

Buddhism and Utilitarianism

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Guest essays represent only the views of the author(s).

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Introduction

The term ‘Buddhism’ refers to a diverse array of historical and contemporary thought and practice.¹ In this article, we do not have space to examine the relationship between utilitarianism and everything that falls under the Buddhist umbrella. To limit our scope, we begin in section 2 by focusing on the ethical outlooks of (i) the Early Buddhist tradition, as it has been preserved in the Pāli Nikāyas—collections of discourses that purportedly contain the word

of the historical Buddha—and (ii) classical Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism (ca. first through eighth centuries CE). The Pāli Nikāyas form part of the doctrinal core of contemporary Theravāda Buddhism,² the predominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and the oldest surviving Buddhist practice tradition. Classical Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy serves as the philosophical foundation for contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhism, the other major branch of Buddhism practiced today alongside the Theravāda.³ After this, we will close section 2 by exploring the Buddhist perspective on well-being, which may be the subject within Buddhist philosophy that is of greatest interest to utilitarians.

Section 3 moves from ethical theory to applied ethics. There we will examine what follows morally when we assume that rebirth occurs, as Buddhism has traditionally done, and what follows if we drop this assumption while retaining the other core components of Buddhism. We will conclude by comparing Engaged Buddhism to [effective altruism](#), which can loosely be thought of as forms of applied Buddhist ethics and applied utilitarianism (respectively),⁴ and by assessing cause areas that are highly prioritized by utilitarians and effective altruists from a Buddhist perspective.

Before proceeding, I should note that it is difficult to say much that is uncontroversial about Buddhist ethics—particularly its theoretical structure. This is because Buddhist philosophers did not traditionally engage in systematic ethical theorizing, as displayed in Aristotle, Kant, and [Mill](#) (for example). However, there is still a great deal of normative content in canonical Buddhist literature. The result, to quote Jay Garfield, is that the scholar of Buddhist ethics is confronted with “a lot of what might appear to be disconnected observations about moral life...Not all of [which] will fit together neatly.”⁵ Any attempt to treat Buddhist ethics is therefore highly interpretive and reconstructive. Recent work in the field reflects this fact: Buddhism has variously been read as committed to virtue ethics,⁶ consequentialism,⁷ pluralism,⁸ and particularism,⁹ alongside moral nihilism¹⁰ and a deliberately

anti-theoretical position.¹¹ In what follows I will try to be clear about where I am following other scholars and where I am offering my own perspective.

Ethical theory

Early Buddhism

Most scholars agree that Early Buddhist ethics is not utilitarian.¹² Instead, the Early tradition seems to be anchored in an individual soteriological ethic. A soteriology is a religious doctrine of salvation. The primary soteriological concern—indeed, the *raison d'être*—of the entire Buddhist tradition is to overcome *duḥkha*. 'Duḥkha' is a technical Sanskrit term that is difficult to translate into English. Some of the most popular translations include unsatisfactoriness, dissatisfaction, suffering, and unease. From a Buddhist perspective, *duḥkha* predominates in our lives—our lives are shot through with *duḥkha*. What's more, we are caught in an indefinite cycle of rebirth. Although Buddhism does not deny that there are goods in our lives,¹³ the resulting picture remains grim: we are repeatedly, involuntarily reborn in a cyclic existence that is, on the whole, unsatisfactory.

Early Buddhist ethical teaching reflects a pragmatic response to this existential problem. In particular, it lays out a path—the Ennobling Eightfold Path of Buddhist practice—that claims to cut at the root of *duḥkha*, culminating in an awakening (*bodhi*) to the nature of reality. Through this awakening, one attains the cessation of *duḥkha* and liberation from *saṃsāra*, the round of rebirth. Early Buddhist thought and practice, including its ethical teachings, are aimed at this final end. (An indicative refrain that one finds repeated throughout the Pāli Nikāyas goes, “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been accomplished, what was to be done is done, there is no further living in this world.”)

It is important to appreciate that none of this implies that Early Buddhism advocates for a life of selfish behavior—at least in any obvious sense. Two of

the cardinal moral virtues championed in Early and Theravāda Buddhism are loving-friendliness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), which are supposed to be directed impartially towards all sentient beings. The emphasis on well-being, the inclusion of all sentient beings as moral patients, and the impartial standpoint are all respects in which Early Buddhism is akin to utilitarianism. However, the primary reason that the cultivation of virtues like compassion is recommended is *not* that doing so will (in expectation) lead to the best outcome for the world. It is rather that cultivating such virtues is part of the path to liberation—what I have been calling the individual soteriological ethic.

¹⁴ I therefore agree with Jake Davis when he writes,

“One might object to this proposal on the grounds that it represents a sort of enlightened egoism, that it falsely takes the aim of ethics to be the (at best) morally neutral project of decreasing one’s own suffering rather than the morally praiseworthy project of decreasing the suffering of all. My own interpretation is that the position of the early Buddhist texts is to bite this bullet. That is, the path to the end of *dukkha* is a path to the end of *dukkha* in one’s own world of experience.”¹⁵

If this reading of Early Buddhism is correct, then regardless of the extent to which the tradition aligns with utilitarianism in practice, it cannot be a form of utilitarianism, for the reasons underlying its ethical prescriptions differ markedly from those of utilitarianism.

