

**BUDDHIST META-ETHICS:
ETHICAL THEORY, ACTION AND EPISTEMOLOGY**

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Introduction:

The nature and scope of Buddhist ethics is a topic of inquiry that is increasingly garnering the critical attention of contemporary Buddhist thinkers. Significantly, much recent work in this field involves attempts to determine which contemporary Western normative ethical theory a Buddhist ethic most closely resembles. For instance, Keown (2001) and, later, Cooper & James (2005, 68) claim that Buddhist ethics is a type of virtue ethics. Siderits (2003, :, 2007) argues that it is unmistakably consequentialist, as does Williams (1998) and Goodman (2008). Cea (2004) and Clayton (2006) argue that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a combination of virtue ethics and utilitarianism whilst Harvey (2000, 49), though acknowledging the analogies, nonetheless maintains that a Buddhist ethical theory is significantly distinct.¹

While a somewhat analogical exposition of a Buddhist ethic may suggest simplification and conflation (even reduction), it is not difficult to see why one might find such a strategy appealing. As Georges Dreyfus (1995) reminds us, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (to take just one Buddhist lineage as an example) did not develop systematic theoretical reflections on the nature and scope of ethics; nor, indeed, do Indic Buddhist texts provide systematic analyses of ethics and ethical concepts. This is not to overlook the fact that Indo-Tibetan traditions had substantive ethical views; moral precepts are advanced and discussed at great length throughout the entire Buddhist tradition. Dreyfus' point, however, is that such discussion is often conducted in practical terms (i.e. concerning the implementation and application of precepts) rather than with the kind of rich and systematic reflection about their nature and scope that is typical of contemporaneous treatises focusing on epistemology and philosophy of language.

As Dreyfus rightly points out, this dearth in Buddhist ethical theorization causes problems for modern scholars who want to explore the nature of Buddhist ethics. To a large extent, Buddhist ethicists find themselves having to *construct* Buddhist ethical theories. Given that Western philosophy has quite a robust tradition of ethical theorization, it seems reasonable to exploit analogies with these systems in the attempt to weave together the various Buddhist moral threads.²

As in the contemporary Western ethical tradition, questions concerning (normative) ethical theorizing are only one species of ethical concern.³ An additional area of interest is meta-ethics.⁴ Meta-ethical questions primarily concern the nature and status of, and

assumptions that support, ethical claims and theories. Such assumptions include, *inter alia*, various epistemological and metaphysical commitments.

One particular metaphysical commitment that has been explicitly considered by most aforementioned Buddhist ethicists is the bearing certain metaphysical views concerning the nature and status of an ontological entity ‘self’ (*atta* (pali.); *ātman* (sk.)) has on ethical theorizing. One of the central tenets of Buddhism is that there is no self (best known in its Pali form as the *anatta* doctrine). How best to understand this doctrine is subject to much dispute. For many, this doctrine constitutes the *ontological* thesis that there is no substantial ego underlying our experience – ‘we’ are nothing but a sequence of causally linked psychological and physical events and processes. Whether such events and processes themselves have substantive metaphysical status is a moot issue.

For Siderits (2003), the *anatta* doctrine is not only an ontological thesis (which, he argues, commits us to a reduced level of events and processes with substantive metaphysical status) it also has direct implications for putative Buddhist ethical theorizing. In particular, Siderits argues that the *anatta* doctrine rules out theorizing Buddhist ethics by analogy with contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethics. His reason for this is the view that virtue ethics presupposes a virtuous *agent* as bearer of particular virtues. This, he takes it, can be reduced to a metaphysical commitment to a ‘self’, which Buddhists would deny.

Keown (2001), in stark contrast, defends a virtue ethical model of Buddhist ethics. He argues that Buddhism provides sufficient criteria to allow the individuation of subjects (as ‘persons’, perhaps), which, on his view, is all that is required by his Buddhist virtue ethical theory.⁵ For Keown, pursuing the issue of the ultimate ontological constitution of persons as part of a study of ethics confuses ethics and metaphysics and, hence, “does not make for a fruitful line of enquiry” (2001, 19). Moreover, he protests that “although facts are not irrelevant to values they have no priority, and ethical issues must be addressed with ethical arguments: they cannot be brushed aside by reference to facts of a scientific, ontological or metaphysical nature” (2001, 162).

Meta-ethics certainly should not be pursued or conceived of as *merely* the joint pursuit of ethics and metaphysics (or science or epistemology). Nor should it be conceived of as a simple-minded attempt to derive evaluative conclusions from purely factual considerations (nor, indeed, to ‘demonstrate’ the impossibility of ethics by citing the failure to provide such a derivation). Keown is right to protest that this would lead to a number of confusions. However, as Siderits’ challenge makes clear, legitimate and important questions arise, and need to be addressed, concerning the *relationship* between metaphysical and epistemological considerations and ethical theories, questions which, in my view, constitute the proper domain of meta-ethics. Ethical theories are not simply collections or lists of values, they are attempts to explain the nature and role and relationships between these ethical values and thoughts and practices within the wider context of the aims and projects of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. As such, they take for granted various epistemological and ontological views and commitments. If these commitments conflict with ‘received’ Buddhist theories on the nature of epistemology

and ontology, the fact of such conflict seriously challenges the status of the putative Buddhist ethical theory.

Having said this, however, Keown is surely right to point out that the mere presence of such conflict does not, in itself, automatically confer priority to the epistemological and ontological theories; we do not simply ‘brush ethics aside’ in the face of opposition. Arguably all Buddhist lineages recognize there to be an important relationship between the practical and theoretical domains; between ethics (*sīla* (*pali*); *śīla* (*sk.*)) and compassion (*karuṇā* (*pali*; *sk.*)) on the one hand, insight or wisdom (*paññā* (*pali*); *prajñā* (*sk.*)) on the other. Given that there is no definitive explanation of the nature of these relationships, why should we assume from the outset that when push comes to shove ethical theories and considerations will, and should, give way?

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between Buddhist theories on metaphysics and epistemology (i.e. the insight and wisdom traditions of Buddhist thought) and ethical theorising? In this paper, I shall investigate certain aspects of this relationship. I shall not seek a definitive and comprehensive answer. Moreover, I shall not proceed by addressing this relationship in terms of the bearing certain *metaphysical* views about the nature of self may have on certain forms of Buddhist ethical theory. Rather, I shall focus on the bearing certain *epistemological* considerations concerning the possibility of ‘action’ have on Buddhist ethical theorizing.

My point of departure shall be Keown’s highly influential virtue ethical theorization of Buddhist ethics (Keown, 2001). I shall discuss this ethical theory in relationship with a contemporary exposition of two prominent Buddhist epistemological theories; namely, Dunne’s exposition of the views of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti (Dunne, 1996). I shall highlight certain points of conflict between these ethical and epistemological theories and will argue that the resolution of this conflict requires revision (either in interpretation of theories or in the theories themselves) by all parties. I shall conclude by arguing for substantive revision to these theories via an engagement with this conflict and, in so doing, hope to exemplify some of the virtues of engaging with a meta-ethical methodology for the advancement of the respective domains of inquiry.

