harmonious structure it is compared to an orderly and well-arranged military array. In contradistinction to an ordinary, defiled world such as ours, in a 'Pure Land' all is beauty and order...The force of their meritorious *karma* enables the Bodhisattva to realize, or to bring to perfection, a Pure Land, an unworldly world, a 'heaven' or 'paradise' which offers ideal conditions for rapid spiritual progress.⁶⁵

This spiritual utopian vision is realized through the *bodhisattva*'s compassion for the suffering in the mundane world, because such "compassion is not limited to an inner attitude, but is identified with practical action."⁶⁶ We can also hear echoes of Kant's kingdom of ends in the orderliness and beneficial arrangements of such social structures, for these reverberate like the system of universal laws of the good will. Herman describes an important example of this in Kant's moral philosophy:

As a person's true needs are those that must be met if [she/]he is to function (or continue to function) as a rational, end-setting agent, respecting the humanity of others involves acknowledging the duty of mutual aid: one must be prepared to support the conditions of the rationality of others (their capacity to set and act for ends) when they are unable to do so without help. The duty to develop (not neglect) one's talents and the duty of mutual aid are thus duties of respect for persons.⁶⁷

The motivation to help others in the Kantian context explicitly intends to enable the rationality of others, but it also must exercise a material

understanding or empirical judgment in order to address the “true needs” of other persons. Thus we can see an implicit compassion (or sympathy⁶⁸), a feeling for and with other persons at work in the concretization of this duty generated from respect, which will necessarily share the moral law’s characteristic universality.

In addition, there is a structural similarity in both philosophical approaches to morality. The defiled world of sensory appearances is the realm of heteronomy. The fetters and obstacles of *dukkha* due to our materialistic and secular desires and attachments mark phenomenal experiences. The hither side of this is the Pure Land, what Kant (and Otto Von Rank) might call the noumenal realm,⁶⁹ where autonomy and liberation (*mokṣa*) can be realized via spiritual growth towards the utopian ideals that are entailed, at the social level of existence, in the actualization of *nirvāṇa*.⁷⁰ We can thus expand upon the *bodhisattva* “vows, mindfulness, and wisdom [that lead to the] develop[ment of] the perspective, the clarity, and the motivation for engaging complex social conflicts and for initiating constructive action.”⁷¹ To paraphrase Padmasiri De Silva, upon the foundations of healthy ethical values, meaningful social structures can be built that are conducive to the alleviation of suffering.⁷²

In conclusion, the meritorious *bodhisattva*’s actions resemble those of the dutiful rational being; the *bodhisattva* relies on compassion and intelligence, and the rational being employs respect and reason. Over the course of experience, these moral agents acquire perfect insight and practical judgment, respectively. Thus emerges *prajña*/wisdom in the continually refined application of their respective ethical-moral ideals that are grounded in an emotional rationality. These ideals are not identical, but the compassionate aiding of those who suffer and the respectful treatment of others as autonomous agents can complement each other in moral practice, for they both employ an understanding of persons as beings of unqualifiedly good worth.⁷³ Synthetically speaking, then, the compassionate respect for others can guide moral agents along the middle way to a lawful spirituality of universal scope.⁷⁴ This would be, in effect, the means for progress toward social enlightenment.

NOTES

- ¹ Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 18-19: An action is *morally worthy* if it satisfies two criteria: (A) The action *conforms* to the moral law, *and* (B) The action is done for the *sake* of the moral law.

- ² Ibid., 39.
- ³ Jurgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 171.
- ⁴ Ibid., 95.
- ⁵ In the case of the moral law, the categorical imperative is an example of a synthetic *a priori* principle, that part of metaphysics that adds to our knowledge beyond the Humean category of mere relations of ideas (analytic *a priori* principles). What is synthetic about this *a priori* proposition, is that despite its abstract, non-empirical content it tells how one *ought* to act in the physical, concrete world of (phenomenal) appearances.
- ⁶ See H.J. Paton's translation of Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 69.
- ⁷ Kant, *Fundamental Principles*, 26.
- ⁸ Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 171.
- ⁹ Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 228. The Kantian phrase, "end-in-itself" refers to persons (that is, rational beings) who can exercise autonomy—that is, such persons can freely choose their own ends that are necessarily the principles that establish the moral law. In this Kantian technical sense then, an "end" is not a "consequence," but rather the object/motive of pure practical reason.
- ¹⁰ Kant, *Fundamental Principles*, 49.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 58.
- ¹² Immanuel Kant, *Ethical Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 97; italics added.
- ¹³ Kant, *Fundamental Principles*, 60.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 62.
- ¹⁵ Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 95.
- ¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005), 28; italics added.
- ¹⁷ Take for example, Junjirō Takakusu's treatment of the "mahayanistic" "new Ritsu School" in *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1973), ch. XIV. We should note his descriptions of the prohibitions "so safeguard one from crime or sin" and that "actual crimes...are themselves evil in nature" (p. 185). Certainly this provides evidence that Buddhist moral philosophy is not singularly a character-based virtue ethics.
- ¹⁸ Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (Bodhicaryāvatāra), (New York: Snow Lion, 1997), 22: "But if

one's mind is kindly inclined, one will bring forth an even greater fruit." This is merely one example to show that the mental state of the agent is a consideration for Mahāyāna ethics.