Mahāyāna Buddhism

It is much more plausible to read classical Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism (at least in its mature phase) as committed to utilitarianism. We will begin by presenting the case in favor of this reading and then turn to some countervailing considerations.

Śāntideva, an eighth century CE philosopher-monk, is often cited as the most informative source for the mature Mahāyāna ethical outlook.¹⁶ At various

points throughout his *magnum opus*, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*), Śāntideva makes claims that appear to reflect core components of utilitarianism. First, Śāntideva's paramount ethical concern is unambiguously with the well-being of sentient beings, which matches the [welfarist](#) axiology of utilitarianism. In an entirely representative verse, for instance, Śāntideva writes that “one should always be striving for others' well-being.”¹⁷ Second, in the same verse, he appears to endorse the [violation of common-sense moral norms](#) when doing so will promote well-being (“Even what is proscribed is permitted for a compassionate person who sees it will be of benefit”),¹⁸ another hallmark of utilitarian ethics. Third, Śāntideva makes several remarks that suggest an acceptance of [aggregationism](#) and [maximization](#) with respect to well-being: “Delight is the only appropriate response to suffering which takes away the suffering of the universe”;¹⁹ “If the suffering of one ends the suffering of many, then one who has compassion for others and himself must cause that suffering to arise.”²⁰ Finally, in the passage that has recently attracted the most scholarly attention,²¹ Śāntideva argues for a strong form of impartiality, in part grounded in the nonexistence of the self (a foundational tenet of Buddhist philosophy that we will presently explore in greater detail). “All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself'...I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering...If [suffering] must be prevented, then all of it must be.”²²

So, on this “strongest case” reading of Śāntideva for utilitarianism, we have at least suggestive textual evidence for welfarism, aggregationism, and impartiality. But do we have evidence for consequentialism? [Consequentialism](#) is a moral theory. As such, it tells us (i) what we morally ought to do and (ii) why we ought to do it. According to consequentialism, we (i) morally ought to promote just good consequences because (ii) that's the best thing to do—and what is right is what is best.

Śāntideva clearly agrees that we ought to promote good consequences. But is he committed to the consequentialist *explanation* of why we ought to do this? The answer to this question will determine whether Śāntideva's view is *foundationally* consequentialist, on the one hand, or whether it agrees with consequentialism about what to do but disagrees about what makes actions right, on the other.²³ It is not clear to me that Śāntideva is committed to the consequentialist account of rightness, although it is certainly a live interpretive option.

One complication for the consequentialist reading is that *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* is a religious text, written in poetic verse, whose purpose is to inspire the reader to transform herself into a *bodhisattva*. The *bodhisattva* is the ethical ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is a being who has (nearly) attained awakening, but who voluntarily takes further rebirths in *samsāra* in order to save other beings, rather than securing final liberation for herself by passing out of the round of rebirth. The cardinal virtue of the *bodhisattva* is thus great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*), because she puts the interests of others before those of herself (recall that the final end of Early Buddhist practice is complete liberation from *samsāra*—precisely what the *bodhisattva* renounces for the sake of others).

There are multiple ways to interpret the ethics behind the *bodhisattva* ideal. One is the consequentialist reading. Another is virtue-based: we ought to cultivate wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), which will result in a great deal of behavior and moral advice that *seems* consequentialist, but rests on an entirely different explanatory framework. Yet another is an ethic centered on what Jay Garfield calls moral phenomenology. On this view,

The aim of ethical practice is...to replace [one's ordinary] experience with a non-egocentric experience of oneself as part of an interdependent world. This experience in turn is expected to induce a mode of comportment characterized by friendliness, care, joy in the success of others, and impartiality that more accurately reflects reality as it is, and that enables

one to alleviate one's own and others' suffering. Ethical practice is about the transformation not in the first instance of what we *do*, but of how we *see*.²⁴

As with the virtue-based reading, if Buddhist ethics is best parsed in terms of moral phenomenology, we have an explanation of why Buddhists would be extremely concerned with the well-being of other conscious creatures—and would therefore *appear* consequentialist much of the time—without thereby committing themselves to consequentialism.²⁵

My own suspicion is that we lack decisive evidence for or against any of these interpretations, because (to reemphasize) Buddhist philosophers were not in the business of doing systematic ethical theory. With that said, to close this subsection, I would like to offer one piece of evidence that weighs against the consequentialist reading of Mahāyāna Buddhism and that has not (to my knowledge) been commented on in the contemporary literature.²⁶ Recently, philosophers have noticed that infinite worlds—worlds that contain infinite quantities of morally (dis)valuable phenomena, such as well-being—pose serious difficulties for consequentialist ethics. Nick Bostrom [presents](#) the classic statement of the problem:

“Ethical theories that hold that value is aggregative [like utilitarianism] imply that a canonically infinite world contains an infinite quantity of positive value and an infinite quantity of negative value. This gives rise to a peculiar predicament. We can do only a finite amount of good or bad. Yet in cardinal arithmetic, adding or subtracting a finite quantity does not change an infinite quantity. Every possible act of ours therefore has the same net effect on the total amount of good and bad in a canonically infinite world: none whatsoever.”²⁷

