

The Bodhisattva: An Ethical Life Being Lived for the Benefit of All Sentient Beings

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INTRODUCTION

The Sufi poet and mystic Rumi once wrote that “the wound is where the light enters you” (Goodreads). For me this was a beautiful and profound expression of understanding of suffering. The suffering in one’s life is inevitable but, in that suffering, there is opportunities to learn, heal, and thrive. In this work I will establish and defend my code of ethics built on the foundational basis of wisdom, mindfulness, and compassion and the spiritual and ethical traditions I draw from. Then I will define and describe the model of virtue ethics as well as address the strengths and weaknesses of the virtue ethics model. Finally, I will provide an example from my lived experience in how virtue ethics, Buddhist philosophy, and my own personal ethical code are applied to resolving an organizational conflict.

MY CODE OF ETHICS

The foundational pillars of my ethical code are based on the virtues of cultivating wisdom, mindfulness, and compassion; and from these core pillars ethical practice arises naturally. The first pillar of wisdom is to understand the way things are. I believe that all sentient beings are in a state of dissatisfaction or suffering, and that all things in the universe are intimately interconnected and interdependent with nothing operating or existing independently of anything else. This perspective is known as *dependent origination* in Buddhist philosophy. (Britannica) Because of this concept, my actions, or karma, can be understood as the “inevitability of cause and effect” (Van Schaik, p.24) of my actions upon myself and all other things.

From this perspective it forces thinking about the consequences of actions beyond the immediate concepts of myself and right now. Does this course of action benefit others as well as myself and what are the long-term consequences of this course of action? If this action harms others it will harm myself as well because there is ultimately no separation or distinction from us. If I make my

suffering theirs, theirs will be mine as well; Understanding this and to constantly be aware of it in thoughts and actions is a part of my second pillar of mindfulness. If I act with wisdom, mindfulness, and loving-kindness towards others in my actions I will experience the benefits just the same. If I suffer less, and help others suffer less, the entire universe suffers less. This is the motivation and importance of the third pillar of compassion. The Upajjhatthana Sutta summarizes the importance of understanding the impact of one's action by stating "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, AN 5.57)

Much of the way I have approached the question of ethics and becoming a better person in my adulthood has been strongly influenced by Zen Buddhist perspectives. Growing up as a child who was strongly empathetic and deeply valued helping others, I was strongly inspired by the Bodhisattvas as models of beings dedicated to saving all sentient beings and I wanted to live the kind of life that benefits and relieves the suffering of others with love and joy even amid all the suffering that persists (ZCLA, p.15) I believe that by cultivating my own wisdom, mindfulness, and compassion that the *brahmaviharas* or the "four immeasurable" virtuous attitudes of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (Lion's Roar, 2020) will be the fruits of my practice that I can enjoy and share with the universe. Because I know that the world is suffering and that its suffering is not separate from my own, it is my duty and my joy to share the fruits of whatever I can offer to everything and everyone around me because the suffering world is in dire need of all those things.

AN EXPLANATION OF VIRTUE ETHICS

The cultivation of a life that is lived through the lens of the Bodhisattva ideal shares a lot in common with the ethical framework of virtue ethics. Initially developed by the ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates, this framework of understanding ethics centers around the

ideal of “living the most exemplary life”; and that a life lived this way is the “most fully humane way of living”. (Neher, p.16) These behavioral and attitudinal traits of an exemplary person are called *virtues*. (Green, 2016) Socrates believed that a person who had *character* was a person that embodied virtues and due to their virtuosity would never choose the unethical option. (Neher, p. 17-18) The virtuousness of character would often guide them to making the right decisions. This concept of having virtuous qualities is also known as *arête*, translated as “goodness, excellence”. (Lidell & Scott) The capacity to be virtuous and to desire it, Aristotle argues, is innate in human nature. (Green, 2016)

Ethical behavior according to Aristotle has three criteria: “knowledge, choice, and character” (Neher, p.23); Actions must be consciously understood as the right course of action, made on one’s own volition, and done through a person that demonstrates good character. A truly virtuous person would in all instances possess the quality of *phronesis*, or “sound practical reason” (p. 26) when making decisions. When a person is faced with an ethical dilemma that cannot be resolved on one’s own, *moral exemplars* serve to be a model to look up to, study, and emulate – a behavior Aristotle believes is also innate in humans. (Green, 2016) The goal through ethical action and virtuosity is to attain a state of *eudaimonia*, or “human flourishing” (Green, 2016). If humanity’s innate nature is to be able to recognize virtuosity and cultivate it, then it is also possible that this state of *eudaimonia* is closer to the most natural state of humanity.