- ¹⁹ See the extended endnote below that discusses Hermann's view of Kant and the possible place of compassion in the latter's deontological ethics.
- ²⁰ There is ample literature in this regard: for example see G. W. F. Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), in which we find some rather Eurocentric views and pejorative judgments about Asian approaches to social values and ethics; F. S. C Northrop's *The Meeting of East and West*, (New York: Macmillan, 1946), esp. chapters IX and X; Nolan Pliny Jacobson's *Buddhism and the Contemporary World* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983); or anthologies like *Interpreting Across Boundaries*, edited by G. J. Larson and E. Deutsch (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), particularly the entries by H. Rosemont, Wing-Tsit Chan, and A. S. Cua; and *Buddhism and the Emerging World Civilization*, edited by R. Puligandla and D. L. Miller (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), especially chapters 1, 2, 9, 12 and 13—just to name a few instances.
- ²¹ Nāgarjuna, *The Precious Garland and The Song of the Four Mindfulnesses* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 83. "In general, one may conclude that Nāgarjuna was thoroughly conversant with the ancient Tripitaka as well as the later developed Sutras of the Mahayana. Without ever breaking radically with the ancient tradition, the Mahayana scriptures launched new ideas about the nature of the world, such as *sūnyatā*?, and about the foundations of ethical behavior (*karuṇā*)" (*Master of Wisdom, Writings of the Buddhist Master Nāgarjuna*, translations and studies by C. Lindtner, (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1997), 326). However, it should be noted that Lindtner does not list this text in his assessment of Nāgarjuna's (ascribed) corpus (pp. 330-1).
- ²² Śāntideva, *Guide*, 20-21.
- ²³ *The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*, trans. E. Conze (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), 55.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ²⁶ Nāgarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 32.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ²⁸ Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, p. 120: "When neither an entity nor a non-entity remains before the mind, then since there is no other possibility, having no objects, it becomes

calm,” and can thereby avoid the mistakes that lead to suffering. This application of the fourth possible of the Buddhist tetralemma is distinctly reminiscent of Nāgarjuna’s use of such in his *Treatise on the Fundamentals of the Middle Way*; see *A Translation of Nagarjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakārikā with an Introductory Essay* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993), trans. K. Inada.

²⁹ See D. Keown’s *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), and his essay, “Karma, Character, and Consequentialism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* (2001), 329-350.

³⁰ On the virtues, see for example discussions of virtues like good conduct, wisdom (p. 30), selflessness (33), peacefulness (44), patience (55), humility (56) in *The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*. In Nāgarjuna’s *The Precious Garland and The Song of the Four Mindfulnesses*, we find discussions of truthfulness (45) and the like (78-93). Also consult D. W. Chappell’s analyses of giving/*dāna* and a number of *bodhisattva* ethical prescriptions in the *Upasaka Precept Sutra* in his “Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (Fall 1996): 358 and 355 respectively. On their interpretation in the different Buddhist traditions see Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 25-30 and 140-146.

³¹ Gadjin M. Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra* (U.S.A.: State University of New York, 1991), 33. See also D. T. Suzuki in his *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 379: “...when Zen came to control the religious consciousness of the Chinese and Japanese people, it took away from Buddhist figures that aloof, unconcerned, rather unapproachable air which had hitherto characterized them. They came down from the transcendental pedestal to mingle with us common beings....”

³² Nāgarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 51.

³³ See Wing-Cheuk Chan’s article, “Mahayana Buddhism and Levinas: The Primacy of the Other,” in *Varieties of Universalism: Essays in Honour of J.R.A. Mayer* (Canada: Thought House Publishing Company, 1999), 228.

³⁴ Cited in Francis H. Cook’s *Hua-yen Buddhism, The Jewel Net of Indra* (New York: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 135; emphasis added.

³⁵ *The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*, 25.

³⁶ See *The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*’s discussion of emptiness starting on p. 81. F. J. Streng aptly states, “The soteriological importance of this negation [that is, *śūnyatā*] is its attempt to divert the religious [person] from longing after or desiring an eternal, unchanging, self-existent Ultimate” (*Emptiness, A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 162).

However, in this context, to treat of Kant's philosophy and *śūnyatā*? is beyond the scope of this paper, for it would require a comparison of the relation between Kantian phenomena and noumena, and then an analysis of these notions in relation to *samsāra* and *śūnyatā*?. To provide an adequate treatment would require, at the very least, another article, if not a full monograph.

³⁷ Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, 122. This reminds me of a stanza cited by Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 123: "No thinking, no reflecting,— / Perfect emptiness; / Yet therein something moves, / Following its own course." While this appears in a poem about swordsmanship, the no-mind of *śūnyatā*? for the *bodhisattva* leads others out of suffering via "its own course."