1. Keown’s (Virtue Ethical) Nature of Buddhist Ethics

Fundamental to Keown’s virtue ethical theorization of Buddhist ethics is the idea that Buddhism is centred on a teleological goal or *summum bonum* of human endeavour; namely, *nirvāṇa* (or, more specifically, nirvana-in-this-life).⁶ Crucial to this view is the idea that the perfection of ethical conduct (*sīla*), together with the perfection of knowledge or insight (*paññā* (*pali.*)), is jointly constitutive of *nirvāṇa*.

On almost all accounts, a buddha is the paradigm of one who has achieved *nirvāṇa*. It follows from Keown’s account that buddhas not only achieve intellectual perfection but engage in ethical conduct; indeed, the *perfection* of ethical conduct. Moreover, for Keown, the moral precepts that are presented in Buddhist treatises “circumscribe the conduct of the Buddha” (p.54). That is, the moral precepts of ethical action developed in

the early treatises take descriptions of the buddha's behaviour as their paradigm. These moral precepts, in turn, form the basis for the preceptual codes common to both the Theravāda and Mahāyanā traditions. "To observe the precepts, therefore, is to model one's behaviour on that of the Buddha" (p.31). More specifically, to pursue the goal of ethical perfection, on Keown's account, is to pursue the goal of acting as the Buddha would act. "The Buddha's *śīla*, or moral perfection, becomes an essential goal for all who aspire to his status." (p.55).

For Keown, moral precepts serve a dual function; they both encapsulate 'condensed descriptions' of how the historical Buddha *did* act as well as provide a model for how a buddha *would* act (or, how we would act were we to attain *nirvāṇa*). Thus, for instance, given that compassion (*karuṇā*), generosity (*dāna*) and courage (*vīriya*) are all considered to fall under the "umbrella term" *śīla* (p.19), and "*śīla* circumscribes the conduct of the Buddha" (p.54), it follows that the conduct of the historical Buddha not only instantiated these virtues or qualities (i.e. he acted compassionately, generously and courageously) but that buddhas, more generally (i.e. those who attain *nirvāṇa*) also act in ways that are compassionate, generous and courageous. This introduces an important element of normativity into Keown's theory. Insofar as we seek to attain *nirvāṇa*, and a partial constituent of *nirvāṇa* involves acting in ways that instantiate these qualities or virtues, we *should* (or 'ought' to) attempt to act in these ways.

Crucial to Keown's theory is the rejection of transcendental accounts of buddhahood and *nirvāṇa*. For Keown, *nirvāṇa* is the highest and best form of human life and, hence, the Buddha achieved the "fulfillment of human potential, not its transcendence" (p.113); he "lived an exemplary moral life" (p.75) with merely a difference in degree, and not kind, of cultivated ethical goodness than one who is still following the path. What distinguishes a buddha from ordinary fallible beings following the path is not the transcendence of human activity, but the fact that his "moral conduct, that is to say his interaction with other beings, is perfect" (p.114).

The idea that a buddha's actions or behaviour is to be characterized in much the same way as followers of the path (albeit with a profoundly higher degree of perfection) is controversial. Much recent debate has focused on Keown's claim that every virtuous action (including that of a buddha who has attained *nirvāṇa*) is both *kusula* (i.e. morally good or skillful) and *puñña* (i.e. karmically meritorious) (p.123). One locus of controversy concerns the canonical view that an *arahat* (i.e. a liberated or perfect being) is free from, or has passed beyond the domain of, karma and rebirth. How can a virtuous action be considered both *kusula* and *puñña* while the agent of the action has passed beyond the domain of karma, *puñña* and *apuñña*? Keown (2001) responds to this challenge by arguing that *puñña* is a function of progress towards *kusula*; once *kusula* is achieved, *puñña* becomes redundant (p.124). According to Cea (2004) this response contradicts the claim that virtuous action, by definition, is both *kusula* and *puñña* (given that the virtuous action of a buddha is *not puñña*). Nonetheless, Cea can be seen to endorse Keown's putative solution as an important correction to his view. For Cea, actions with the quality of *puñña* are merely *instrumental* towards *nirvāṇa* whereas actions with the quality of *kusula* are genuinely constitutive.

Significantly, this dispute is conducted on the basis of a common assumption that a buddha (or *arahat*; i.e. one who has attained *nirvāṇa*) has the capacity to act. The debate concerns what *qualities* can be predicated of a buddha's actions (i.e. whether *kusula* and/or *puñña*) not whether or not action is possible. Adam (2005) attempts to diffuse this debate by pointing out that the term for 'action' in the Buddhist canon is *karma* (or *kamma* (*pali.*)). Given that the *arahat* is considered to have reached the goal of having 'destroyed action (*kamma*)'⁷, Adam argues that an *arahat* cannot be considered to act at all.⁸ According to Adam, an *arahat*'s "enlightened conduct or awakened activity" (p.77) falls entirely outside the scope of *kusula* and *puñña*. Note that while Adam denies *arahats* the capacity for 'action' (*karma*), he nonetheless acknowledges that they engage in "good conduct" (p.76) and "activity" (p.77). Thus, even with Adam's qualification, it remains the case that the debates, which arise in response to Keown's account, concern the *kind* or *quality* of a buddha's *conduct* (i.e. whether or not such conduct is karmically efficacious or, in Adam's terms, whether or not such conduct counts as 'action (*karma*)'). However, such debates do not question the underlying assumption that it is possible for a buddha (or *arahat*) to engage in conduct or activity (i.e. action that is not karmically efficacious). In what follows I shall focus on this underlying assumption and shall set aside the issues of whether or not a buddha's conduct is karmically efficacious; whether or not it should be termed as conduct or activity or 'action (*karma*)'; whether or not *kusula* or *puñña* can be predicated of such conduct or action.

2. Keown continued...

As mentioned, Keown's theory of Buddhist ethics is committed to the view that a buddha has a capacity to engage in ethical conduct insofar as ethical conduct is constitutive of *nirvāṇa*. This theory is also committed to the idea that a buddha's capacity for ethical conduct is characterized in much the same way as that of a follower of the path, albeit with a higher degree of perfection. How does Keown characterize this assumed capacity for ethical conduct (and action, more generally) which underlies his theory?⁹

There is no simple answer to this question. The dominant thread of Keown's argument focuses on an account of ethical conduct as requiring choice. This notion is first introduced in the context of discussing the Buddha's decision to teach the *dharma*. According to the Vinaya, after the Buddha attained enlightenment he was asked three times to teach. It was only when he was asked for the third time that he 'surveys the world with his Buddha-eye out of compassion (*kāruṇṇatā*) for beings' and decides to teach rather than remain silent (Vin. 1.6). Keown generalizes from this event the idea that the Buddha's "initial hesitation" (during which time, Keown claims, the Buddha 'recognized alternative conceptions of human good') as well as the Buddha's "subsequent decision" to teach as being paradigmatic of "the new scale of values introduced by Buddhism" (p.42). Ethical conduct, on this 'new' view, paradigmatically involves choice and choice requires the recognition of alternatives.

