

Ethics, Kamma, and Sustainable Development

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INTRODUCTION:

In this paper, I examine the underlying philosophy of the U.N. Millennium Development Goals in the context of Theravāda Buddhism. I consider *kamma* (S. *karma*) as a situated and embodied ethical category in light of the Pāli Buddhist canon and the contemporary global environmental crisis. *Kamma* has multiple senses in classical Buddhism and is one of its most misunderstood concepts. One early meaning of *kamma* is action, and not the consequence or product of action with which it is later identified. How does action become associated with consequences? It is through the perception and analysis of action as part of an interdependent causal nexus instead of as a discrete particular event. This causal nexus has four features: (1) relations of cause and effect, (2) the causal determinants of a life, (3) intentionality, (4) morality. It is written: “I am the owner of my actions (*kamma*), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” As the Buddha rejected speculation in favor of moral and meditative practice, *kamma* is not a metaphysical proposition about the world. It is an ethical claim demanding the examination of the conditions and possibilities of one’s present actions. The second half of the paper focuses on the experiential meaning of *kamma* as a situated

responsibility responsive to one's own and others' conditions, which has significant consequences for how we respond to contemporary problems such as poverty, overuse of resources, pollution and the destruction of the environment, and sustainability. *Karmic* responsibility for others, animals and the environment is neither an external nor purely normative category. As causal ethical efficacy, it is the logic of action itself and a needful element for engaging our current ethical and environmental dilemmas.

THE CRISIS OF DEVELOPMENT

It has long been argued in the tradition of critical social theory that modern societies are confronted with multiple contradictions and crises of "development."¹ In both "developing" and "already developed" nations, one finds that the pressures of material and economic progress are in tension and conflict with the preservation of the natural environment and the flourishing of human and animal life. The avowed goal of individual nations and of the United Nations is "sustainable development" in light of previous stages of unplanned and planned growth and its problematic legacies for the natural environment and social equality.

The idea behind "sustainable planning" is to minimize environmental and human costs and damages while at the same time continuing to maximize increased production and the exploitation of resources for the greater well-being of more and more people; that is, "maximizing economic value while minimizing environmental impact."²

According to one interpretation, the principle of sustainability would allow, for example, the calculative resolution of the tensions of development according to a cost-benefit analysis of how much exploitation of resources or how many negative "side effects" and "secondary" consequences are permissible given the needs, expectations, and aspirations of

1. On the multiple crisis tendencies of modern societies, see Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.

2. Kimberly R Bunz, Gregor P. Henze, and Dale K. Tiller. "Survey of sustainable building design practices in North America, Europe, and Asia." *Journal of architectural engineering* 12, no. 1 (2006): 33-62.

growing human populations.³ According to this interpretation, issues of sustainability can be resolved through technical planning and steering. As William F. Baxter argued in his defense of pollution for the sake of development, *People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution*, the good of the continuing existence of a wilderness or a species can be calculated vis-à-vis the benefits intervention in an ecosystem can have for human beings.⁴ Negative effects on an ecosystem, and the local humans and animals that depend on it, can be offset by the benefits to the general human population that, for instance, forest clearing, oil drilling or gas pipelines can produce. If our “aesthetic” preference for having cute penguins in the world does not offset the benefits to humans of sustained or increasing production, then there is no reason not to choose a certain amount—which Baxter describes as optimal—of negative environmental consequences for human material needs and comforts.

The technocratic or instrumental account of sustainability, which I have quickly summarized here on the basis of Baxter’s arguments, clearly presupposes an anthropocentric perspective in which humans stand as the arbitrators of value and lack of value. Thus, a large gnarled tree only good for the napping of wanderers, the chattering of birds, and the activities of insects is “useless” in comparison with the employment opportunities and material benefits that a new superstore and parking lot could bring to the community.