³⁸ See H. V. Guenther's discussion in *Philosophy & Psychology in the Abhidharma* (Berkeley: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1976), p. 247 in particular.

³⁹ Nāgarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 49.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Śāntideva, *Guide*, 35; italics added.

⁴² Ibid., 42.

⁴³ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 36.

⁴⁵ Nāgarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 57.

⁴⁶ Śāntideva, *Guide*, 34.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁹ E. Conze states in his commentary on the *Prajñāparamita*: "The Bodhisattva would be a man who does not only set himself free, but who is also skilful in devising means for bringing out and maturing the latent seeds of enlightenment in others." (*Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 128)

⁵⁰ Nāgarjuna, *The Precious Garland and The Song of the Four Mindfulnesses*, p. 61. See also Chappell, "Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic," p. 361.

⁵¹ Śāntideva, *Guide*, 53. See also Cook's statement in a similar regard (*Hua-yen Buddhism*, 119): the "attitude or respect and gratitude toward all things, which I would consider part of ethics, is extremely important in Buddhism, because it is not so much what one does, such as eating a carrot, as it is what one's attitude toward that thing."

- 52 Nāgarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 73.
- 53 Two different stanzas come to mind in this regard from Nāgarjuna's *The Precious Garland*: "Just as you love to think / What could be done to help yourself, / So should you love to think / What could be done to help others" (p.55). And later in the text he writes, "...How then could even suffering not be helpful / For one who gives assistance with the motivation to help others" (p. 73).
- 54 Śāntideva, *Guide*, 57.
- 55 Śāntideva, *Guide*, 101.
- 56 See C. S. Prebish's "Ambiguity and Conflict in the Study of Buddhist Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* (2001), 299.
- 57 Nāgarjuna, *Precious Garland*, p. 58.
- 58 Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism*, 121.
- 59 Śāntideva, *Guide*, 39 and 43, respectively.
- 60 In *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Keown provides a wonderful analysis of *cetanā* showing how it "stands at the crossroads of reason and emotion...[for] *cetanā* is best pictured as the matrix in which the push and pull of the rational and emotional aspects of the psyche are funnelled in the direction of moral choice" (p. 213).
- 61 Chappell, "Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic," 355.
- 62 Nāgarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 59.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 64 Śāntideva, *Guide*, 74.
- 65 *The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*, 46-47. In terms of *karma*, D. Keown observes (*The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 115) we must recognize that "the relationship of *kamma* to *nibbana* is the relationship of ethics to soteriology, and far from being incompatible there is an integral and inalienable relationship between moral goodness and enlightenment."
- 66 Chappell, "Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic," 360.
- 67 Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, p. 67.
- 68 We could stretch Herman's notion here and identify compassion as a Kantian talent or virtue, but this would take a more extended argument to prove, and thus I can only provide a rough outline here. In Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he describes four general categories of duties: perfect, imperfect, for self, and for others. Perfect duties are precise, while imperfect ones are inexact. The development of one's talents (for oneself) is an imperfect duty because one may not know which talents are best to concentrate on, and each individual will have their own (unique) set of talents. Another imperfect duty involves

how best to help, aid, or treat others, especially those in need. Since we cannot (always) determine the best course of action, that is, self-legislate the appropriate subjective principle of volition, this duty falls under the category of imperfect as well. Thus if we were to apply these two imperfect duties of talent cultivation and benevolence, we could, perhaps, claim that compassion would be so constituted, and would function in a way that would more or less mimic the Buddhist notion of *karuṇā*. This approach merely stems from the line of reasoning in this paper. To explore this more fully would take me too far afield here and would require an extended engagement with Kant's explicit discussions of benevolence, beneficence, love and respect in the second part of his *Metaphysics of Morals*; see Kant's *Ethical Philosophy*, pp. 112-123.

⁶⁹ I mean this in the more spiritual sense, not in the strict Kantian sense of the objects that stand as the source of sensory data that is organized by the various mental faculties into the phenomenal world of appearances.

⁷⁰ Chappell refers to the *Upasaka Precept Sutra* in this regard: "Some practical examples of giving [*dāna*] to society are shown in chapter 19, which ends with an extended description of various social welfare projects that a lay [read: ascending] bodhisattva should undertake..." (Chappell, "Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic," 363-4).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁷² See Padmasiri De Silva's *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology* (Great Britain: Rowan & Littlefield, 2000), 4.

⁷³ To quote Herbert Guenther (*Psychology in the Abhidharma*, 79), "Ethics is a function, a force in our mental life, our awareness and understanding, just as are *cognition and feeling*, and without this function [human beings] would cease to be [human]." Emphasis added.

⁷⁴ Chappell, "Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic," 366: "The strongest aspect of the universalism expressed by the *Upasaka* is the commitment to non-discrimination and non-favoritism, and in this sense the *Upasaka* shares common ground with the attitude of compassion toward all beings that already occurs in early Buddhism..."