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Buddhist Modernism and Kant on Enlightenment

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Some claim that the European Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the triumph of reason over religious authority, and the Buddhist concept of enlightenment, as a transformative awakening, have nothing in common – indeed I have been told that “it is a mere coincidence that they share a similar sounding word”; that asking how they are related is nothing but a “conceptual confusion,” an equivocation that is on a par with confusing the bank of a river with a bank for cash deposits.¹

Of course, the two historical traditions are indeed different in countless ways. The European Enlightenment was rooted in the acceptance of the new scientific method, the industrial revolution, the emergence of politically powerful merchant classes, the resulting disruption of established social hierarchies, factional religious disputes, and bloody religious wars. For complex socio-cultural reasons, and philosophical reasons too, a skepticism and rejection of religious authority and traditional hierarchies became increasingly widespread. The enlightenment instead emphasized relying on one’s own judgment and this fueled the nascent and emerging republican sentiments for representative government.

In contrast, Buddhism began over 2,000 years ago as a monastic tradition focused on the ultimate goal of achieving nirvana, which is understood to be a release from samsara, that is, the otherwise endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. From its humble beginnings, Buddhism spread and diversified into one of the major world religions with perhaps 500 million people across the globe identifying as Buddhist. Indeed, there are a vast diversity of Buddhist religious sects, and each has its own favorite doctrines and texts, traditions and rituals.

Unlike the European Enlightenment, the objection might continue, Buddhism is a sectarian religion, not a scientific and secular rejection of religious authority. The practice of Buddhism involves superstitions, folk rituals, prayer, and worship of buddhas and bodhisattvas all of which contrasts with the rationalism of the European Enlightenment. In addition, the monastic pursuit of personal

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enlightenment is clearly distinct from the emphasis on the socio-cultural and historic shift from religious authority to the dominance of science and reason that is central to the Enlightenment.

This is all true. Nonetheless, one of the many contemporary offshoots of the early Buddhist teachings is the contemporary tradition of Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist Modernism (which is explained below); and it is this offshoot and version of Buddhism that is most familiar and popular in the West. In Europe or America, when a colleague or student asks about the *relationship between European and Buddhist enlightenment*, they are (most likely) asking about Buddhist Modernism, and not monastic Buddhism and the early Buddhist teachings. Clearly, they are not asking about the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth or nirvana as the escape from the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, or the monastic code of conduct, and they are also not asking about the practice of Buddhism as a living religion that shapes local cultural practices.

In contrast to the many Buddhist religious and cultural traditions, when it comes to the contemporary Modernist, Engaged-Buddhist conception of enlightenment and the European enlightenment, especially Kant's conception of *enlightenment*, we will see that these two traditions do have much in common. The clear mistake is instead thinking that the two traditions simply share a similar sounding word (by an accident of translation) and shared metaphors of "light" and "awakening."

What is Buddhist Modernism?

Buddhist Modernism is the most common and familiar form that Buddhism takes in the West. It is a mistake, however, to call the Buddhist Modernist tradition "Western Buddhism" (McMahan 2008). First, Buddhists throughout Asia also embrace this Modern form of Buddhism, and second, the leading figures of Buddhist Modernism are not Europeans – consider, for example, that three of the most influential figures in "Western Buddhism" are the Dalai Lama (1999, 2005), Thich Nhat Hanh (1998, 2016), and Chogyam Trungpa (1973, 1984, 1991). In addition, when people learn about Buddhism and ask how it is related to the Enlightenment, they are not confused by the use of the same word; they are especially struck by the similarity between Buddhist philosophy and Western non-religious traditions like *secular humanism*. This cross-cultural similarity is both *historical and doctrinal*. Buddhist Modernism is itself, *in part*, a product of the engagement between Buddhism and the European Enlightenment; for a systematic account of the history, see David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008). Nonetheless, it is also doctrinal; the elements of Buddhist Modernism (which are outlined below) have deep textual and historical roots in the early teachings, Theravada, and Mahayana traditions. Buddhist Modernism highlights and emphasizes some Buddhist doctrines

and themes, reinterprets others, and minimizes or ignores others. This is unavoidable. As the Zen philosopher Dōgen teaches (Dōgen 2012), “Whenever one side is illuminated, the other side is darkened” (Edelglass and Garfield 2009, 256). Buddhist Modernism illuminates (and darkens) distinctive aspects of the Buddhist canon. All forms of Buddhism have taken particular shapes that respond to the local cultures. All of the current sects of Buddhism have also developed their distinctive doctrines in response to other cultures and traditions. Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Tibetan, and all other Buddhisms include an intercultural fusion of Buddhism with other traditions. Although Buddhist Modernism is *in part* a product of engagement with the West, it is also clearly Buddhist nonetheless.