This is bad news for consequentialist moral theories, which tell us to do whatever will result in the greatest net gain in goodness in the world.²⁸

Buddhism may also encounter infinite ethics, for on some traditional Buddhist

understandings of cosmology, *samsāra* contains an infinite number of world systems and hence an infinite number of sentient beings. But whereas contemporary consequentialists have been at pains to avoid the paralysis result highlighted by Bostrom,²⁹ Buddhists have apparently been undisturbed by the problem. Indeed, part of the *bodhisattva* ethos seems to be maintaining great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) and the dedication of one's life to other beings *despite* the impossibility of ever fully redeeming *samsāra*: for instance, the four great *bodhisattva* vows³⁰ begin, "Beings are numberless; I vow to save them." So, while certainly not decisive, the problems of infinite ethics suggest to me that Mahāyāna Buddhism is not grounded in an ethical theory whose central imperative is to maximize the universe's balance sheet of goods and bads.

Well-being

Contemporary utilitarians may find Buddhist views on [well-being](#) especially fruitful to consider. Recall from above that the fundamental problem in Buddhism is the pervasiveness of *duḥkha* and that Buddhists believe that the self is illusory. These two points are intimately connected in Buddhist philosophy. In brief, the illusion that we are selves is the ultimate cause of *duḥkha*. Let us explore this thesis in greater detail.

According to Buddhist psychology, our default phenomenological mode is to experience the world from the perspective of a self (*ātman*): to quote Galen Strawson, a "mental someone" who is "the *I*, the putative true originator of thoughts, decisions, and actions" — "a self-determining planner" as well as subject of experience.³¹ Experiencing the world from the perspective of a self gives rise to the following intentional orientation: things "show up" — are highlighted in my awareness — as they relate to my concerns and interests.³² It is as if I am the center of my own subjective universe, in which things gain or lack significance as they relate to me. I correspondingly develop craving (*trṣṇā*, alt. trans. thirsting) for and attachment to things that I take to be good for me

and aversion (*dveṣa*) to things that seem to be bad for me. The basic Buddhist psychological picture is that I then spend most of my life and energy chasing after the myriad objects I crave (experiences, emotions, people, social positions, material objects, etc.) and fleeing (physically, mentally, and emotionally) from the countless states of affairs I find aversive—everything from trivial discomforts to the inevitability of my own death.

From a Buddhist perspective, this *modus vivendi* is tragically misguided for at least three reasons. First, it doesn't work. Specifically, it fails to achieve what Buddhists take to be the ultimate goal of all our striving, namely, a robust state of flourishing characterized by being deeply at ease and at home in the world.³³ Instead, this way of living lands us in a cycle of uneasy striving; transient, ultimately unsatisfying psychological reward; followed by more striving. Perhaps we could endorse such a lifestyle if it netted us a positive balance of satisfaction over dissatisfaction, but Buddhists hold that it rather tends to yield a preponderance of *duḥkha* over the good in the long run. What's more, even when we temporarily succeed at arranging the world into a pattern that conforms to our desires, not only does part of our mind often remain dissatisfied—wanting things to be even better—we carry with us the background unease that comes with knowing that no matter how hard we try, things will eventually fall apart. In particular, we and everyone we know and love will eventually succumb to old age, sickness, and death, and there is nothing we can do about it. This—the long-run preponderance of *duḥkha* over satisfaction—is the second way in which the default life strategy of 'try to get what you want and avoid what you don't want' falls short.³⁴

It may be helpful to further illustrate this perspective on life with a few quotations. As Rupert Gethin puts it, "Beings wander through this vast endless universe attempting to find some permanent home, a place where they can feel at ease and secure...[but] the search for happiness and security within the round of rebirth never ends."³⁵ Śāntideva, for his part, writes that "sensual pleasures in cyclic existence...are like honey on a razor's edge"³⁶ and warns

that “For those prey to passion such misery is abundant, whereas enjoyment is paltry, like snatches at bits of grass made by a beast as it draws a cart.”³⁷ The point is not that there are no goods in life. It is that the goods are fleeting and tend to be outweighed by the bads over the long run.

The third and most fundamental way in which our common *modus vivendi* is misled is that it is not aimed directly at the good. In Buddhist thought, the primary determinant of our well-being is not what we get—in particular, it is not whether we experience pleasure or pain or whether our desires are satisfied—but the way in which we respond to whatever comes our way. To illustrate, as Buddhists see things, what is bad about painful physical and emotional experiences is not their negative hedonic valence, but our habitual aversive reaction to them. Take, for example, strenuous physical exercise and medical blood work. In both cases, the raw sensory input is unpleasant. Yet different people’s overall experience of strenuous exercise and blood work varies widely. Some derive great psychological satisfaction from pushing their physical limits; others cannot stand it. Similarly, some find blood work fascinating and enjoy observing the process, whereas others find it anxiety-inducing. A Buddhist analysis would be that although intense exercise and blood drawing involve unpleasant hedonic sensations for everyone, some people are not *averse* to these experiences, and hence do not *suffer* on account of them. Again, *duḥkha* arises (or not) from our intentional orientation to our experience, rather than from the base-level content of the experience.