The idea that ethical conduct involves recognition of alternatives and choice resurfaces in Keown's later discussions of the notion of *cetanā*. Although, again, there are many

threads to Keown's discussion of *cetanā*, his focal argument centres on the view that "the faculty of moral choice...for Buddhism is *cetanā*...it is the pivot around which virtue and vice revolve." (p.195). Indeed, Keown considers *cetanā*, defined as capacity for choice, to be that which determines the moral quality of an action.

Keown's argument for this idea turns on an appeal to Abhidharmic literature. For Keown, virtues and vices are *dharmas*; they are real and objective elements "'found' within the psyche." (p.64) On his account, however, the virtues and vices do not, of themselves, motivate or cause action. Rather, they "influence specific moral choices and decisions" (p.214). *Cetanā*, for Keown, is the "preceding motivation (*cetanā*) which determines the moral quality of the action" (p.178); *cetanā* is the "compass-needle of moral choice" (p.211). A Buddhist virtue ethical theory, on Keown's view, is thus concerned with "virtuous choices" (p.222); virtues are dispositions to "choose rightly" (p.207). Indeed, by the end of Keown's argument it is no longer the case that the early Buddhist treatises describe the Buddha's conduct but, rather, they contain a record of the Buddha's "important moral choices" (p.226).

Significantly, the notion of *cetanā* defined as 'choice' is intimately connected with that of representing and considering alternative courses of action; there is no such thing as choice without alternatives between which one can choose. This is both recognized by Keown when he introduces the notion of a Buddha's decision to teach as occurring subsequent to his recognition of alternatives, and it is also theorized in his claim that *cetanā* is the outcome of a process that involves "initial attention to the matter in hand (*vitakka*), reflection upon it (*vicāra*), and an intellectual decision or resolution (*adhimokkha*)" (p.211). Indeed, Keown proceeds to offer *cetanā* as a suitable candidate for the Western philosophical term 'practical reason'. According to this thread of Keown's thought, *cetanā* comes to denote the entire process that generates action, starting from the initial intuition of a good end, subsequent deliberation (*cetayitvā*) about practical choices, and conclusion in choice and action (p.218). Insofar as *cetanā* is morally determinative, it follows that behavior that is not produced via this "process of *cetanā*" is "not ethically charged" (p.220)

Note that the above characterizations of ethical conduct require that a buddha engages in conceptual thought. The characterisation of *cetanā* in terms of 'choice' (what I call Keown's 'minimal conception' of *cetanā*) requires that a buddha has capacities to represent and choose between alternative courses of action. A 'course of action' is a conceptualized mental item that is entertained or represented, rejected or endorsed. The characterisation of *cetanā* as 'process' (what I call Keown's 'maximal conception' of *cetanā*) requires that a buddha also has capacities to reflect, compare and deliberate about these mental items. Both conceptions of *cetanā* presuppose conceptuality. Significantly, however, conceptual thought is held suspect by most Buddhist epistemological theories. Hence, there is reason to think that the epistemological commitments that underlie Keown's theory conflict with the 'received' views of Buddhist epistemology.

2. A Dilemma: Dunne's Thoughtless Buddha

In order to grasp the precise nature of the conflict that arises between the definitions of ethical conduct that underlie Keown's ethical theory and Buddhist epistemology, we need to consider and address particular epistemological theories. 'Buddhist epistemology' is an umbrella term for a number of sophisticated and highly systematic theorizations. While there is much agreement between these theories (insofar as their proponents each conceive themselves to be consistent with the teachings of the Buddha) there is also considerable disagreement between them. Hence, in order to show that the presuppositions underlying Keown's theory do, indeed, conflict with 'received' Buddhist epistemological views, we need to locate this disagreement in the context of particular epistemological theories. In what follows I shall focus on Dunne's exposition of two highly influential epistemological theories (i.e. that of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti) and shall demonstrate the extent to which they do, indeed, come into conflict with Keown's ethical theory.¹⁰

Both Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti are part of an epistemic tradition that considers concepts (*vikalpa*, *kalpana*) to be closely linked to ignorance (*avidyā*) and ignorance to be at the root of all suffering. Though the respective analyses of the relationship between concepts, ignorance and suffering vary, that there *is* such a relationship is a shared assumption. It is also important to recognize that both thinkers agree that conceptual thought and inferential knowledge has objects or referents in much the same way as perceptions are considered to have objects or referents. For Dharmakīrti, the objects of perception are considered to be unique and momentary particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*). These objects count as 'real' insofar as they can be individuated in terms of the performance of causal functions and are detectable by sense faculties. Unlike perception, however, the objects or referents of conceptual thought and inferential knowledge are not considered to be 'real'; they are words, concepts, universals (*sāmānya*), i.e. generally characterized phenomena (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), which have no inherent existence. As a result, Dharmakīrti considers such cognitions to be ultimately erroneous or distorted (*bhrānta*). This is not to undermine the practical benefits of engaging in conceptual thought and inference.¹¹ The salient problem, however, is that, according to Dharmakīrti, conceptual thought essentially involves determining the apprehended intentional object *as being* a real particular when, in fact, the only real particulars are unique and momentary events in causal relations.¹² In conceptual thought we combine things that are, in fact, distinct and we direct our anger (*krodha*), fear (*bhaya*), and craving (*tṛṣṇā*) towards these pseudo-objects and, thereby, perpetuate suffering. It is not merely the case that, in conceptual thought, we make a mistake about what there really is, "conceptual knowledge is not [even] capable of apprehending (particulars) just as they are because conceptuality is controlled by ignorance"(PVSV, 49).

Dunne observes that "for Buddhists of Dharmakīrti's ilk ignorance is the beginningless source of suffering. And on Dharmakīrti's view ignorance is also the mental mechanism - the internal cause - that compels people to lump things together conceptually and suffer thereby" (Dunne, 532). Hence, it is not merely conceptuality that is false; it is false *because* it is (or is rooted in) ignorance. As Dharmakīrti himself writes, "ignorance is

defined as conceptuality. That is, ignorance is conceptuality. Ignorance leads one astray by its very nature” (PVSV, 49). In identifying ignorance with conceptuality, argues Dunne, Dharmakīrti implies that what is said of ignorance applies to conceptuality. Hence, just as ignorance is an essential cause of suffering, so too is conceptuality. It follows from this that “just as ignorance must be overcome to become a buddha, so too must conceptuality” (Dunne, 533).

Candrakīrti, like Dharmakīrti, also held the view that conceptuality is incompatible with buddhahood. Candrakīrti’s major work, the *Madhyamakāvātāra*, focuses on investigating the distinction between ‘conventional’ reality (*vyavahāra*, *tha snyad* (tib.); *saṃvṛti*, *kun rdzob* (tib.)) and ultimate reality (*paramārtha*; *don dam* (tib.)).¹³ Although Candrakīrti discusses this distinction in a number of ways, that which is relevant to the current discussion is the idea that things which exist in terms of ultimate reality are ‘truly real’ and things that exist in terms of conventional reality are only provisionally real (i.e. they do not have ultimate or true reality). To this extent, Candrakīrti’s view is seemingly compatible with Dharmakīrti’s epistemological distinction between the objects of perceptual knowledge, which are ultimately real, and the objects of inferential knowledge, which do not have ultimate reality but, nonetheless, have a provisional or conventional status given their important pragmatic role in ordinary, everyday discourse.