One more point of clarification. Buddhist Modernism is not itself supposed to be a Buddhist sect or tradition. It is instead a broad and overarching analytical category that is useful in distinguishing different contemporary strands of Buddhism. As a particular example, Engaged Buddhism is a paradigmatic Buddhist Modernist approach (Queen 2000). Another specific example of Buddhist Modernism is the explicit modernizing of Thai Buddhism that started under King Chulalongkorn. The cosmopolitan and democratic turn in Tibetan Buddhism under the Dalai Lama, which has surely been influenced by his exile, is another clear example. The historical interaction between the European West and Buddhist cultures is a complex and interesting story of mutual influence and integration (McMahan 2008). Our focus, however, is instead on the core philosophical elements of Buddhist Modernism.

Buddhist Modernism has the following six features:

- 1) *Meditation and mindfulness are the central focus of Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist Modernism.* Unlike Modernism, Buddhism as a living religion is more focused on rituals and worship, and on actions that contribute to good rebirth. Buddhist cultural traditions also emphasize and rely on the life and the past lives of the Buddha (as recounted in the Jataka tales) as a source of moral guidance and wisdom. Although in Buddhist cultures, some lay-Buddhists do practice meditation, meditation is not a common lay-practice and is instead associated with a more committed monastic practice.

In contrast, for Engaged Buddhists, meditation and mindfulness are the major focus of daily Buddhist practice, and mindfulness is meant to permeate all aspects of one’s daily life and work. For Buddhist Modernists, meditation, mindfulness, and non-violence are the heart and soul of Buddhism. This is a significant difference from the traditional more monastic focus of Buddhism. For early Buddhism, the community of monks, the Sangha, constitutes the core of the Buddhist community, and a layperson gains merit and good karma by supporting the community of monks (and through wholesome action). For many Engaged Buddhists,

the concept of the Sangha is expanded from the community of monks to include all self-identified and practicing Buddhists.

As a distinct but related part of this reorientation, both Thich Nhat Hanh and Chogyam Trungpa explicitly emphasize the Third Noble Truth, instead of the First Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth is the truth of the unavoidability of suffering, unease, and dissatisfaction. The Third Noble Truth is the possibility of the release from suffering, the end of delusion and craving that results from an awakened mind. According to early Buddhist teaching, dependent origination is essentially related to the impermanence of all things and it is thus the source of suffering (and holds us in the cycle of rebirth). For Engaged and Modernist Buddhists, the more important point is that suffering results from the primal confusion of self/other (subject/object dichotomy), and its related egocentrism, and the solution to suffering is a cognitive and emotional recognition and internalization of dependent origination and our interdependence. Greater mindfulness, achieved through increased wisdom and insight meditation, is the essence and nature of awakening. The Dalai Lama (1999) also advocates for a “spiritual revolution” and shift in our consciousness (our heart-mind) that follows from the recognition of our webs of interconnection and common humanity, which he argues leads to boundless compassion. Recognizing the truth of dependent origination, he tells us, ends anger, greed, and delusion, and thereby calms our minds and generates a profound inner peace. In short, meditation and mindfulness are the means to a more enlightened, peaceful, and contented existence.