Seen in this light, the strategy of trying to get what you want and avoid what you don’t is aimed at things that are at best correlated with the good, rather than at the good itself. What is good is a way of being in the world—of experiencing and acting—grounded in non-delusion, non-aversion, and non-thirsting, which for Buddhists involve wisdom, compassion, loving-friendliness, and equanimity. In this (ideal) state, one is able to meet with open arms—with a certain warmth and unshakeable fearlessness—whatever it is that comes one’s way, whether that is an old friend or news that one has

been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Since on the Buddhist view our entire cognitive, conative, and emotional involvement with the world revolves around craving for things we want and aversion to things we don't want, all we have managed to do when we wrangle the world into a shape that fits our desires is to find a temporary respite from craving and aversion. While such a state may be positively good (as opposed to merely not bad), we can see how this method of pursuing the good is indirect: it aims at things (experiences, people, etc.) whose presence we tend to meet with diminished craving and aversion—and at our best moments, genuine joy, love, etc.—rather than at the good itself. It is also pernicious because it keeps us tethered to the cycle of striving and transient reward. On this point it is worth quoting the [Lokavipatti Sutta](#), which is quite expressive:

“the world spins after these eight worldly conditions...Gain, loss, status, disgrace, censure, praise, pleasure, & pain...an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person...welcomes the arisen gain and rebels against the arisen loss. He welcomes the arisen status and rebels against the arisen disgrace. He welcomes the arisen praise and rebels against the arisen censure. He welcomes the arisen pleasure and rebels against the arisen pain. As he is thus engaged in welcoming & rebelling, he is not released from birth, aging, or death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, or despairs. He is not released...from suffering & stress...This is the difference...between the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones and the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person...the wise person, mindful, ponders these changing conditions. Desirable things don't charm the mind, undesirable ones bring no resistance. His welcoming & rebelling...do not exist. Knowing the dustless, sorrowless state, he discerns rightly, has gone, beyond becoming, to the Further Shore.”

This is why Buddhist monastics stylistically spend their time meditating instead of doing things like making money: they are attempting to pursue the good directly. What are they hoping to accomplish? Recall the no-self (*anātman*) thesis: our experience of being a self (*ātman*) is illusory, for there

are no enduring substance selves in the sense described above. Instead, we are just causally interrelated series of impersonal mental and physical events. Essentially, the Buddhist soteriological program consists of (i) coming not just to believe the no-self thesis, but gaining non-conceptual insight into selflessness in a way that radically alters one's experience, while at the same time (ii) cultivating wholesome mental states such as loving-friendliness and compassion. Since the delusion of self is held to be necessary for craving and aversion, which in turn are necessary and sufficient for *duḥkha*, the output of this process of cultivation and phenomenological reorientation is supposed to be a state free from *duḥkha*, which we might characterize positively as one of unsurpassed tranquility.

While utilitarianism *per se* is not committed to any particular [theory of well-being](#) and is hence compatible in principle with every such theory, the Buddhist understanding of what is good and bad for us, and what the ultimate goal of human existence is, differs from how well-being has been understood by the historical utilitarians ([Bentham](#), [Mill](#), and [Sidgwick](#)), as well as by most contemporary analytic ethical theorists. Yet if the Buddhist analysis of *duḥkha* and its deleterious impact on our well-being is tracking an important phenomenon, utilitarians, whose sole purpose is to promote well-being, would be well advised to study Buddhist psychology and investigate its practical implications.

Applied ethics

Rebirth

We will now move away from theory and into practice: what sort of action does Buddhism recommend, and to what extent does it overlap with or diverge from the type of behavior recommended by utilitarianism? The answers to these questions will depend on at least two key choice points within Buddhism. The first point is rebirth. As we noted above, a literal belief in rebirth is part of the

classical Indian Buddhist tradition. In conjunction with the problem of *duḥkha*, this tenet has major ramifications for moral action.

Imagine that we help someone: we improve their well-being in a conventional manner. By both Buddhist and utilitarian (and common-sense) lights, this is a good thing to do (all else equal). However, regardless of how much we help them—even if we somehow make them the happiest person in the world—the traditional Buddhist standpoint holds that when this person dies, they will be reborn somewhere else in *saṃsāra* and face *duḥkha* again in their next life. Similarly, imagine that we manage to transform Earth into a *bona fide* utopia. This will be pleasant for the beings who happen to be reborn on Earth. But, once they die, these beings will likewise end up somewhere else in *saṃsāra*, where they will again be caught in the unsatisfying cycle of craving, aversion, and transient enjoyment that never fully quenches the thirsting (*trṣṇā*) that lies at the heart of unawakened existence.

I have referred to this problem in other work³⁸ as the samsaric futility problem. The problem is that helping people—or improving the entire world—in conventional terms does not address the ultimate causes of *duḥkha*—delusion, craving, and aversion—and is therefore ineffective in the long run. A solution to the problems of existence that is curative rather than temporarily palliative must address the root causes of the problem. This is why the *bodhisattva* (see subsection 2.2) is a moral exemplar for Buddhists. The *bodhisattva* trains to become a Buddhist adept so that she can lead others down the Ennobling Eightfold Path to awakening. In doing so, she offers them something that others cannot: a permanent solution to their suffering (*duḥkha*), as opposed to something that merely affords temporary release.

