

The Concept of Justice in Aristotle's and Theravada Buddhist Ethics

Ven. Senior Professor Kandegoda Wimaladhamma Thera

This article deals with the philosophical ethics in 'Buddhism and Aristotle's Philosophy' especially the ethical doctrine and notion of justice in the two systems. We examine the Buddhist tradition; 'the fundamental elements in Buddhist teaching and Aristotle's ethics establishing that the primary object of both tradition was to seek a moral and intellectual state of mean', leading to wholesome happiness.

The word "justice" was often used by the Greeks in a broad way to embrace all the good acts sanctioned by law and custom. Aristotle's treatment of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is directed towards this notion since virtuous actions are enjoined by law in best points; justice is broadly conceived in lawfulness. In Aristotle's works (*Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics* and *Rhetoric*) under the light of a peculiar scheme of causal relationship, a total consideration of subjects such as written law, equality, friendship, doctrine of mean is allowed for relating ultimately to justice.

The Buddhist disciplinary law also known by some as Buddhist ecclesiastical law is found in the section of vinaya (general sense discipline, and in the special sense of the law and constitution). It is a compendium of law, made for the monks and nuns, but there is no such law made for the benefit of the laity. Dhamma (doctrine of righteousness) and vinaya are significant for the Buddhist ideas about secular law. The conception of the "rule of righteousness" is extremely important for the Buddhist attitude to a conception of law. The first sermon has been called by the Buddha himself 'the setting in to motion of the supreme wheel of law', which cannot be turned back by any religious teacher, angel, God or anyone in the world. The concept of Kamma as a natural law in Buddhism is not different in principle from a law in the natural science.

We then review and investigate the origin of the doctrine of four noble truth in Buddhism and its central concern in man's nature, his suffering, the cause and the means or path to attain his liberation. The first noble truth is like a revelation that a physician has discovered a disease in his patient and point out the necessity that must be removed. It

describes the symptoms and the need for healing and diagnoses the nature of the illness: “Wake up”, says Buddha “you are ignorant, unenlightened and suffering”. The second one is also diagnostic but it focuses on the pathological condition which causes the illness: “You are attached to the pleasurable and to a false notion of what is good”, says the Buddha. The third noble truth is prognosis, it predicts the course and the end of the disease and the outlook based on proper treatment: “your fever can be extinguished and your suffering with ends, “says the Buddha”, it is the path to freedom”. The basis of the middle path, morality, concentration and wisdom also form the basis of “laws” devised for the layman found scattered in the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhist doctrine advocates seeking a permanent state of freedom or liberation, from Samsara, a freedom from all bodily existence. Reincarnation must be transcended; Buddhists refer to this as getting off the wheel – which represents the cyclic process of birth and death. Significantly, such experience for Buddhism is not of primary concern. The goal of Buddhism enlightenment, liberation or the attainment of Buddhahood – is not a temporary condition or experience; rather, temporariness of enlightenment. Samsara is causing suffering (dukkha), it is impermanent (anicca), as never to be what it was even a moment ago : and all persons, things or beings within it are totally without separation, individual self, devoid of any soul or substance (anatta). Our life on earth is a life of continual rounds of birth, old age, decay, death and rebirth and so on. But the soul of man, like his body, must be cared for and health is to the body as liberation to spirit. This is the essential message of the four truths, and in the Malunkyaputta sutta we find the Buddha applying this teaching.

It is clear from the Nicomachean Ethics that, for Aristotle, it is the nature of men which impels him to attempt always to live in accordance with his nature or in other words, to lead a virtuous life. In Nicomachean Ethics book 5, Aristotle tells us that justice is complete virtue and so it operates not merely in relation to the individual in whom it is found, but also to others. So, the just individual is of necessity someone who has regard for other people, not merely negatively, by not harming them, but positively, by seeking someone else’s good. Aristotle distinguished justice in to universal and particular elements. If one regarded courage, moderation and prudence as they affect others, then one would be regarding them as elements in universal justice. The essence of particular justice, on the other hand, is fairness and there are two kinds of it. One is corrective justice. Corrective justice rights the balance when one person gets more than his share in a voluntary exchange. The other form of particular justice is distributive justice and this, for Aristotle is the fair distribution of wealth

and other goods to the citizens in accordance with their virtue. In the case of mutual communication between the citizens of polis, Aristotle devises a third virtue of justice, the reciprocal justice, which is over and above the corrective and distributive justice and is used as compatible with equality between people. Buddha also emphasizes the role of duties and obligations in relevant context. The Sigalovada Sutta discusses the duties and rights of whole of the society. However, what have been described here are reciprocal of mutual obligation rather than any concept of human rights. First the Buddhist's approach to duties and rights is more humanistic than legalistic. Thus while concepts of duty and obligations, as well as of justice and righteousness.