- 2) *Buddhist Modernists emphasize Buddhist moral psychology and the Inner Science of the Mind, which includes a highly developed (empirical) science of cognition and emotion.* Even the earliest Buddhist teachings include a complex moral psychology and cognitive science. Buddhaghosa in particular developed an elaborate account of intention and of the complex interrelationship between different mental states (Buddhaghosa 2003; Heim 2013). Buddhism also anticipates the recent scientific insights into the embodied nature of cognition, the fractured and multiple processing systems of the brain/mind, and the cognitive theory of the emotions (Dalai Lama 2005). These scientific principles provide the empirical and verifiable basis for the above claims about the benefits of meditation and the nature of the will and consciousness (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991; Davis and Thompson 2014). The conception of embodied cognition is an offshoot of early Buddhist philosophy and a corollary of the Buddhist theory of the self as constituted by the five *skandhas* (aggregates or bundles), which are physical body, feeling/sensation, perception, volition/emotion, and conscious awareness. Early Buddhist teachings argue, via introspection and insight meditation, first, that there is no core self that survives or unifies the flow of mental states that constitute our mental and bodily existence, and second,

that there is no unified center of will or executive control that might constitute our true self (Siderits 2007, 32–69). Instead the self is a “convenient designator” for the changing and transient coalition of mental aggregates that shapes action and experience. One of the major points and transformative aspects of Buddhist meditation is developing and internalizing these insights into the nature of the self. These insights in turn alter one’s fundamental moral orientation and experience of the world. This aspect of Buddhist doctrine is important in our discussion below of Buddhist and Kantian enlightenment.

- 3) *Buddhist Modernism emphasizes Buddhism as philosophy.* Philosophical reflection and insight is at the core of Buddhism from the start, but it is not always a focus of Buddhist religious and cultural traditions. The early Pāli Canon was divided into three baskets, the Tripitaka. The three baskets are the Sutras, which are closest to scriptures, the Vinaya, which is the Monastic Code of Discipline, and the Abhidharma, which is the philosophical texts and commentary on the dharma and the Buddha’s teachings. Not surprisingly, the lay-practice of Buddhism as a religion focuses on the Sutras, and largely ignores the philosophical analysis of the dharma. And, of course, the Sutras and Vinaya Code are at the core of monastic Buddhism. The attention to the Abhidharma is more varied and less central to religious practice and ritual. The monastic community preserves Buddhist philosophy but it is more difficult and abstract and thus less definitive of Buddhism as lived religion.

The Pāli Tripitaka was first recorded and maintained at the Aluvihara Rock Temple in Sri Lanka. When I visited Aluvihara and asked the Abbot of the monastery about the Abhidharma, he waved his hands dismissively and said it is too confusing and not important and that I should focus on the Sutras. In contrast, however, Tibetan Buddhist monks are often philosophical scholars and the Dalai Lama has a commanding understanding of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. In predominantly Buddhist countries, however, most lay-Buddhists and many monks do not study Buddhist philosophy or cognitive science. Western Buddhists are often surprised to discover that most lay-Buddhists do not practice meditation or care about Buddhist philosophy.

Nonetheless, at roughly the same time as Greek philosophy in the West, Buddhism launched one of the world’s earliest and richest philosophical traditions. Buddhist philosophy includes epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language, logic, and especially theories of personal identity, cognition, and moral philosophy and a related moral psychology (see Siderits 2007; Garfield 2015). In short, Buddhist philosophy and cognitive science are central to Buddhism in general, but emphasized by Modernists in particular.

- 4) *Buddhist Modernists emphasize the “Four Immeasurables,” which are the practice of loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, caring-compassion, and equanimity.* Although all Buddhist traditions also emphasize these virtues,

Buddhist Modernists place primary emphasis on the cultivation of virtue (and the correlative principle on not harming sentient creatures), and significantly less emphasis on moral rules and the precepts (including monastic practice and the Vinaya monastic moral code of conduct). Although they do not have a monastic focus, Buddhist Modernists may still participate in meditation workshops and longer Buddhist retreats (see PlumVillage.org, for example). The point and focus of these retreats is to be more awake, mindful, and enlightened when one returns to the routine daily life of work, community, and family. The goal is to be more compassionate as one continues as a full participant in one's community, family, and work.

- 5) *Buddhist Modernists also embrace democratic values and declarations of human rights.* So far, all of the distinctive elements that are emphasized by Buddhist Modernism are also found in Buddhism more generally. The nature and standing of rights is the exception to this claim. Classical Buddhism does not defend either democratic values or human rights. Indeed, it is widely agreed that Buddhist texts have no concept of individual human rights, understood as claim-rights or trumps that protect the individual from the demands of the common good (Keown, Prebish, and Husted 1998). Indeed, it is a common characteristic of all pre-modern cultures that they do not include justifications of human rights, especially universal rights to liberty and property. This is true of both Western and Buddhist cultures. Rights-based theories of justice are a modern and contemporary phenomenon. Traditional Buddhist cultures focus on role-based responsibilities and duties, and Buddhist ethics in particular is concerned with wholesome actions and opposed to unwholesome ones. Similarly, the contemporary focus on individual rights also emerged only recently in the West. For example, Aristotle did not develop a conception of universal human rights, but contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethicists all embrace human rights.