However, it does not follow from the literal belief in rebirth that becoming a *bodhisattva* is the only effective way to help beings in *saṃsāra*.³⁹ As I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁰ one can facilitate others' progress towards awakening indirectly, e.g. by financially supporting Buddhist monasteries or by researching which meditative techniques are most effective at producing their

desired results. Still, the general takeaway of the samsaric futility problem remains: any altruistic effort that does not somehow address delusion, craving, and aversion is destined to function as a temporary analgesic (at best). This traditional Buddhist perspective will generally find itself at odds with [contemporary utilitarian approaches](#) that prioritize causes like global health and development and farm animal welfare.⁴¹

Modern skepticism about rebirth

Pessimism

Content warning: this subsection discusses pessimism and suicide. If you are struggling with mental health, please reach out to someone who can support you or to a mental health professional. You can also reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by dialing 988 in the United States.

Many contemporary Buddhists are either agnostic or skeptical about rebirth. What happens to Buddhist ethics if we excise rebirth but retain the other core commitments of the tradition? This brings us to our second major choice point: the question of just how pessimistic Buddhism is about unawakened existence. It seems to me that Buddhism is pessimistic in an important sense, for it evaluates the cycle of unawakened rebirth as undesirable and unsatisfactory.⁴² But there are at least two competing routes to this evaluation. The first is that the universe contains more bad than good. I'll call this view *weak pessimism* because it acknowledges that there *are* goods and presumably also that the preponderance of bad over good is contingent: in the future, there could be more good than bad. The second route is that there are no goods at all. I'll call this view *strong pessimism* because it implies that the best state for the universe to be in *in principle* is one of neutrality: no bads, no goods.

I don't think we can decisively rule out the strongly pessimistic reading of Buddhism. The way to generate this conclusion is to understand Buddhism as holding that the presence of *duḥkha* is bad, whereas the absence of *duḥkha* is

not good—merely neutral. On this view, when someone attains awakening, they have progressed from a negative to a neutral state of being. The glaring problem with strong pessimism is that, when it is conjoined with the rejection of rebirth, it implies that the best thing that could happen to us would be to die instantly. As Jan Westerhoff observes,

“The central goal of the Buddhist path is the complete and permanent eradication of suffering (*duḥkha*)...If this liberation is the objective, the defender of the suicide argument points out, it is by suicide, not by spiritual practice, that we are going to arrive at this goal in the most speedy manner.”⁴³

Would an agent who accepted strong pessimism—which I absolutely believe we should reject—have most reason to end their own life? Not necessarily. An altruistic agent with this evaluative outlook would have strong instrumental reason to remain alive, in order to alleviate the suffering of others. However, such an agent would be forced to accept the infamous null-bomb implication, which says that the best thing to do would be to permanently destroy all sentient life in the universe. I join almost every other philosopher in taking the fact that an ethical theory accepts the null-bomb implication as a decisive reason to reject the theory (as not merely misguided, but horrifically so).

Tentative optimism

Fortunately, I don't think that strong pessimism is the best reading of Buddhism. In particular, it does not seem to me that the presence of *duḥkha*—no matter how minute or subtle—necessarily makes an experience or outcome bad on balance. Instead, it seems to detract from the outcome by some non-zero amount, but not necessarily by an amount that outweighs whatever good may also be present. I therefore agree with Antoine Panaïoti when he writes that

“The whole point [of the Buddhist analysis of *duḥkha*] is that things could be significantly better for me, not that everything in my life is terrible.

Underlying the Buddhist view that life is full of suffering is a message of hope, not existential despair.”⁴⁴

What evidence can we draw from the Buddhist tradition in support of this weakly pessimistic—or, as we might just as accurately call it, tentatively optimistic—reading? Some evidence comes from Early Buddhist accounts of *parinirvāṇa*, the state that beings who have attained awakening pass into upon the deaths of their physical bodies. Although the Buddha is generally evasive when it comes to answering questions about the nature of *parinirvāṇa* in the Pāli Nikāyas, he does deny that *parinirvāṇa* is nonexistence.⁴⁵ Moreover, elsewhere in the Nikāyas, the *nirvāṇa* one experiences after attaining awakening is described as “the greatest bliss.”⁴⁶ For his part, Śāntideva asks, “What would be the point in a liberation without sweetness?”⁴⁷ and wishes, “May all beings have immeasurable life. May they always live happily. May the very word ‘death’ perish.”⁴⁸ None of this sounds like a tradition that denies the existence of *any* goods and whose ultimate goal is nonexistence. A final piece of evidence we can point to is the sheer implausibility of both strong pessimism in general and the specific view that the presence of *any* amount of *duḥkha* makes an outcome bad overall. Think about the best experience you’ve ever had. (Or, the best experience *any* unenlightened person has ever had.) It strains credulity to think that these experiences are *negative*—that it would have been better if they had never happened. Therefore, the principle of charity, which tells us to interpret philosophical positions in their most plausible forms, also weighs against the strongly pessimistic reading of Buddhism.