For Dunne, Candrakīrti’s view is much more radical than that of Dharmakīrti insofar as Candrakīrti argues that the objects of perceptual knowledge (i.e. *svalakṣaṇa*), *themselves*, cannot be ultimately real. This is because *svalakṣaṇa* are defined in terms of their causal capacities or function; the fact of having causal capacities or functions serves to individuate them as particulars. For Candrakīrti, the possibility of individuating particulars in terms of their definitive function presupposes that particulars have an essence. However, as Candrakīrti argues, that which arises from causes and conditions cannot have an essence. Hence, the objects of perceptual knowledge are only conventionally real and the only possible ultimate reality is essencelessness (*niḥsvabhāvatā*, *ngo bo nyid med pa* (tib.)) or emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid* (tib.)).

According to Dunne, one implication of Candrakīrti’s extension of conventional reality to the objects of perception is that any experience of the world (i.e. whether it be of persons, tables, the color blue, a sensation of pain) is necessarily an experience of an ultimately unreal, conventionally constructed thing. If we extended Dharmakīrti’s identification of ignorance and conceptuality to ignorance and *conventionality*, it would follow that conventionality, like ignorance, is a source of suffering. Hence, a buddha must not only abandon ignorance, he/she must also abandon conventionality in order to attain *nirvāṇa*.

I shall not, here, critique Dunne’s exposition of these epistemological theories. Notice, however, that on the assumption that it is correct, these theories have significant implications regarding the cognitive capacities of a buddha. For instance, it follows from this exposition of Dharmakīrti’s view that a buddha does not engage in any form of conceptual thought. In particular, he does not (or cannot) engage in forms of deliberation or reasoning (which would require the possibility of entertaining, and relating conceptualized thoughts). Nonetheless, for Dharmakīrti, a buddha has the capacity for

direct, sensory perception (*pratyakṣa*) insofar as the objects of perception are real. This is not the case for Candrakīrti, however. For Candrakīrti, on Dunne's analysis, a buddha does not even have the capacity for perception insofar as the objects of perception are also conventional constructs and, hence, rooted in ignorance. As Dunne argues: "not only does such a buddha not see the ordinary things of the world, he does not even know ultimate reality because nothing at all occurs in a buddha's mind. Indeed, it would seem that Candrakīrti's buddhas do not know anything at all...one might even conclude that such a buddha is simply dead" (Dunne, 548).

While we need not go as far as Dunne in concluding that a Candrakīrtian buddha is (cognitively like one) dead, it should be clear that the implications of these epistemological theories for the possibility of a buddha's capacities for action will be incredibly steep. In particular, the theories of both Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti, on the above exposition, would rule out the possibility that a buddha could act or engage in ethical conduct as characterized by Keown. Both Keown's minimal and maximal characterizations of *cetanā* require that a buddha engage in conceptual thought as part of the process that produces action. Indeed, a buddha's conduct does not count as ethical (it is not "ethically charged") *unless* it is produced by just such a process. And, yet, according to the epistemological theories we have just canvassed, a buddha does not have the capacity to engage in such a cognitive process insofar as a buddha does not have capacities for conceptual thought.

If we prioritize the conclusions of these epistemological theories, it seems to follow that Keown's virtue ethical theory is not a plausible theorization of Buddhist ethics insofar as it requires that a buddha can act (or engage in ethical conduct) and is committed to a characterization of action (or ethical conduct) which presupposes that a buddha has the very capacities that are denied him on epistemological grounds. Hence, we should reject Keown's theory. However, if we alternatively prioritise Keown's theory we could argue that the epistemological theories must be wrong in their characterization of a buddha's cognitive capacities (or lack thereof). Hence, we should reject the epistemological theories. How do we resolve this dilemma?¹⁴

In what follows, I shall argue that we can resolve this dilemma only if both parties of the conflict revise their positions in certain crucial respects. I shall argue that these revisions are substantive advances in both ethical and epistemological theorization. I shall conclude that this result reflects favorably on meta-ethics as a methodology for inquiry.

4. Resolving the Dilemma

My first approach to resolving this dilemma involves a return to Keown's virtue ethical theory of Buddhist ethics. The idea that puts Keown's theory in direct conflict with the epistemological theories of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti is the idea that ethical conduct (and action, more generally) requires representation of alternatives and choice of a course of action as an essential part of the process that directly productive of action. Need a virtue ethical theory of Buddhist ethics conceive of ethical conduct in these terms?

I think not. The first reason is phenomenological and stems from a reflection on typical actions of ordinary fallible beings. In the course of a typical day we do a multitude of things: we breathe almost continually; blink from time to time; walk from place to place; eat and drink; forget various things; talk to our friends. Some of these things do not count as intentional (e.g. blinking and forgetting). For many philosophers, it is only intentional, *volitional* action that genuinely counts as action.¹⁵ Such is true for many Buddhist thinkers. Indeed, *cetanā* is often translated as volition or intention. “It is intention/will (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call action (*karma*); having intended/willed, one acts through body, speech or mind”(A.III, 415). Now, we might concede that action must be intentional action (or conduct that involves *cetanā*) for it to genuinely count as action or conduct (and not mere behaviour). However, it does not follow that this necessarily commits us to a phenomenology of reflection and choice as directly productive of action. For instance, I typically do not reflect and choose what I say before every utterance I make to my friends. Nonetheless, I (often) intend what I say when I say it. Similarly, I do not typically reflect and choose to brush my teeth before getting into bed, or to walk down the stairs to the kitchen in the morning, or many other instances of habitual behaviour. Of course I could, and sometimes do. But not always, and this is the point. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to mount a substantive argument in defense of this view, it seems at least plausible to suppose that some, if not much, of our intentional action does not involve a phenomenology of reflection and choice directly prior to action.

Now, a defender of Keown’s theory may respond to this by conceding that not all instances of intentional action involve conscious reflection and choice immediately prior to, and necessarily productive of, action. However, she may argue that Keown’s theory is only committed to the view that *ethical conduct* is to be characterized in this way. Virtues are dispositions *to choose*; an action only counts as virtuous if *chosen* in the light of the virtues. If we deny that reflection and choice are constitutive of the process that generates ethical conduct then there is no way for the virtues to get a grip on our behavior and, hence, for conduct to count as ethical.

It seems, however, that if we have already granted the *possibility* that intentional action can count as intentional without prior reflection and choice, why can’t we also grant the possibility that at least some instances of ethical conduct can be characterized in the same way? Consider, for instance, an ordinary, fallible person writing a monthly cheque to Plan International. Imagine that the person in question has been sponsoring a child for a number of years. Her income is healthy (she is the chair of a wealthy academic department and in no threat of redundancy); she is satisfied that Plan is managing her funds well and that her donation is genuinely contributing to the well being of the child. It is reasonable to suppose that this person does not need to represent alternatives and choose or form the intention to write her monthly cheque every time she writes the cheque; in many cases she simply sees that the payment is due (it might be marked on her calendar, for instance) and responds by writing the cheque. One might say that the intention to send a donation every month was formed way back when she originally chose to sponsor a child and does not have to be remade every time she writes the cheque. Writing a cheque for Plan has become a habit, one that she fully endorses.