STRENGTHS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

One of the strengths of virtue ethics is that it discourages extremism through the Aristotelian concept called the *golden mean*, the ideal mid-point between excess and insufficiency (Green, 2016). To think of actions in this framework compels the actor to consider the situation and weigh the consequences of the extreme courses of action and settling on the middle ground being the likely correct response. This deters the actor from taking severe extreme responses but prompts them to also

avoid inaction. Similar attitudes also appear in religious traditions such as the Buddhist teaching of avoiding extremes in favor of the “middle way”. (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, SN 56.11)

In stark contrast to Immanuel Kant’s *categorical imperative*, arguing for an ironclad universality when it comes to ethical decisions (Neher, p. 28), the virtue ethics model allows a great deal of flexibility when approaching an ethical dilemma. This encourages mindfully approaching a dilemma and considering all the parts to make sound and reasoned decisions. By placing moral agency on the individual, it encourages people to make a lifetime goal of cultivating themselves to be better human beings; a mindset that would be much more difficult to cultivate in moral and ethical systems that pessimistically see human beings as incapable of goodness by their own virtue.

WEAKNESSES OF VIRTUE ETHICS

A potential weakness of the virtue ethic model is that it is filled with ambiguity when it comes to defining virtuous behavior and identifying it. Hank Green paraphrases Aristotle’s argument that specificity in defining virtuous behavior is unnecessary because “if you’re virtuous, you know what to do. All the time.” (Green, 2016) This individually centered approach to ethics that lacks concrete ideas and rules is difficult for people outside the individual or the individual’s cultural group to follow because it does not work from a framework of shared understanding and reality. Aristotle’s argument relies on *practical wisdom* to be a factor in what guides ethical decisions, but this relies on lived individual experience (Green, 2016) which again, could prove difficult for others to follow. The consequence is that what it prescribes is “frequently too vague and unhelpful for persons who have not yet acquired the requisite moral insight and sensitivity.” (Louden, p.230)

Another weakness of the virtue ethics model is that since it is vague in its definitions and applications of what virtue is, highly prone to cultural relativity and what other cultures may see as having character. In pre-communist China, the Confucian-dominated bureaucracy administered tests for

entrance in civil service that were aimed more to create and ensure “morally cultured gentleman” were working for the government than competent experts in the positions they would be assigned. (Heinz & Murray, p.266) Confucius himself rejected the idea of training men with skills remarking that “a gentleman is not a pot.” (p.266) Much in a similar way that Aristotle believed that the virtuous person would always choose the best action, Confucius believed that a person could be equally competent as a diplomat and engineer if he were trained in Confucian virtues and scholarship. This cultural attitude rejected *practical wisdom* for the sake of cultural and political cohesion. While both Aristotle and Confucius both had ethical perspectives based around virtues their applications were dramatically different, implying a lack of consistent results from this model.

APPLICATION OF THE VIRTUE ETHIC MODEL

As someone who studies communication and relationships, I am constantly considering the messages I am communicating to myself and others; and as a Zen Buddhist who has taken the Bodhisattva vows, I have made a solemn commitment to living a life dedicated to relieving the suffering and liberating all sentient beings. When I found myself in a position recently of having to negotiate conflict about a course of action as an officer of a community on an online roleplaying game that was beyond my own practical wisdom it was helpful to look upon the Bodhisattva moral exemplars as guidance to my actions.

In the example of Avalokiteshvara-Bodhisattva, the “one who hears the cries of the world” (ZCLA, p.16) was I truly dispassionately listening to other people and taking to heart their concerns? Am I then skillfully working with this understanding and applying it to my actions in a way that affirms and exercises goodwill towards everyone involved? If so, my actions should reflect the *brahmaviharas* or the “four immeasurable(s)” virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity; to which teacher Ayya Khema described as “the only emotions worth having.” (Lion’s Roar, 2020) By deeply

listening, being present, and communicating with good will the conflict was quickly resolved thanks to a cultivated communication environment that emphasized good will and mindful listening where everyone felt heard and respected and there was no need to fight for control.

CONCLUSION

In this work I have outlined the underlying pillars of my ethical code built on wisdom, mindfulness, and compassion and how my Zen Buddhist practice and perspective informs my view of ethical conduct. This informed perspective takes the form of cultivating the bodhisattva ideal, the thirteen bodhisattva precepts, and the practice of the four immeasurable virtues. I have also defined and described the ethical model of virtue ethics and the functions of virtue and character that are behind the ideal of the ethical and best life lived as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the virtue ethics model. Finally, I have provided an example of how the model of virtue ethics is reflected in my own conduct with an example in my daily life of having to manage interpersonal conflict.

In conclusion, because life and relationships are so complex and intertwined that perhaps it may be impossible for any ethical framework to satisfyingly have an answer to every ethical or moral dilemma. Even with all the possible ethical models and perspectives we have developed as a human race over centuries and millennia, we are ultimately left with ourselves and our own actions. Roshi Wendy Egyoku Nakao comments on this uncertainty in ethics by stating “we never really know if we have acted sufficiently. Regardless, each of us is responsible for our life. We simply do the best we can at any given time.”

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