Where does this leave us? One plausible interpretation is that what Buddhists find positively valuable is the conscious experience of freedom from *duḥkha*, as opposed to the mere absence of *duḥkha* as such.⁴⁹ On this view, an empty world—a world devoid of sentient life—would be neither good nor bad, whereas a world populated by beings who have attained awakening—and thereby the cessation of *duḥkha*—would be good. In the remainder of this

article, we will briefly explore the implications of the tentatively optimistic Buddhist position for applied ethics, particularly *vis-à-vis* the cause areas that are currently highly prioritized by utilitarians.

To start off, it will be informative to compare Engaged Buddhism to effective altruism. Engaged Buddhism is a somewhat heterogeneous social movement grounded in the conviction that Buddhists ought to bring Buddhist practices and values to bear on contemporary issues.⁵⁰ Engaged Buddhists tend to be united in their commitment to addressing the structural, systemic, and institutional causes of suffering in their political, economic, social, and environmental forms, in a way that manifests Buddhist values of compassion and nonviolence.⁵¹ More succinctly, “Engaged Buddhism is characterized by activism to effect social change.”⁵² Activities carried out under the banner of Engaged Buddhism have taken a variety of forms, e.g., environmental activism in Thailand, hospice and elder care, participation in the Extinction Rebellion movement, work to alleviate hunger and poverty in Sri Lanka, disaster relief, recycling, and attempts at peaceful conflict resolution in Myanmar.

[Effective altruism](#) (EA) is a movement whose goal is to do the greatest possible amount of good, in terms of well-being, given a fixed quantity of resources (money, research hours, political capital, etc.).⁵³ Given its emphasis on impact maximization, EA is heavily invested in [global priorities research](#): research into which cause areas, and which interventions within those areas, are most effective at promoting well-being. So far, EA has focused the majority of its efforts on [global health and development](#), [farm animal welfare](#), and [risks of extinction and civilizational collapse](#), including risks from transformative artificial intelligence (AI), pandemics, nuclear weapons, great power conflict, and extreme climate change. The EA emphasis on prioritization research marks a significant contrast with Engaged Buddhism, which has not attempted to systematically answer the question of how to bring about the greatest amount of well-being, given a finite quantity of resources. So, whereas EA retains a more analytical, research-heavy orientation that attunes it to

problems that are—thankfully—not currently manifest, like engineered pandemics and misaligned, superintelligent AI, Engaged Buddhism is geared more towards social activism and immediately salient social issues.

It is also productive to compare EA efforts to reduce the suffering of farmed animals with the implications of Buddhist philosophy for non-human animal welfare.⁵⁴ Buddhists have traditionally regarded all sentient beings as moral patients, holding that, like us, non-human animals are subject to *duḥkha*.⁵⁵ Buddhist ethics, EA, and utilitarianism are therefore similar in [assigning greater importance to non-human animal welfare](#) than most other moral approaches.

We can nuance this picture, though, by recalling that Buddhism distinguishes between pain (negative hedonic valence) and *duḥkha* and maintains that pain is only bad to the extent that we are averse to it. (From a Buddhist perspective, pain is unavoidable, but *suffering* on account of pain is not.) It is extremely plausible that pain is aversive to many non-human animal species—including all those currently subjected to the [horrendous conditions on factory farms](#), such as cows, chickens, pigs, and fish. However, it is possible that some species—perhaps only a tiny minority—lack the cognitive architecture that is necessary to generate what is, for the Buddhist, the ethically-relevant conjunction of pain and the higher-level attitude of aversion (*dveṣa*)⁵⁶ to pain.⁵⁷ It is therefore possible that Buddhists will end up with a slightly less expansive [moral circle](#) than many utilitarians and effective altruists, who tend to hold that pain *simpliciter* is bad and worth alleviating.

Finally, we can inquire into Buddhist and utilitarian perspectives on the future of humanity. Although utilitarianism is compatible with multiple positions in [population ethics](#), a prominent strand in recent utilitarian(-leaning) work embraces *totalism*, which says, very roughly, that the more happy people there are in a population, the better. By totalist lights, the best-case scenario for humanity is that it develops into an extremely long-lasting interstellar

civilization composed of trillions of happy people (or more!).⁵⁸ To me, it seems doubtful that Buddhism would go in for a picture like this.⁵⁹ As we saw in section 2, Buddhist ethics does not start with a conception of what is good and then say that we should maximize the total quantity of that thing in the universe (as does utilitarianism). Instead, Buddhist ethics starts with the problem of *duḥkha* and then sets out paths to the solution to that problem. Even on the tentatively optimistic reading of Buddhism, on which attaining the cessation of *duḥkha* is positively valuable, it seems to me that Buddhists would find the claim that we should bring *new* beings into existence, so that they too can overcome suffering, to be an alien one. Rather, it seems that Buddhists thinking about the future would wish for us to lead whichever beings currently exist along the path to awakening, and perhaps for the *bodhisattvas* of the interstellar space age to try to save the aliens too (if doing so turns out to be tractable).

There is one fascinating way in which Buddhist and utilitarian thinking about the future seems to converge, however. Over the past several decades, applied ethicists—alongside the public—have become increasingly interested in *human biomedical enhancement*, which we can gloss as the project of biomedically intervening on the human organism for the purpose of increasing well-being.⁶⁰ Human enhancements would thus include everything from currently existing, relatively mundane procedures such as laser eye surgery to radical possible interventions, such as genetic engineering aimed at dramatically increasing general mental ability (“IQ”).