Buddhism and the goal of Buddhist doctrine is to bring about liberation from human suffering. Any rational activity is made in service to this goal. And, this holds equally for Plato and Aristotle; their key concepts are named liberation and ultimate goal respectively. For them, metaphysical speculation and rational inquiry are performed solely to liberation. It is not suggested that the final goal or summum bonum are experientially identical or have the same metaphysical consequences (the end of life). For Aristotle, the goal of human perfection has no transcendental implications: it is a perfection to be manifested in this world alone and specifically in the social context of the city. The goal of human perfection, which is described as nibbana is conceived of as embracing a bilateral perfection. The characteristics of the goal are determined by the facts of human nature and its potential for development.

The concept has connotations of achievement, success and moral excellence lacking in the concept of happiness. The word is imposed from the Greek prefix, meaning 'good' and, which means 'divine power' (deity) ; accordingly, it is the state or condition of having a possession of happiness. Living well or doing well in an objective sense is only possible for one whose soul is in a good condition as the soul would produce the contentment and joy which are associated with 'happiness' so that everyone who is eudaimon would also be happy, according to Aristotle, but not everyone who is happy would be eudaimon.

Aristotle mentions four possible goods: honour, reputation, wealth and intellectual cultivation. Could any of these things alone constitute the complete good for a man Aristotle conceives to be? It seems not, since any of these particular goods could be supplemented by (the addition of) another. Eudemonia, then, cannot be defined as a single dominant end in the fashion of utilitarianism. This is how Aristotle puts it (1097b 13-22): 'Human action is goal-

oriented, men pursue many and varied goals, but let us imagine there is one goal, eudemonia, which constitutes the final good for man’.

Nibbana is not a place, but a state of mind; it is the state in which one no longer suffers the ignorance that follows man’s existence. With this attainment one is free of Samsara. Samsara is also a state of mind but the opposite of Nibbana. It is in the state of confusion and suffering that one undergoes endless cycles of birth and death. The goal of Buddhism is to put an end to this cyclic condition. Edward Conz says that what is known as “Buddhism” is a part of the common human heritage of wisdom by which men have succeeded in overcoming this world, and gaining immortality, or a deathless life. We suggest that the formal characterization of eudemonia provided by Aristotle can be applied to Nibbana. (Whatever else Nibbana is, it is indisputably the summum bonum of Buddhism and may be characterized, like eudemonia, in the way described above :) it is desired for the sake of it, it is never chosen for the sake of anything else. This formal equivalence of eudemonia and nibbana seems unexceptionable, and in fact it involves little more than the conceptual unpacking of the notion of an inclusive final goal. However, since the Buddhist conception of the final goal as consisting of sila (virtue) and panna (insight, wisdom) has been provided, we may take this opportunity to illustrate why nibbana can only be understood as a second – order end.

There is relation between Aristotle’s psychology and his ethics. We believe there are interesting parallels in the relations between ethics and psychology in Buddhism. For Buddhism, as for Aristotle, human nature is a compound of mental and physical elements. On one hand, there is physical form (rupa) and on the other, the four psychic (nama) faculties of feeling, cognition, mental formation and consciousness. In terms of the psyche (citta = mind), the basic human predicament is likewise emotional or intellectual deficiency epitomized by craving (tanha) and ignorance (avijja). This deficiency leads to the formation of complex mental conditions (sankharas), which bring about rebirth until they are dissolved.

Just as neither vedana (feeling) nor sanna (cognition) are reducible to one another, neither of the two basic values of Buddhism, sila (virtue) and panna (wisdom), is reducible to the other. This approach is to view the reason – emotion bifurcation as artificial and seek a ‘middle way’ between them: this is the position of the Aristotelian tradition and the view most congenial to Buddhism. For birth, reason and feeling are complimentary rather than disjunctive. In speaking of the emotions I am referring to a dimension of psychic life, which

manifests itself across a spectrum or continuum of responses ranging from aversion, hostility, anger and wrath, to continuum embraces attitudes such as benevolence, kindness, affection and sympathetic joy.

Neither prohairesis (choice or will) nor cetana (will) are pure, abstract volition. Theory of the Will as defined above is not to be found in Aristotelian Philosophy or Buddhism, and perhaps for good reason. As Kenny remarks “It is true that account of the will is not to be found in Aristotle. This is not to Aristotle’s discredit, for this whole conception of volition and freedom has been subjected, in our own time, to decisive criticism by philosophers such as Ryle and Wittgenstein (Aristotle’s theory of the will, p.¹,,) philosophical who accept the criticism of this school have attempted to build afresh a philosophical theory of the springs of human action, which will be free of the confusions involved in the theory familiar in the modern philosophical tradition.

My argument here is not innovative or radical in the context of moral philosophy, but it has not previously been applied to Buddhism. For Both Buddhism and Aristotle, human perfection lies in the balanced operation of the cognitive and affective aspects of the psyche, in other words, in the final analysis, for both systems it is not possible to completely disengage moral from intellectual.