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF INTERDEPENDENCE

It has often been maintained in response to such human-oriented accounts that the recognition of interdependence based on the concept of dependent arising or dependent origination (*P. paticcasamuppāda*, *S. praṭītyasamutpāda*) articulated in classical Buddhist texts can provide an alternative to the instrumental anthropocentric understanding of human and natural life. “Sustainable development” could in this Buddhist context

3. For an overview of different interpretations of sustainable development, see Sylvie Faucheux, Martin O’Connor, and Jan Van Der Straaten, *Sustainable development: Concepts, Rationalities and Strategies*. Springer Netherlands, 1998.

4. William F Baxter, *People or Penguins; The Case for Optimal Pollution*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

be more open to being oriented and shaped by motives that are (1) more broadly ethical rather than exclusively instrumental and (2) biocentric instead of anthropocentric.

The recognition of the interdependence between humans and non-humans, sentient beings and their natural environing world, might be a necessary condition yet appears to be an insufficient condition insofar as the “fact” of interdependence can be acknowledged and nothing in one’s attitudes or behaviors might be different. Mere interdependence and non-duality is compatible with the use and exploitation of what one perceives oneself to be at one with, since the anthropocentric instrumental approach in authors such as Baxter does not deny mutual dependence. Interdependence indicates a limit to the amount of pollution that humans can maintain for the sake of development. Likewise, praising naturalness and perceiving animals as models for human life is compatible with the domination of nature and use of animals. *Mimesis*, which Adorno describes as the impulse to imitate that is constitutive of human imagination and reason, can copy and reproduce the natural in order to control and reshape it as the Frankfurt school critical social theorist has argued.⁵

To introduce a more extreme thought experiment through which to think about the anthropocentric attitude, we can compare humans to parasites who live symbiotically with their hosts. If the parasite could express its understanding of its world, it would no doubt be able to recognize and express its need for and interdependence with its host while at the same time justifying its activities that it pursues for its own well-being. Accordingly, the “natural fact” of mutual dependence need not entail an ethical relationship between parasite and host or between human beings and the animals and environments that they use. Humans need and utilize environments and animals as “natural goods” that are “given by God” or as the right of the “fittest” in the “the struggle for existence” that are available and “ready to hand” for human use. This is deeply compatible with admitting interconnectedness not only mentally but bodily through hunger and thirst, while denying that this interrelatedness entails non-

5. Eric S. Nelson, “Revisiting the Dialectic of Environment: Nature as Ideology and Ethics in Adorno and the Frankfurt School.” *Telos* 155, Summer 2011, 105-126.

harm (P. *avihiṃsā*, S. *ahiṃsā*) much less compassion (*karuṇā*) toward the dis-ease and suffering (P. *dukkha*, S. *duḥkha*) of bodily worldly beings.

If a fact about the world cannot justify a norm about how the world should be, if “ought” cannot be directly derived from “is” and it is fallacious to conflate them, then the “fact” of worldly or natural interdependence is not a sufficient condition for the recognition of ethical interdependence.⁶ Dependent arising and mutual interdependence alone fail to motivate the ethical responsiveness that would widen and extend human sensibility beyond its fixations on its own needs and the instrumental calculation of their efficient fulfillment. This instrumental model, as thinkers from Max Weber to Heidegger and the Frankfurt School have argued, is typical and perhaps constitutive of modernity and one sees its continuing role in the anthropocentric cost-benefit analyses that inform many contemporary models of sustainable national planning as well as U.N. developmental planning.

However, the opposite approach seems problematic in addition to perhaps being futile. The rhetoric of ethical idealism and universal ethical obligations to non-humans and other humans with good reason appears empty to the hungry and the poor. These words sound like words of luxury and privilege to the masses who merely want to make a place for themselves and their families in the world under social conditions that are often harsh and overly competitive. The language of ought, obligation, and duty rings hollow and hypocritical given the massive asymmetries in wealth, status, and power between the experts who speak and those who are supposed to listen.

As the Indian eco-feminist philosopher Vandana Shiva has demonstrated, environmental issues cannot be separated from issues of human justice and fairness, as the poor and women often face the harshest contradictions living with the consequences of environmental destruction and social inequality.⁷ Given who counts what has value and what lacks

6. The analysis of the so-called naturalistic fallacy was first fully developed in G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.

7. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. London: Zed Books, 1988.

value, the idea of “sustainable development” can benefit the privileged elites of developing and developed countries steering environmental destruction for their own profits and consequently undermining the well-being of communities poisoned by the pollution of air, earth, food, and water and divided by the socially constituted competitive struggle for resources and recognition.

KAMMA AND THE COMPLICITY OF ETHICS

The often ideological and hypocritical employment of the language of ethics that expects people to be ethical while others pursue self-interested profit indicates a serious problem. On the one hand, moralistic ways of speaking can function as ideological disguises for the ongoing operation and reproduction of power. On the other hand, the abandonment of ethics appears to deliver us over to the regime of instrumental rationality and a functioning of power that can no longer be criticized or contested without a normative orientation that can help express why the situation or institution ought to be different.

In addition to its ideological legitimating function, i.e., its complicity with the way things are, ethics indicates through the transformative “ought”, and its promise, possibilities of different kinds of relationships between humans with each other and with other beings.⁸

In the face of this dilemma between the worldly and ideological complicity of ethics and the absence of and consequent indifference to ethical critique and transformation, Buddhism can help suggest an alternative “middle path” (P. *majjhimā paṭipadā*, S. *madhyamā-pratipad*).

Phenomenologically or descriptively speaking, moments of loving kindness (*mettā*), generosity (*dāna*), and compassion (*karunā*) do in fact occur between ordinary people in everyday and in extraordinary circumstances as well as between human and non-human animals. In such moments, ethics takes place in a way that indicates more than or

8. On the ideological and emancipatory functions of ethical language, see Eric S. Nelson, “Revisiting the Dialectic of Environment: Nature as Ideology and Ethics in Adorno and the Frankfurt School.” *Telos* 155, Summer 2011, 105-126.

something other than an instrumental use and rhetoric of power. The ethical is neither merely a natural fact of society nor a pure value or ought in such moments of the bodily response of one being to another in its neediness and suffering. It is both complicit with the forces that constitute all social life such as power and ideology while at the same time pointing beyond its instrumental logic in “useless” moments of ethical spontaneity and responsiveness.

The Buddhist experience and concept that encompasses this worldly ambiguity and complicity of our intentions and actions is *kamma* (S. *kamma*). *Kamma* is, on the one hand, a crucial category for practicing Buddhists in Asia and elsewhere that helps them interpret and understand their situations and life. On the other hand, it appears as a relic of magical and metaphysical thinking to western reflections on Buddhism and its contemporary significance. Recent “naturalizing” interpreters of Buddhism, such as that of Owen Flanagan, wish to reconstruct and reformulate Buddhism within the scope and limits of current Western thinking by removing any supernatural or metaphysical commitments.⁹

One need not be an opponent of naturalism in general to recognize that the philosophical reading of *kamma* as primarily a metaphysical or cosmological thesis about the nature of the cosmos is highly questionable. As should be well-known, the Buddha found in the Pāli canon (*Tipitaka*) expresses skeptical doubts about giving metaphysical and speculative answers to ontological questions about the structure of reality as a whole or as such. The Buddha dismisses such speculative questions as intellectual diversions and turns our attention and care to the ontic and empirical realities of the realization of the *dhamma* (S. *dharma*) “within this very life here and now.” How then do we explain the continuing reliance on notions such as *kamma* within the discourses ascribed to the historical Buddha?

Kamma, understood as a special causality running through the fabric of the cosmos, can be rejected as an unsupportable metaphysical thesis.

9. Owen J. Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011.

Be that as it may, the notion of *kamma* has a rich and varied place in Buddhist thought and can be given a more minimalist interpretation as the problem of human interdependence with others and the world. *Kamma* refers primarily to a practical reality within the realm of everyday life that is experienced and confronted by practitioners of the way. In this context, it refers to the worldly complicity of our intentions and actions. We are often negatively conditioned by ourselves, others, and our environments. We confront the seeds of our past actions and the conditions of the world in cultivating meditative states (*samādhi*), morality (*sīla*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Likewise, we are confronted with karmic networks of complicity in our social and environmental reflection and practice.