Nonetheless, the question of the place of rights in Buddhism is important *because* many believe that the recognition of universal human rights is a product of and the crowning jewel of the European Enlightenment.

Is there a foundation for human rights in Buddhist theory in particular? Or is it instead an *ad hoc* "Western" addition to Buddhism? I have argued elsewhere that the Buddhist conception of the self as constituted by a web of interdependent relationships is at odds with recent attempts to ground rights (and justice) on the distinctness and separateness of persons (Cummiskey 2010). Instead, a Buddhist conception of rights should recognize that human rights are instrumental means, but nonetheless usually an essential institutional means, which advance the Buddhist's ends of compassion and care for others (Garfield 2015). For Buddhism, compassion is conceptually prior to rights claims. In addition, the capacity to achieve

enlightenment (wisdom and boundless compassion), and our common “Buddha-nature” (in some traditions), provides the basis of our equal moral standing and significance. In contrast, as we will discuss below, for Kant, autonomy is the basis for the dignity of humanity. This contrast, and important difference between Kant and Buddhism, will be explored more fully in the rest of the chapter.

It is nonetheless worth emphasizing that the Buddha rejected caste-based societies and embraced a more egalitarian moral ideal. This is especially true of the monastic community. When it comes to the background society and political philosophy, traditional Buddhism defends a conception of enlightened monarchy. In contrast, Buddhist Modernists almost universally embrace human rights, a vision of more mindful and compassionate politics, and democratic values. Although this is not our focus here, developing a contemporary, distinctly Buddhist political theory is an ongoing project of Buddhist Modernism (see Cummiskey 2014).

- 6) Finally, *and most importantly for our discussion of the nature of enlightenment, for Buddhist Modernism, the Buddhist teachings are a system of testable beliefs (and not based on appeal to authority and a leap of faith)*. The Buddhist dharma, the teachings, forms a comprehensive philosophical doctrine rooted in arguments and empirical science. Modernists emphasize that the Buddha insisted that people should not accept his arguments and doctrines based on his authority alone, but rather that his followers should constantly test his teachings “as the wise would test gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it (on a piece of touchstone), so you are to accept my teachings after examination and not merely out of regard for me” (from the Kalama Sutta).

This last teaching, which Kant echoes, is absolutely central to Buddhist Modernists. Unlike many Buddhist religious traditions, they insist that Buddhist doctrines must be based on independent verification and rigorous philosophical analysis. In categorically rejecting all dogma and all bald appeals to authority, Buddhist Modernists instead embrace Kant’s deceptively simple “motto” of the European Enlightenment, “to have courage to use your own understanding.” This is already a first and fundamental point of agreement, a shared European and Buddhist conception of enlightenment. Kant and Buddhists ask the question “What is enlightenment?” and both agree that it begins with the simple directive *to think for oneself*.

What is Enlightenment?

Let us explore this point of agreement more fully. Is this again a mere trivial similarity that hides a deeper and more fundamental disagreement? What more precisely are the points of similarity and difference between

contemporary Buddhist conceptions of enlightenment and Kant's conception of enlightenment? Rather than focusing on the historical period known as the Enlightenment, the question is what is enlightenment.

For Kant, enlightenment involves first and foremost thinking for oneself, but that just shifts the question: what is involved in thinking for oneself? Kant argues, first, that passively letting others control what one is thinking is a form of *immaturity*. If others tell me what to think, and limit what I am allowed to think, then they stand above me like a parent to a child. When it comes to fundamental personal, moral, and religious questions, if I defer to another, it would seem that I take them to be more enlightened. If I am to think for myself about fundamental personal, moral, religious, and scientific questions, then I also must be permitted to decide what I think is plausible and believable and not have this determined by moral and religious authorities. *Religious freedom* is a necessary condition of enlightenment and it is thus also a political precondition for enlightenment. This is why the emergence of religious freedom and tolerance is central to the European Enlightenment period.