Moreover, even though the person does not represent alternatives and form the intention to send the donation every time she writes a cheque for Plan, if queried, she would freely endorse the action as something she intended to do and could provide reasons that explained why she did it. It does not follow, however, that these reasons and intentions need to have been mentally represented and formed as part of the process that directly produced the action (writing a cheque) for the action to count as intentional.

Most importantly, if the act of writing a monthly cheque for Plan genuinely counts as virtuous, this is not because the person was motivated *to choose* to act in this way. It counts as virtuous because the action, itself, *instantiates* the virtue in question. A virtue is, characteristically, a disposition for a type of *action*, not a disposition for a certain type of *choice*.

Notably, if we analyse Keown's own choice-model of ethical conduct, we can see that it already presupposes that types of actions are characterised by virtues. On Keown's account, virtues motivate or inspire or cause us to *choose* to enact virtuous courses of action. The paradigm object of choice is a course of action. Thus, action-X counts as virtuous, on Keown's account, if we choose to do course-of-action-X (rather than course-of-action-Y). However, it would seem that we choose to do course-of-action-X (rather than course-of-action-Y) insofar as X counts as a virtuous course of action, and Y does not (or X counts as more virtuous than Y, or is more virtuous in this situation or is more relevant etc.). Virtues could only motivate *choices* if courses of action can be recognized to instantiate virtues. Hence, to use Keown's example, compassion could only motivate the Buddha's choice to teach the *dharma* if the Buddha recognized that this course of action, 'teaching the *dharma*', counted as a compassionate action whereas keeping silent did not (or keeping silent was less compassionate or not compassionate given the intended audience, the situation, etc.). Of course what counts as an instantiation of a virtue will only be vaguely demarcated insofar as some action types will instantiate some virtues in some circumstances but not in others or at certain times but not others or in certain ways but not others.¹⁶ Hence, the identification of an action as instantiating a particular virtue will necessarily take a number of factors into consideration. However, if an account of virtuous choice already presupposes the idea of a virtuous *type of action* (which we can recognize as being virtuous in order to choose to act in that way and, hence for our action to count as virtuous) why can't we simply dispense with the mediating act of choice and speak simply of virtues as being dispositions to perform certain types of *actions* or to *respond* in certain types of way (i.e. virtuously, compassionately, courageously), rather than merely dispositions to make certain types of *choices* to act in certain types of ways?

That Keown seems to acknowledge some version of this response-account of virtuous conduct (in contrast to the choice-account of virtuous conduct) is arguably evident in his claim that "moral virtue is manifested by making the appropriate ethical response in different situations" (p.208) and that "generosity and the other virtues involve not merely the bare realization that a practice is good, but also the *instantiation* of the practice" (p.213) Keown also admits that the term *cetanā* does not merely designate the act of making a choice or decision but may be taken to "describe the general moral stance or

posture adopted by the psyche and its orientation with respect to ends” (p.213). If we adopt a response-account of ethical conduct, we might interpret this claim as follows: the fact that a person consistently and reliably responds compassionately to certain kinds of situations (and, thereby, instantiates a disposition to respond compassionately), expresses their moral stance or the posture of their psyche and its orientation. Moreover, given that this moral stance or posture was cultivated while they were a follower of the path, and perfected once they became a buddha, one could reasonably argue that their compassionate responses are intentional; the fact that they can respond compassionately as they do (i.e. in the right way, at the right time, to the right object etc.) is the result of a process of self-cultivation in which they have intentionally engaged. This position is consistent with the claim that actions involve *cetanā*, but does not thereby commit us to an account of a buddha explicitly representing options and making choices immediately prior to ethical conduct. *Cetanā* is still required for behaviour to count as action, but the scope of *cetanā* extends over the process of cultivating dispositions for virtuous *response* rather than constituting choices (or choosing) that necessarily produces the action.

Hence, my suggestion is that we revise Keown’s choice-model of virtues and, instead, focus on a response-model of virtues. Virtues are dispositions for response, first and foremost, and not limited to dispositions for choice. If we accept this revision of Keown’s account, we are no longer committed to a view of buddhahood that requires a buddha to represent and choose their actions in order to be considered to engage in ethical conduct. Of course, it may have been necessary for them to represent and choose actions while they were a follower of the path in order to *cultivate* the dispositions that enable them to respond the way they do. Nevertheless, the perfection of these dispositions is *instantiated* in their direct and spontaneous ethical responses, their actions are not mere manifestations of represented courses of actions that have been chosen and enacted.

5. Resolving the Dilemma (cont.)

Is this response-model of a Buddhist virtue ethics compatible with the epistemological conclusions of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti, on Dunne’s analysis and, if so, have we resolved our dilemma?

If we consider the view of Candrakīrti, the answer seems to be ‘no’. While a buddha with capacities for virtuous response, as characterized above, need no longer engage in deliberation or represent courses of action as options for choice prior to response (and, hence, need not engage in conceptual thought, broadly construed), a buddha would still need to be able to perceive situations in order to respond to them. A Candrakīrtian buddha, on Dunne’s analysis, is not capable of perceiving anything and, hence, does not have the required cognitive capacities. A Dharmakīrtian buddha, however, *is* capable of perception. One might argue that if we opt for a Dharmakīrtian epistemology over that of Candrakīrti, then compatibility between our ethical theory and epistemology is assured and, hence, dilemma resolved. Our response-model of Buddhist virtue ethics, on this view, is compatible with a Dharmakīrtian epistemology and, hence, retains its status as a plausible theorisation of Buddhist ethics. Moreover, given an apparent standoff between the epistemological theories of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti, it might seem that the appeal

to ethical considerations functions as a means for adjudicating this dispute.

As promising as this might sound, however, things are not quite so straightforward. While Dunne's Candrakīrtian buddha clearly does not have sufficient cognitive capacities to count as a buddha capable of ethical response, it is not entirely clear that a Dharmakīrtian buddha does either. A buddha, according to the response-model, does not merely require perceptual capacities; they need to be able to perceive and respond to situations or composite objects (e.g. disciples, suffering sentient beings etc.) which are, essentially, general. Even if these situations or objects of virtuous actions are not represented and, thereby, recognized *as being* objects of certain general kinds (i.e. a buddha does not need to *think* that the perceived object is a sentient being, least of all a suffering sentient being, which would be required if, in order for his conduct to count as ethical, the buddha had to *choose* what to do), nevertheless, what is perceived is an object of a certain kind (i.e. the buddha *sees* 'a suffering sentient being') and it is that which stimulates the relevant kind of ethical response.

A Dharmakīrtian buddha, however, merely has capacities to perceive particulars. What counts as a particular is a matter of much commentarial dispute (particularly in the Tibetan tradition).¹⁷ It seems, however, that if Dharmakīrti is consistent in maintaining that the objects of perception are free from *all* conceptuality then he must commit to a view of perceptual objects being unique, momentary and non-persisting events. Such objects, however, do not seem to be the proper objects of ethical response.