I believe that Buddhism and utilitarianism are both committed to in-principle support for human enhancement (if this can be achieved without harmful side-effects or unintended consequences). Utilitarianism says that we should promote the sum-total of well-being. So, if a certain enhancement would make humanity better off, utilitarianism would support it. For its part, unlike many other religious traditions (such as Christianity), Buddhism thoroughly rejects the notion that there is a sacrosanct human essence that we must

preserve.⁶¹ Moreover, Buddhism is pragmatic about attaining the cessation of suffering. For instance, if it turned out that stimulating the brain in a certain way during meditation allowed meditators to more efficiently gain insight into the nonexistence of the self, it seems that Buddhists should heartily endorse this practice. So although Buddhists may disagree with totalist utilitarians that our primary objective should be to become a vast interstellar civilization, they may well agree that we should use the tools of modern technology to intervene in our biology and psychology—perhaps radically—to attain a greater level of well-being.

About the Author

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1. I am grateful to Richard Yetter Chappell, Jonathan Gold, and Darius Meissner for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. ↩
2. Though, it is important not to conflate contemporary Theravāda Buddhism with Early Buddhism as it was practiced during the life of the historical Buddha (ca. 6th/5th centuries BCE) and the centuries afterwards. ↩
3. Vajrayāna Buddhism, perhaps most associated with Tibet, is sometimes thought of as a third branch. Scholars tend to classify Vajrayāna

Buddhism as a special sub-branch of the Mahāyāna, but for our purposes, not much hangs on this classificatory distinction. ↩

4. This is a simplification—quoting from [this article](#), “While utilitarianism and effective altruism share certain similarities, they are distinct and differ in important ways. Unlike utilitarianism, effective altruism does not require that we [sacrifice our own interests](#) whenever doing so brings about a greater benefit to others. Unlike utilitarianism, effective altruism does not claim that we should always seek to maximize wellbeing, [whatever the means](#). Finally, unlike utilitarianism, effective altruism does not equate the good with the total sum of wellbeing.” As a result, effective altruism is compatible with [a wide range of moral theories](#) besides utilitarianism. ↩

5. Garfield 2021, 17. ↩

6. See e.g. Keown 1992 and Fink 2013. ↩

7. See e.g. Goodman 2009 and Siderits 2016. ↩

8. See e.g. Harvey 2000, 51 and Vélez de Cea 2010. ↩

9. See e.g. Hallisey 1996, Barnhart 2012, and Garfield 2021. ↩

10. See Hidalgo 2020. ↩

11. See Gowans 2015a and Gowans 2017. ↩

12. Though see Goodman 2009, who argues that Theravāda Buddhist ethics is a form of rule consequentialism, and [this textbook](#) for a discussion of whether rule consequentialism is a species of consequentialism at all. ↩

13. See subsection 3.2.2 for some considerations in favor of this reading. ↩

14. The relationship between personal liberation and other-regarding virtues like compassion is a vexed interpretive issue. It is uncontroversial that these virtues are traditionally thought to facilitate one’s progress on the

path to awakening. Briefly, the reason is that the ultimate cause of *duḥkha* is egocentrism (see subsection 2.3), and cultivating non-instrumental concern for the well-being of others is supposed to counteract egocentrism. On some readings, the other-regarding virtues have solely instrumental value: they matter just to the extent that they help us to attain liberation (see e.g. Breyer 2015 and Siderits 2016). On other readings, the core Buddhist virtues are essential parts of the awakened state and valuable for their own sakes (see e.g. Keown 2001, Goodman 2009, Flanagan 2011, and Gowans 2015b). ↩

15. Davis 2017, 231. *Dukkha* is the Pāli word for the Sanskrit '*duḥkha*'. ↩

16. See Goodman 2016 for a more comprehensive treatment of Śāntideva. Goodman's consequentialist reading of *BCA* (see also Goodman 2009) has informed my own reading of the text. ↩

17. *BCA* 5.84; see also 5.101, 8.109, 8.137. ↩

18. *BCA* 5.84. ↩

19. *BCA* 6.75; see also 6.72. ↩

20. *BCA* 8.105; see also 5.86–87. ↩

21. *BCA* 8.90–10; see also 8.104–120. ↩

22. *BCA* 8.90, 8.94, 8.103. It is fascinating to compare Śāntideva's arguments in *BCA* 8.90–137 to those of Derek Parfit in Part III of *Reasons and Persons*, which argues for an impartial consequentialism partially on the basis of revisionary views of personal identity. On some readings, Śāntideva anticipates Parfit by over 1,000 years. ↩

23. A moral theory can agree that we ought to impartially promote well-being without being foundationally consequentialist. Take, for example, a moral theory whose bedrock is compassion. This theory might tell us to promote well-being because that is the compassionate thing to do. But

importantly, 'because it's compassionate' is a different explanation of why an action is right than 'because it will lead to better consequences than every other available action'. ↩