Is this sufficient? What is it to think for oneself? Is the goal nothing more than rejecting authority? Although freedom from the control of others, negative freedom, is necessary, if one's thinking is simply uncontrolled, then it is also random, lawless, and *ungoverned by reason*. As such it also lacks any legitimacy and authority. Kant thus concludes that in order to think for oneself, one must also follow the dictates of reason.

Maturity (and enlightenment) requires that one thinks for oneself, and (as Kant argues elsewhere) thinking imposes its own constraints and limits. For Kant, thinking for oneself does not involve thinking whatever one wants. Just as there is more to freedom of the will than simply following one's inclinations (for Kant), so too there is more to thinking for oneself than believing whatever one happens to want to believe. Indeed, Kant agrees with Rousseau's famous claim that "to be driven by appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty" (Rousseau 1762, bk. I, ch. VIII). For Kant, *thinking for oneself* essentially involves thinking and thus following the dictates of reason. Thinking is itself rule-governed, and thinking for oneself, as opposed to deferring to others, involves believing on the basis of rational norms and reasons. This is in one sense trivially true but it is nonetheless significant.

When it comes to morality, Kant insists that people have the capacity to set themselves ends and to act on principle, and that this is the source of our freedom and our value. When our desires and natural inclinations conflict with our aspirations and principles, they are actually a *hindrance to our freedom*. This is clearest when one is overcome by desire and acts against one's deeper goals or higher aspirations. If I eat compulsively or "lose" my temper, I am not in control, and I am not free. I cannot here adequately reconstruct Kant's argument from freedom to morality. Let us simply note that for Kant, thinking for oneself

requires inner freedom and rejecting egoism (which he calls *the principle of self-love*). Reason has its own norms and these norms have their own inner authority. Neither our actions nor our beliefs should be subservient to our inclinations. For Kant, the mistake of all previous theories of morality was attempting to ground moral motivation on the person's contingent desires and inclinations. The idea that rational conduct is subservient to passions and desires undermines freedom and morality, Kant argues. The will is not limited to serve only as a tool of self-love. It instead is capable of a higher vocation that frees it from mere "heteronomy" and makes self-rule, autonomy, possible. Heteronomy of the will, that is, treating reason as the slave of self-love and the passions, is for Kant the primal confusion. Enlightenment includes and requires a transformation of one's orientation from self-love to recognition of and respect for our common humanity (for more, see Cummiskey 1996).

This conception of the inclinations, as hindrances to freedom and reason, is in many ways analogous to the Buddhist view that we need to free ourselves from our "afflictive emotions" (Dalai Lama 1999). The afflictive emotions include jealousy, anger, and hatred. These emotions systematically disrupt our judgment and disturb our inner calm; they make us less mindful and less perceptive; and they thus typically harm both oneself and others. For Buddhists, as for Kant, morality also involves overcoming the afflictive emotions and a transformation in one's motivational structure.

Transforming one's moral orientation is central to Buddhist practice. The point of insight meditation is to help one overcome *entrenched habits of mind* and develop greater awareness of oneself and others. More philosophically, the emotions of anger and selfishness are rooted in the *primal confusion* of the *subject-object duality*. More specifically, we take our particular standpoint to be ontologically significant – but it is not! And this primal confusion is thus also the root of egoism, attachment, and selfishness. This is also referred to by Buddhists as *twofold self-grasping*: First, one spontaneously takes the perspective of "I" as a *privileged subject*, and second, one thus sees *everything else as situated in relation to oneself* (Garfield 2015).

In order to overcome this deeply engrained perspective on the world, one must engage in both *philosophical reflection* and *meditation*, which is meant both to enable and to internalize philosophical insights. One must also change and *discipline one's actions*. In short, increased enlightenment requires increased wisdom, moral restraint, and meditation. (These are the three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path.) The goal, however, is not just better behavior. The goal is a fundamental *phenomenological* transformation that leads to a new way of seeing and responding in the world.