Dharmakīrti might be seen to disagree with this analysis. He writes, "even though buddhas and bodhisattvas may act out of compassion for the sake of others, they are faultless because they do not make false impositions" (PVSV, 9). Dunne interprets this to mean that buddhas do not engage in conceptuality insofar as they do not need to compulsively assume that the object of perception (i.e. the other; a disciple; a suffering sentient being) is anything more than a group of psycho-physical aggregates. However, even on this interpretation, it seems to be only when a group of psychophysical aggregates is *seen as* a particular object (i.e. a suffering sentient being) that a particular kind of compassionate response is stimulated. If seen as a different object (i.e. an enlightened being), a different kind of response is stimulated. Seeing a 'group' of psychophysical particulars *as* an object of a certain kind, however, essentially involves combining particulars. If the combination of particulars is essential to conceptuality and, thereby, bound to (if not identical with) ignorance, it follows that the relevant kinds of perceptual objects for ethical response is bound to ignorance and, hence is beyond the ken of a buddha.

Should we, thus, conclude that the dilemma still holds and that our response-model of Buddhist virtue ethics is incompatible with the demands of epistemology? The answer to this, I propose, turns on how we understand the notion of conceptuality in Dharmakīrti's thought.

Contemporary commentators seem to divide on, what I will call, a narrow and broad interpretation of conceptuality in Dharmakīrti's thought. Aspects of the narrow

interpretation can be found in Dunne (2004, :, 2006). According to this view, conceptuality (*vikalpa*) merely involves the *linguistic interpretation* of ‘non-conceptual’ mental images generated by perception.¹⁸ That is, perception produces a mental image through contact with sensory objects (2006, 508). This mental image is non-conceptual but has phenomenal content. Conceptuality consists in the subsequent superimposition (*samāropa*) of an unreal *conceptual* image (*akārā*) - such as sameness - onto the original image and, thereby, “compulsively input[ing] sameness onto entities that are in fact not the same” (2004, 61). Conceptuality is tied to ignorance, on the narrow-view, insofar as it involves the (erroneous) *imposition* of universals onto the non-conceptual images afforded by perception. Crucial to this view is the idea that the non-conceptual images generated by perception are not flawed. Rather “it is the perceiver’s inability to *interpret* the image, and not the image itself, that is causing the error” (2004, 87, my italics).

If we pursue the narrow interpretation of conceptuality, it follows that a buddha has capacities for entertaining the non-conceptual mental images afforded by perception but does not super-impose conceptual constructs onto these images. If conceptuality *simply* involves the explicit thought or linguistic designation (*prajñapti*) of the affordances of perception, then this view of conceptuality may be compatible with the response-model of Buddhist virtue ethics. All that is required for the ethical responsiveness of a buddha is that she is able to perceive (and respond to) objects of certain kinds; she does not also need to subsequently think or reflect or super-impose linguistic designations *onto* the objects of perception. If the non-conceptual mental images afforded by perception can count as objects of perception and, thereby, be sufficient for the stimulation of behavioural response (an equivalence that would need to be established) and if the formation of such objects does not involve conceptuality, understood as above, then it seems that our ethical theory may be compatible with a Dharmakīrtian epistemology and, thus, the dilemma resolved.

The narrow interpretation of conceptuality in Dharmakīrti’s thought is not without challenge, however. On, what I call the broader interpretation, conceptuality plays a critical function for the very combination of multiple affordances of perception into a single image or object in the mind (which, on this account, occurs *prior* to super-imposition or linguistic designation as conceived on the narrow-view). As argued by Katsura (1984), Dharmakīrti’s particulars are momentary (*kṣaṇika*) and, as such, beyond the scope of perceptual awareness. What we ordinarily experience, however, are undifferentiated continua (*santanā*) of moments, or persisting perceptual objects, and not moments themselves (1984, 216). Conceptuality (*vikalpa*), according to the broader view, is the critical factor involved in unifying the unique, momentary perceptual inputs into persisting, perceptual objects. Given that conceptuality is bound to (or identical with) ignorance, it would seem that perceiving *an object* (let alone responding to it correctly) is, itself, beyond the ken of a buddha. Hence, on the broader interpretation of conceptuality, our response-version of Keown’s theory is *not* compatible with a Dharmakīrtian epistemology. The dilemma remains.

Dharmakīrti allows for the possibility of ‘yogic perception’ (*yogipratyakṣa*). Could one not argue that a buddha has yogic perception and, thereby, the relevant cognitive

capacities? Given recent exegeses of this notion, however, the answer seems to be ‘no’. If we follow Dunne’s analysis, for instance, the proper objects of yogic perception are truths; in particular, the four noble truths (Dunne, 2006, 497). While the *perception* of the four noble truths may be advantageous for a buddha, a buddha with capacities for virtuous response, as we have argued, also requires the capacity to perceive objects of certain kinds in order to respond appropriately. Thus, yogic perception, on Dunne’s analysis, will not help. If we follow Katsura’s analysis, by contrast, the proper objects of yogic perception are the innumerable point-instants or moments of material objects and mental phenomena that elude the sense perception of ordinary fallible beings (Katsura, 1984, 216). While this account provides a buddha with (innumerable) objects of perception, it does not present them in a form that is consistent with an account of virtuous responses as generated by dispositions that were *acquired* through a process of cultivation.¹⁹ Again, it seems that an appeal to yogic perception, based on contemporary analyses of this notion, is not going to solve our particular problem.

Significantly, Katsura points out an inconsistency in Dharmakīrti’s thought, which is relevant to our discussion. He notes that while Dharmakīrti identifies perception as a form of *pramāṇa* (i.e. a means/source of true knowledge) he nonetheless defines *pramāṇa* as instrumental to the ‘fulfillment of human purpose’ (*arthakriyā-sthiti*)²⁰ ‘human activity’ (*pravṛtti*) and ‘experience’ (Katsura, 1984, 222). Practical human activity, Katsura points out, requires, *niścaya* (which he defines as ‘perceptual judgment’) and *adhyavasāya* (‘determination’). Indeed, without perceptual judgment and determination, Katsura argues, perception would have no practical significance at all (Katsura, 1984, 226).

Perceptual judgment (*niścaya*), as characterized by Katsura, is similar to our notion of the objects of perception being of certain kinds. Katsura exemplifies this notion in terms of the perception of a woman as a skeleton (by a monk); as an object of lust (by a lustful man); as a nice dinner (by a dog). Where, for Katsura, perceptual judgment is formed *subsequent* to the perceived image (i.e. the perceptual judgment ‘a nice dinner’ is formed after the perception of ‘a woman’), according to our response-version of Keown’s theory, the perception ‘of a woman is’, already, the perception of an object of a certain kind. Despite this difference, it is notable that, on both accounts, it is the perception/perceptual judgment of an object of a certain kind that is the significant factor for the stimulation of conduct or response. For Katsura, *niścaya* and *adhyavasāya* are required to prompt human activity (Katsura, 1984, 224). Moreover, Katsura argues that both of these notions are based in linguistic conventions (*samketa*, see 1984, 226). Hence, Katsura may be read as presenting a dilemma for Dharmakīrti based on considerations that are internal to his own theory.²¹ Either Dharmakīrti needs to allow for certain forms of conceptuality to be involved in perception to satisfy Dharmakīrti’s own *pramāṇic* criteria (i.e. such that perception can be considered instrumental to the fulfillment of human purposes), or he needs to omit instrumentality for the fulfillment of human purposes from his criteria of *pramāṇa* such that an entirely non-conceptual perception can be considered a form of *pramāṇa*.