As Aristotle defines, temperance as moderation or observance of the mean with regard to pleasure. (NE, 10, 1), so the Buddha advises us to avoid the two extremes and to follow the middle way. This is the only virtuous course. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle thinks that virtue always lies between the two extremes, too much and too little; e.g courage between cowardice and foolhardiness, liberality between prodigality and illiberality, the Buddha also finds virtue in the middle way. Aristotle (NE, B7) maintains that nobody falls short of anything in the matter of pleasure and takes less delight than he ought to. Human beings naturally seek for the gratification of their desires, and when this seeking is carried to an extreme, we call it profligacy, as Aristotle does. On the other hand, however, we meet people who absolutely reject pleasures, whether mental or physical, and who, carrying this rejection to its extreme, take delight in suffering mental or bodily pains, commonly practiced among Indian ascetics (like that of Jaina) as an act of religious austerity. Aristotle was certainly ignorant of or ignored this fact, and thought only of excess in pleasure seeking. The Buddha, on the contrary, was aware of both possible extremes, which he emphatically tells us to avoid so as taking the middle course. We showed that like the middle path of Buddhism

(avoid two extremes), Aristotle maintained as a fundamental tenet the avoidance of the extremes of passions. We saw that the standard of ethics in both systems is determined by their goal.

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is essentially an attempt to establish where an appropriate response lies. "I take the doctrine", writes Norman, "to be a thesis about the proper relation between reason and feeling" (The moral Philosophers, p.50). He regards the Aristotelian thesis as lying midway between the extreme positions typified by Plato. For Plato, reason must assert authoritative control over the other two parts of the soul (desire and anger). Aristotle adopts a middle position and so, essentially, does Buddhism, although we also find in the latter views closer to both extremes. The excess and defect both are equally harmful and destructive for the society. The Bodhisattva (a being destined to attain full Enlightenment), examined all the important schools of philosophy of the day, falling within the one or the other of the self-mortification and materialism respectively.

Early Buddhism presents an independent ethico epistemological middle path (majjima patipada), a unique doctrine. According to Aristotle "the mean in all things is best". The principle of limit, measure and no excess and defect that the individual ought to follow and behave by, was the most essential quality of temperance. Contrasting that, we find mentioning in the Theravada of extirpating the passion as if they had an autonomous life independent reason. Neither Buddha nor Aristotle accepted these extremes.

Buddhism refuses hedonism. Aristotle also does not think much of the pleasure of life: he says it is the choice of "the common run of people" who "betray their utter slavishness in their preference for a life suitable cattle" Aristotle understands by "the life of pleasure" not any life filled with pleasant experiences. For he thinks the good life is pleasant in that sense, but rather, a life devoted to the pursuit of the pleasure of eating, drinking and sex. It is common to speak about abstinence only in connection with these three (NE, I 10, 10). The instinct of gratifying appetite and sexual desires is natural to human beings as well as other animals, and the gratification of them is necessary for their own existence and for the continuation of their race. Evil only comes out of satisfying them in an existence and for the continuation of their race. Evil only comes out of satisfying them in an excessive degree and in the wrong manner.

All associations or people are established for the purpose of attaining some good. So, the first association is the union of a male and a female in order to make reproduction

possible. This is followed by the formation of a second association, that of the family. We saw in some suttas in Buddhism not only cooperation among family members but also equal attitude towards and respect to all human beings or fellow citizens and all of neighbors in society. Therefore, there isn't any difference between any human being. According to Buddhism all human beings are of the same category. During Aristotle's period, there was a difference in Greek society between lord and slave. Slaves had no privilege in ancient Greek period. I think that was ancient custom, not criticized directly by Aristotle.

The coming together of the external and the internal sources of obligation outlined above was confirmed further by the stoics who described the fundamental principle of ethics as "living in accordance with nature". The Stoic nature was a single universal principle extending throughout the universe, also called the active principle, identified with reason. Consequently by living in accordance with nature an individual is living both in accordance with his own nature as well as in accordance with the nature of the universe around us. Both of them constitute a single nature – reason. In Buddhism, this concept can be compared with dependent origination (Paticca Samuppada – cause and effect). In Stoics, the moment of the beginning of its conscious life, possesses an awareness of belonging to itself. Initially this is an awareness of its own body and its own mind. Finally each person possesses the whole of the physical universe. Nevertheless, this relationship belongs to us. It is also in its essence a process, of which the goal is to become a wise man and possibly very small number of human beings.

The parallel between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics is, I believe, quite close in some aspects. Aristotle's ethical theory appears to be the closest western analogue to Buddhist ethics, and is an illuminating guide to an understanding of the Buddhist moral system. It is all the more valuable, since the research for the meaning of Aristotle's ethics has reached a more sophisticated level than the study of ethics in Buddhism. Both regard human nature as a complex of intellectual and emotional factors and consider that the final good for man lies in the full development of his potential in these two dimensions. The state of perfection of Buddhism Nibbana, and Aristotle's characterized by happiness and is the final goal of human endeavor. I am not suggesting that we will approach complete agreement between the Buddhism and Aristotle on these points, although there are similarities and interesting points of contact. It appears, nevertheless, that Aristotelianism provides a useful Western analogue which will be of use in elucidating the foundation and conceptual structure of Buddhist ethics.

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