This Buddhist conception of moral development is characteristic of Buddhist Modernism (see, e.g., Thich Nhat Hanh 1988) but it is also thoroughly based in Nāgārjuna's philosophy (150–250 CE; Nāgārjuna 1995) and Śāntideva's classic work *Bodhicaryāvatāra: A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life: How to Live*

an Awakened Life (685 CE and see Garfield 2015, ch. 9). The Buddhist focus on transformation, transcendence, and awakening one's mind is precisely what seems to many to make it so different from the European Age of Enlightenment, which was a socio-cultural transformation of society. However, this distinction is misleading. What distinguishes the "Age of Enlightenment" is the focus on individual enlightenment. The study of European history focuses on the socio-logical, cultural, and political changes, but the defining feature of the age is the focus on the capacity of each citizen to take charge and responsibility for their own life and to decide fundamental religious and moral questions using their own reason. This brings us back to Kant's definitive and influential essay, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (Kant 1784).

To further explore Kant's answer and its commonality with the Buddhist Modernist conception of the awakened mind, we turn to Kant's views on *Education* (Kant 1960). It is here that Kant sketches the precondition necessary for enlightenment (which Buddhists would characterize using their concept of dependent origination). Kant's *moral anthropology* is too often neglected, to the detriment of Kant studies. *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* by Robert Louden (2000) provides the most sustained and philosophically richest discussion of Kant's understanding of human nature, socialization, and moral development. Kant follows Rousseau in taking seriously the importance of the philosophy of education and arguing that right education is essential to moral development. Indeed for Kant, education is *uniquely essential* for humans, because human beings need to develop through four stages of development: humans must be *disciplined, cultivated, civilized, and moralized*.

Briefly, the first stage of education is *discipline* and this begins with training and reinforcing behaviors in infants and small children. This first stage is often ignored but it is clearly the first step in socialization and a precursor of moral development. The next stage is *cultivation*, which involves developing and perfecting skills. Through the cultivation of skills, we further develop a disciplined mind and character that is now also informed by instrumental reason; and in this way, Kant argues, we are reshaping our untutored nature to advance an end. The capacity to take the necessary means to our ends is constitutive of practical reason. Through discipline and cultivation, we develop our nascent will and thus the capacity to take the necessary and indispensable means to advance our ends. This is Kant's formulation of the "hypothetical imperative." A mature person also has the capacity to choose and endorse ends, but one must first learn the basic self-control to pursue an end over time and in light of adversity. The cultivation of skills must next be complemented by what Kant calls "*civilization*" – for Kant to be civilized is to *prudently develop the responses and behaviors that are agreeable to others*. For Kant, *prudence and good manners* are two sides of the same coin. Notice that *being civilized is essentially social*. It involves not simply the maturity of the individual but also the development of the "species" (or at least the narrower community with

which one interacts). Civilization is thus a social accomplishment of many individuals acting in concert and harmony.

The hardest step for individuals and humankind, Kant argues, is the transition from being civilized to being “moralized” – which parallels the transition in Kant’s practical philosophy from *prudence and self-love* to *ethics and morality*. For Kant, the full maturity of the human race, the shedding of our self-imposed immaturity, and the actualization of our capacity for autonomy are all one and the same, and they constitute enlightenment. The maturity of the human race, its enlightenment, requires a fundamental transformation in orientation. The enlightened person rejects the principle of self-love and embraces and internalizes the authority of morality.

In both his writings on the doctrine of virtue and his writings on educating the whole person, Kant is explicit that the transition from being civilized to being moralized involves *a transformative reorientation of the self*. At its core, the transformation involves an inner “disposition” to choose ends. This transformation requires (what the Dalai Lama calls) an inner “spiritual revolution” (which is not a religious conversion). Kant writes: “The most difficult condition of the human race is the crossing-over from civilization to moralization.”

What does this involve? Kant writes that the human being “should acquire the disposition to choose nothing but good ends. Good ends are those which are necessarily approved by everyone and can simultaneously be ends of everyone” (quoted by Loudon 2000, 42). We see here that Kant’s famous categorical imperative is not a sterile rule for testing maxims. It must instead become a settled disposition that shapes one’s consciousness.