The above dilemma can be seen to mirror the dilemma posed by our ethical theory.²² On

both counts, it seems that Dharmakīrti should either allow some rudimentary form of conceptuality into his account of perception (in order to properly capture the notion of a perceptual ‘object’ of response which is required for human activity, in general, and *ethical response*, in particular) or he should redefine conceptuality much more narrowly, possibly akin to the narrow interpretation of conceptuality, such that the perception (or perceptual judgment) of an object of a certain kind is no longer identified with ignorance and, hence, no longer eliminated on the pathway to buddhahood. Either revision would require a much more sophisticated account of the relationship between conceptuality and perceptions. The upshot of this is that Dharmakīrti’s theory would not only be compatible with his own definition of *pramāṇa* (and thereby resolve the *internal* dilemma) it would also resolve the *external* dilemma that arises when Dharmakīrti’s epistemological theory is brought into dialogue with Buddhist ethical theory.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on the relationship between Buddhist epistemological theories and Buddhist ethical theorizing. In particular, I focused on certain epistemological commitments concerning the possibility of action that underlie one prominent theorization of Buddhist ethics (i.e. Keown’s Buddhist Virtue Ethics) and demonstrated the ways in which these commitments come into direct conflict with the epistemological theories advanced by two prominent Buddhist thinkers (i.e. Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti).

Rather than ethical theory being ‘brushed aside’ or collapsing under the pressure of the conclusions of epistemology (as warned against by Keown), I demonstrated a certain mutuality of revisionary pressure bearing on both parties of the conflict. On the one hand, I demonstrated that insofar as an ethical theory assumes certain underlying epistemological commitments, there is pressure on the theory to revise in the face of conflict with the established positions of Buddhist epistemological theories. As I have argued, Keown’s virtue ethical account of Buddhist ethics can relevantly meet this pressure for revision if it alters from a choice-model of virtue and action to a response-model of virtue and action. Such a revision is both internally consistent with Keown’s account remaining a virtue ethical theory and also meets certain aspects of the epistemological demands. In order to *completely* satisfy the epistemological demands, I have argued, would require some revision on the part of the epistemological theories. Nonetheless, our proposed revision of Keown’s theory, from a choice-model to a response-model, is a substantial improvement in the theory. Hence, while the pursuit of meta-ethics may not have resulted in a perfect resolution of the conflict that arises between ethical theory and epistemology, it has resulted in the advancement of our ethical theory and this is a significant outcome.

On the other hand, insofar as there are internal conflicts *within* each of the epistemological theories addressed in this paper as well as conflicts *between* these epistemological theories, I demonstrated that ethical considerations may be utilized both in the attempt to adjudicate these disputes as well as to add support to particular strategies for the resolution of internal conflicts within these theories.²³ I argued that Dharmakīrti’s epistemological theory could relevantly meet the pressures of our revised response-model

of Buddhist virtue ethics only if it revises its account of the relationship between perception and conceptuality (or, at least, if scholars can provide a more sophisticated analysis of their relationship). Whether or not this epistemological theory can revise, or scholars can provide a more sophisticated analysis, in a way that both meets the demands of our ethical theory and retains consistency with its other theoretical commitments is beyond the scope of this paper to conclusively answer. One might argue, however, that the arguments raised by Katsura suggests there is already sufficient pressure from considerations internal to Dharmakīrti's theory that the theory be revised in ways that would be compatible with the requirements of our ethical theory. Hence, while it may be arguable whether the requirements of our ethical theory, by themselves, provide sufficient reason to motivate revision, consideration of these requirements may be mobilized to *support* extant revisionary claims.

The Buddhist tradition is singularly distinctive in its expressed value of an intimate relationship between ethics and insight; compassion and wisdom. This value, I believe, introduces a certain demand for mutual attentiveness to, if not drive for compatibility between, the respective domains of Buddhist thought. An epistemological theory that excludes the possibility of ethical conduct is just as problematic, in the context of Buddhist soteriology, as a theory of ethical conduct that requires that which is necessarily excluded on epistemological grounds. While, in this paper, I have only been able to highlight and put pressure on certain elements in prominent epistemological theories, I have demonstrated that the challenges raised by pursuing an investigation of the relationship between epistemology and ethics stimulates an important revision to one of the most prominent Buddhist ethical theories. This revision, I contend, constitutes a significant improvement to the theory and, hence, exemplifies one of the virtues in pursuing a meta-ethical methodology.

¹ Note that all of the above positions come with various limitations and qualifications. For instance, Goodman's position is limited to Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics whereas Clayton's position is presented in the context of an exposition of Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya*.

² One might wonder whether Buddhism is in need of ethical theorization. The fact that systematized theorizations were not developed within the Indo-Tibetan traditions may be taken to suggest something distinctive about Buddhist approaches to ethics. For instance, Hallisey (1996) takes this to indicate that Buddhist practitioners and intellectuals employed a kind of ethical particularism which recognises a diversity of values. Hallisey contrasts this notion with 'ethical theories', interpreted as aiming to provide singular criteria or methods for the resolution of moral conflicts, moral decision-making and action-guidance.

Whether or not we infer from the historical lack of ethical theorisation in the Buddhist tradition that Buddhism, therefore, has no need for ethical theory will depend on what we mean

by ‘ethical theory’. Hallisey’s characterisation of this notion seems consistent with many contemporary Western views on the nature and purpose of *normative* ethical theorizing; the predicate ‘normative’ may be taken to suggest that ethical theories aim to provide criteria and methods for figuring out what we ‘ought’ to do. In response, one might argue that Buddhist canonical texts already providing sufficient resources aimed at advising practitioners on the recognition, instantiation and/or implementation of moral precepts and/or qualities without additionally requiring the introduction of ethical theories, so understood.

This is not the only way to think of ethical theory, however. Alternatively, it might be understood as the attempt to coherently *explain* the nature and role of ethics, in its variety of aspects, within the wider context of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. Ethical theory, on this broader interpretation, seeks to answer questions specifically *about* ethics (such as its function in Buddhist soteriology; the function of moral precepts for Buddhist ethical practice; the role of analogies and stories for the cultivation of ethical practice) rather than provide instructions or methods for how practitioners should *engage in* ethical practice.