24. Garfield 2021, 22-23. ↩

25. If Garfield's interpretation is correct, then it is also possible that Buddhism is not even committed to welfarism. [Welfarism](#) says that positive well-being is the only intrinsic value. Everything else that is valuable is so just to the extent that it contributes to well-being. But on one way of understanding moral phenomenology, the only intrinsic value is (acquiring) apt moral phenomenology. And although having apt moral phenomenology entails having great non-instrumental concern for the well-being of others, well-being itself does not play the fundamental axiological role. (I do not claim that this is Garfield's view. It is simply a conceptual possibility.) ↩

26. Though, see Davis 2016, 146 for a brief mention of the problem in the context of Early Buddhism. ↩

27. Bostrom 2011, 10. ↩

28. Of course, it is also bad news for non-consequentialist moral theories which agree that we have moral reason to promote the good. But the problem seems more acute for consequentialism than it does for non-consequentialism, because whereas infinitarian paralysis threatens the *entire* consequentialist enterprise, it presumably leaves other aspects of non-consequentialist moral life intact. We can still do things like cultivate virtues and respect others' autonomy even if we cannot increase the quantity of well-being in the universe. ↩

29. E.g., by attempting fancy mathematical footwork (e.g., Bostrom 2011) or accepting other counterintuitive implications, such as that the spatiotemporal arrangement of value *itself* has non-instrumental

importance (e.g., Wilkinson 2021), which arguably run against the core intuitions that motivate consequentialism in the first place. ↩

30. Particularly prominent in the Zen tradition, an East Asian form of Mahāyāna Buddhism. ↩

31. Strawson 2017, 73, 75, 77. ↩

32. For a more thorough exposition of this psychological process, see Panaïoti 2012, chapter 4. ↩

33. Buddhists often portray this state in terms of negatives such as freedom from fear, dissatisfaction, and other unwholesome mental states. ↩

34. For a deeper dive into the various forms of *duḥkha* and the psychological analysis they receive in the Buddhist tradition, see Harris 2014 and Garfield 2021, chapter 6. ↩

35. Gethin 1998, 27. ↩

36. *BCA* 7.64. ↩

37. *BCA* 8.80. ↩

38. Baker 2022. ↩

39. Cf. Gold 2019, 3. ↩

40. Baker 2022. ↩

41. Though see Baker 2022 for a discussion of the extent to which Buddhist and utilitarian/effective altruist priorities might align in the short term. ↩

42. See e.g. Goodman 2009, 102: “Even a cursory reading of Śāntideva’s text makes it clear that he regards the universe, at least as it exists now, as bad.” ↩

43. Westerhoff 2017, 149, 153. ↩

44. Panaioti 2012, 159. ↩
45. MN 72 “Aggivaccha Sutta.” ↩
46. MN 75 “To Māgandiya.” ↩
47. *BCA* 8.108. ↩
48. *BCA* 10.33. ↩
49. See Breyer 2015 for a defense of this interpretation. ↩
50. For discussion, see Clayton 2018; King 2018; and Garfield 2021, chapter 12. ↩
51. King 2018. ↩
52. Clayton 2018, 136. ↩
53. For elaboration, see MacAskill (2019). ↩
54. For a survey of Buddhist ethical thought on non-human animals, see Finnigan 2017. ↩
55. See e.g. the *Lankāvatārasūtra*, an important Mahāyāna *sūtra* that advocates for vegetarianism and continues to exert cultural and religious influence in East Asia. ↩
56. Aversion, to reiterate, is an intentional attitude directed at the first-order contents of experience, which include hedonic valence (whether something is pleasant or unpleasant). In Buddhist psychology, aversion can arise only in the mindstream of a being that has a sense—even if minimal—of being someone/something *for whom* things can be good or bad. (You and I clearly have this sense. Rocks do not. It is exceedingly likely that dogs do. But do all worms and insects? This descriptive question has key ethical significance for the Buddhist.) ↩

57. Although Buddhists may find subtle disagreement with the appeal to preferences in the following passage, it is worth quoting from David Foster Wallace's essay "Consider the Lobster" for illustration. Remarking on the culinary practice of boiling lobsters alive, Wallace writes, "there remain the facts of the frantically clanking lid, the pathetic clinging to the edge of the pot. Standing at the stove, it is hard to deny in any meaningful way that this is a living creature experiencing pain and wishing to avoid/escape the painful experience. To my lay mind, the lobster's behavior in the kettle appears to be the expression of a *preference*; and it may well be that an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering.* The logic of this (preference → suffering) relation may be easiest to see in the negative case. If you cut certain kinds of worms in half, the halves will often keep crawling around and going about their vermiform business as if nothing had happened. When we assert, based on their post-op behavior, that these worms appear not to be suffering, what we're really saying is that there's no sign that the worms know anything bad has happened or would *prefer* not to have gotten cut in half" (2005, 267). ↩
58. See [Ord \(2020\)](#) and [Greaves and MacAskill \(2021\)](#) for exposition and defense of this sort of view, as well as discussion of how one might arrive at it even if one does not accept all the components of utilitarianism. ↩
59. Though I should note that there has been very little scholarly work on what Buddhist principles imply about the open questions in population ethics. ↩
60. The best stand-alone source on human enhancement I'm aware of is Buchanan 2011. ↩
61. Recall the no-self (*anātman*) thesis: all we are are series of impersonal mental and physical events, which themselves arise in dependence on innumerable other impersonal causes and conditions. ↩