The crucial concept here is that of a *disposition*, and as Loudon explains, a disposition for Kant is not a mere habit. It is “a mechanism by way of sense” and as such it is more than just a way of thinking; it is a way of seeing and being in the world. It involves nothing less than a person’s basic orientation to life (Louden 2000, 42). The phenomenological transformation of how the enlightened person experiences the world is analogous to the account of the awakened mind that we find in Śāntideva (685 CE), and the account of moral phenomenology echoed in Jay Garfield’s compelling reconstruction of Śāntideva (Garfield 2015, ch. 9). Barbara Herman explains that Kant’s categorical imperative does not provide a decision procedure for actions, but instead provides “rules of moral salience” that enable us to immediately recognize and respond to the morally salient features of a deliberative field (Herman 1993).

The Kantian vs. Scottish Enlightenment

But wait, one might object, Kantian ethics is based on *the priority of the individual and the significance of the autonomous agent!* This is fundamentally at odds with Buddhist conceptions of *interdependence, dependent origination, and rejection of the autonomous self*.

In response, first, this is an interesting substantive philosophical dispute about the nature of enlightenment; it is not a case of two views talking past each other, confused over a similar-sounding word or references to light as a metaphor. Indeed, there are lengthy discussions in the Buddhist canon of agency, executive function, and the nature of freedom and responsibility (e.g., Goodman 2002; Sridharan 2013; Repetti 2014). On this substantive question, though, many Buddhist philosophers are closer to the Scottish Enlightenment (Hume and now Parfit, instead of Kant and Korsgaard, for example). Kant aims to show that morality is and must involve a rational and categorical necessity. Hume, in contrast, famously argues that reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions.

Hume (2006) argues that reason is a mere tool of desire (or passion or inclination). Reason is important because it discerns facts and causal relations between facts, and reason also establishes abstract logical relations between ideas, but reason cannot motivate us to do anything (or even to refrain from acting) without a prior, antecedent desire (*Treatise* III iii 3). Reason judges either matters of fact or relations of ideas. The justification of an action, however, cannot be reduced to either a mere matter of fact or relations of ideas. The wrongfulness (or unwholesomeness) of an action eludes us until we turn to our own sentiments and attitudes (*Enquiry* Section I and Appendix I). Hume's method is very similar to the Buddhist method in analyzing the self. For Hume, we first break down the capacity of reason and the distinctions and relations of ideas. Hume identifies seven relations of ideas: Resemblance, Identity, Relations of time and place, Proportion in quantity and number, Degrees in any quantity, Contrariety, and most importantly, Causation. Although we will not explore this here, the similarity to the Buddhist method of exploring the mind is clear and fascinating. Returning to the question of whether reason alone can provide moral distinctions: Can reason, so understood, motivate without desire? It is clear that without any human sentiments or preferences, reason alone compares and sorts ideas and establishes relations. But all of this rational processing is inert and provides no basis for distinguishing right from wrong, virtue from vice until it considers the effects of actions and outcomes on our passions and desires. We are motivated by our desires and passions. Reason's role is to help us judge whether a recommended course of action causes suffering or happiness. Indeed, Hume argues that the virtues are simply character traits that are useful or immediately agreeable to self and others.

The final distinction between virtue and vice comes from a sentiment or feeling of sympathy for others but reason must first prepare the way for us to experience appropriate sympathetic responses. Through reason we learn the facts and the causal effects of our actions. Although reason alone does not distinguish right from wrong, it is a necessary precondition for right conduct and virtue. Hume's analysis of the role of reason and sympathy is more in line with Buddhism, which emphasizes the importance of wisdom and compassion as essential to enlightenment.

To sum up, on the foundations of moral judgment, and on the necessity of emotive engagement, Hume and the Scottish Enlightenment also rejects Kant's rationalism and are much more aligned with Buddhist Modernism. There are clearly important differences in the Kantian, Humean, and Buddhist conceptions of the person, reason, and agency. As a result there are substantive disagreements about the *answer* to the question, "What is enlightenment?" Both Kant and Buddhists, however, are concerned with the same question, and concerned for the same reasons, and agree that enlightenment involves a fundamental reorientation of self that avoids the primal confusion of solipsistic egocentrism and heteronomy.

As a final note on this point, in addition to its parallels to Hume, the Buddhist conception of the mind, as a bundle of interacting cognitive functions, is often compared with recent accounts of embodied cognition (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). Depending on how one interprets Kant's transcendental idealism and conception of autonomy, Buddhist Modernism may be *more naturalistic and scientific* than Kant. At any rate, Buddhist Modernism is clearly sufficiently committed to the empirical, scientific vein of the Age of Reason.