On this broader conception of ethical theory, Hallisey’s notion of ethical particularism, itself, counts as an ethical theory. For instance, Hallisey claims that ‘ethical particularism’ is a necessary heuristic for explaining how ethical stories function for Buddhist practitioners (i.e. Hallisey argues that they help sensitise practitioners to morally salient features of situations in order to negotiate conflicts without appeal to criteria). To the extent that ethical particularism seeks to provide an explanation of a certain aspect of Buddhist ethics, ethical particularism, on our broader definition, is an ethical theory. However, Hallisey is right to argue that it is not a *normative* ethical theory, understood as providing specific methods or criteria to guide moral decision-making as oftentimes conceived by contemporary Western ethicists. This might be taken to indicate that the contemporary Western ethical taxonomies are unduly limited. Indeed, on this broader definition of ethical theory, the division between ethical theory and meta-ethical concerns becomes much less distinct. However, I shall leave further reflection on this issue for a different paper.

³ See previous note

⁴ The contemporary Western ethical tradition also pays considerable attention to practical or ‘applied ethics’. Applied ethics proceeds, for the most part, via application of ideas developed in ethical theories to practical situations and cases. Although I shall not discuss applied ethical questions in this paper, it is notable that Buddhist scholars have recently ventured into this territory, offering accounts of how a Buddhist ethic may provide solutions to issues concerning the environment (Cooper & James 2005); abortion (Keown ed. 1998); and bioethics (See Levin, 2004).

⁵ Indeed, Siderits himself acknowledges a distinction between the concept of ‘person’ from that of ‘self’; whilst Buddhists clearly reject the latter, Siderits argues that they need not deny the pragmatic utility of employing the former. Despite these concessions, I believe that Keown’s particular exposition of Buddhist virtue ethics does, indeed, commit him to a substantive account of the nature of self (above and beyond that of merely individuated ‘persons’). This is because Keown conceives of action as essentially involving choice which, though not necessarily problematic in itself, is defined by reference to that “*core* of the personality” which, Keown maintains, is the final resort for explanation of action. (2001, 221). How consistent Keown is in endorsing this view is arguable. However, while Keown may be committed to a substantive view of the self, it does not necessarily follow that all theorizations of Buddhist ethics in virtue ethical terms will necessarily be so committed.

⁶ I follow Adam in using anglicized Sanskrit words (i.e. “*nirvāṇa*”, “*śīla*”, “*karma*”) in place of the Pali (i.e. *nibbāna*, *sīla*, *kamma*). One exception, however, is that I shall retain the original Pali form of *paññā* rather than its Sanskrit form *prajñā*. This is because Keown argues for

conceptual differences between these two terms and, thus, his claims with respect to one will not automatically transfer to the other.

⁷ This is a quote from the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, i, 390

⁸ This argument depends on the close etymological connection between *karma/kamma*, as the term used for ‘action’, and *karma/kamma* as denoting the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Note, also, that this is not a complete characterisation of Adam’s argument. At the core of Adam’s argument is the idea that the terms bright (*sukka*) and dark (*kaṇṭha*) can be employed to “bridge the conceptual gap between *puñña* and *kusala*.” This issue, like that of *puñña* and *kusala* proper, is outside the scope of this particular paper.

⁹ Henceforth I shall use the terms ‘conduct’ and ‘action’ interchangeably insofar as conduct does not have a present perfect form which leads to clumsy expression. Notice, also, that I will assume that what holds for *ethical* conduct must hold for conduct/action insofar as ethical conduct/action is a subset of conduct/action proper (i.e. it is action of a particular kind, or action performed in a particular way, but action for all that). In this paper I shall focus on ethical conduct, but most of the argumentation can be extended to a concern with action, more generally.

¹⁰ I shall only provide an overview of these theories and, even then, shall focus only on those aspects that are relevant to this discussion. In particular, I shall not address Dharmakīrti’s theory of *apoha* as putative solution to the possibility of inferential knowledge. For detailed discussion of this theory see (Katsura, 1984, :Dreyfus, 1997, :Tillemans, 1999).

¹¹ “Although all (conceptual cognitions) are confused, we still define some as instrumental and some as spurious.” (PVSV, 49)

¹² For a discussion of this point see (Tillemans, 1999)

¹³ I here follow Dunne in his citations of probable equivalences between Sanskrit terms and original Tibetan translations (only ‘probable’ insofar as it remains the case that the *Madhyamakāvātāra* and its commentaries are available only in Tibetan).

¹⁴ One problematic way to approach the problem might be to appeal to the authoritative status of the disputants (a move not unfamiliar to the Buddhist commentarial tradition). That is, one could argue that we have a choice between accepting the views and theory of Keown, a contemporary Buddhist ethical theorist, or that of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti, Buddhist thinkers whose epistemological theories constitute the background of the entire Indo-Tibetan logico-epistemological tradition. This is not an uncommon move in Buddhist debates both contemporary and ancient. Such an approach would be fallacious, however; rejecting Keown’s theory for reasons concerning relative authority in the tradition would be an *ad hominem* and has no bearing on the actual substance of his theory, which is what is at issue. Certainly, appeals to authority in *support* of the truth of particular claims are legitimate argumentative moves (albeit with limitations). However, appealing to the (relative) lack of authority of a disputant to disprove their theory is fallacious.

¹⁵ See, for instance (Davidson, 1980)

¹⁶ For instance, giving a child some bread might be compassionate in one circumstance but not in another (e.g. if they are allergic); at one time but not another (i.e. if given before a child is about to run); in one way but not another (e.g. if thrown into the dirt at their feet).

¹⁷ For extended discussions of this point see (Dreyfus, 1997, :Dunne, 2004)

¹⁸ This might be thought to contradict Dunne’s earlier claim that “on Dharmakīrti’s view ignorance is also the mental mechanism - the internal cause - that compels people to lump things together conceptually and suffer thereby” (1996, 532). One might reply, however, that this claim identifies ‘lumping things together *conceptually*’ as the problem, not the mere act of ‘lumping things together’. Whether this is a plausible reply, I shall not here seek to answer.

¹⁹ I discuss this point in more detail in (Finnigan, To Appear)

²⁰ “*Pramāṇa* is non-contradictory knowledge (*avisaṃvādi-jñānam*). Non-contradictoriness [here]

means the existence of the fulfillment of a human purpose (*arthakriyā-sthiti*).” (Pramāṇavārtika, Chapter 2, v1a-c, as quoted in Katsura, 1984, 219)

²¹ This is not to make any claim about Katsura’s actual intentions in raising these concerns

²² Further pressure is added by considerations concerning the possibility of a buddha teaching the *dharma* as discussed in (Dunne, 1996) and (Finnigan, To Appear). As Dunne points out, Dharmakīrti allows that Sakyamuni Buddha spoke. How can we make sense of this, however, if the Buddha does not employ concepts? Dunne attempts to resolve this inconsistency by arguing that a buddha *perceives* concepts (and, thereby, only employs perceptual knowledge). However, this does not seem to solve the problem insofar as a buddha would need to *employ* concepts in uttering speech acts.

²³ In this paper we employed an indirect strategy of adjudicating the dispute between a Candrakīrtian and Dharmakīrtian epistemology, in Dharmakīrti’s favor, by appeal to the plausibility of their theories relative to the cognitive requirements of a buddha with capacities for ethical response. This strategy would only constitute a genuine adjudication, it seems to me, if each theory were already established as internally consistent and there being no further point of appeal within the ken of epistemological theorizing to demonstrate one theory as better than the other. However, that either of these theories are internally consistent remains to be established.

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