On the other hand, although the Buddhist embodied conception of the self fits well with scientific models, Buddhists also need fairly robust accounts of agency and responsibility, and this is thus a lively focus of contemporary Buddhist philosophy. In short, the nature of embodied autonomy is one of the more interesting philosophical questions for both Kantians and Buddhists of all types. For the purpose of this discussion, however, the primary point is that the debate between Kant and Buddhism/Hume is an internal debate over the nature of enlightenment itself.

Returning to Kant, we should not overstate the supposed difference in the traditions by overemphasizing the alleged individualism of Kant's conception of enlightenment. We have already seen that Kant emphasized the need for education, the social nature and preconditions for civilization, and moral development. In this respect Kant's views on moral development and the preconditions for autonomy are actually similar to communitarians (Taylor 1985). Kant's conception of morality is itself social at its essential core. As Bristow (2011) explains, in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on the Enlightenment,

[Kant's conception of enlightenment] proposes, instead, a vision of human beings who are able...to step back from their particular situations and inclinations, in order *to construct an intersubjective order of co-existence, communication and cooperation on terms that all can accept.*

(Bristow 2011, *emphasis added*)

Kant's maxim of enlightenment is "To think for oneself" and for Kant this involves the public use of one's reason freed from all authority and addressing the world at large. Following Onora O'Neill (1989), we can see that this maxim

of enlightenment is completed by Kant's second maxim (from the *Critique of Judgment*) – “To think from the standpoint of everyone else” (quoted by O'Neill 1989, 46 [Kant, *Critique of Judgment* V 294]). We are to reflect on our own judgment from the perspective of everyone else. Kant's third maxim, “To always think consistently,” seems easiest but is actually “the hardest of attainment.” (The three rules of thinking are straightforward applications of the formulations of Kant's categorical imperative: Autonomy of thought, Treat other thinkers as subjects too, and Consistency in thinking is as important as consistency in willing.) In short, Kant's conception of enlightenment is not overly individualistic or ahistorical.

Conclusion

There remains a fundamental difference and substantive dispute between Kant and Buddhist Modernism. For Buddhists, unlike Kant, the key to awakening is the realization of the fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness of human beings (and indeed of all existence); our fundamental equality is rooted in our common susceptibility to suffering, and not in our autonomy and capacity to reason; and rational insight alone is not enough to achieve a systematic reorientation of one's thinking and action. Overcoming self-love and partiality requires retraining the mind through meditative practice, which leads to a transformation of consciousness, which includes a more mindful awareness of interdependence. Buddhism defends the more plausible position: selfishness, anger, and hatred are rooted in our (natural?) egocentric orientation, and mere reason cannot overcome these passions. We have already seen that Kant thinks that “The most difficult condition of the human race is the crossing-over from civilization to moralization.” Śāntideva's account (685 CE) of the difficult path to an awakened mind provides a more compelling and psychologically realistic account of how one transcends the “primal confusion” of egocentrism and heteronomy. Wisdom/reason alone is not enough; one also needs to retrain the habits of the mind through moral practice, and perhaps also years of meditative practice.

Again, this is an internal dispute about the best means to a more enlightened self. And here, we find a common spirit and hope that a more enlightened existence will also lead to a better, more satisfying life. William Bristow concludes his discussion of Kant as follows: “The faith of the Enlightenment – if one may call it that – is that the process of enlightenment, of becoming progressively self-directed in thought and action through the *awakening* of one's intellectual powers, leads ultimately to a better, more fulfilled human existence” (Bristow 2011, emphasis added). Kant and Modern Buddhists share a conception of enlightenment and a conviction that awakening one's mind will lead to a better, more fulfilling life.

Note

- 1 With thanks to Burt Loudon, Paul Schofield, and Rachel Neckes for helpful comments on this chapter, and Mark Okrent for his dismissive skepticism, which helped inspire it. For examples of the dismissive attitude see, for example, <http://ask.metafilter.com/216044/How-does-the-Buddhist-understanding-of-enlightenment-compare-with-the-Western-Age-of-Enlightenment> (accessed 14 November 2016).

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