Insofar as it is necessary to confront such nexuses within ourselves and in the world, the “naturalistic” elimination would entail the elimination of the Buddhist path as a path of critical transformation and potential emancipation. The elimination of the category of *kamma* would entail the destruction of the ethical core of Buddhism: the recognition of the agent’s ambiguous complicity in body, speech, and mind with itself, others, and the world.

Instead of positing ethical idealism or the abandonment of ethics, i.e., the either-or dilemma formulated earlier in the paper, *kamma* indicates that our intentions and actions are bound up with a wider worldly nexus and that they have mutual effects on that context as well as on our own selves.

That is, *kamma* is the analytic and practical tool of the Buddha’s “middle way” that points out the tensions and mediations between the natural and the normative, the factual is and the ought to be, which constitute practical ethical life. It should be interpreted primarily as a moral experience rather than a metaphysical thesis or theory, at least on the basis of how *kamma* was portrayed in the early discourses of the Buddha as they are transmitted in the Pāli Buddhist canon.¹⁰

10. For more discussion of this interpretation, see Eric S. Nelson, “The Complicity of the Ethical: Causality, Kamma, and Violence in Buddhism and Levinas.” Leah Kalmanson, Frank Garrett and Sarah Mattice, *Levinas and Asian Thought* (Pittsburgh:

DEVELOPMENT AND KARMICALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

Kamma is first and foremost a situated and embodied ethical reality instead of an abstract metaphysical or speculative category. It is an ethical claim demanding the examination of the conditions and possibilities of one's present actions. This interpretation of *kamma* can be articulated in light of the Pāli Buddhist canon and is suggestive in response to our contemporary global environmental crisis and concerns about sustainable development.

Kamma has multiple senses in classical Buddhism and is one of its most misunderstood concepts. One early meaning of *kamma* is action, and not the consequence or product of action with which it is later identified. How does action become associated with consequences? It is through the perception and analysis of action as part of an interdependent causal nexus instead of as a discrete particular event. This causal nexus has four characteristics: (1) relations of cause and effect, (2) the causal determinants of a life, (3) intentionality, (4) morality. It is written in the *Upajjhatthana Sutta*: "I am the owner of my actions (*kamma*), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir."¹¹

What then does *kamma*, both in the context of Theravāda Buddhist thought and interpreted as the complicity of intentions and actions, norms and values and the world, suggest about the sustainability of development and the U.N. Millennium Development Goals?

The primary experiential and phenomenological meaning of *kamma* is a situated responsibility that is responsive to one's own and others' conditions. This insight has significant consequences for how we can begin to respond to contemporary problems such as poverty, overuse

Duquesne University Press) and Eric S. Nelson, "Questioning Kamma: Buddhism and the Phenomenology of the Ethical." *Revisioning Kamma*, ed. Charles Prebish, Damien Keown, Dale S. Wright (Journal of Buddhist Ethics, 2007), 353-373.

11. *Upajjhatthana Sutta*, AN, 5.57. Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara Nikaya*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999.

of resources, pollution and the destruction of the environment, and sustainability. Karmic responsibility for other human and non-human animals and the environment is neither a purely external instrumental question demanding neutral policymaking nor a purely normative or ethical category abstracted from the world. As a causal yet ethical efficacy, it is the logic of worldly action itself and, as such, a needful element for engaging our current pressing ethical and environmental dilemmas by encouraging an ethical responsiveness to all beings and ecosystems. Such responsiveness could ethically situate and orient human policymaking and planning about development and sustainability by contesting and broadening the ethically indifferent and neutral calculative planning of means.

This would mean that “we” (i.e., “those who are in a position to...”) cannot only balance human needs and expectations against each other, as anthropocentric thinkers such as Baxter suggest, but we have to engage and potentially contest the complex mediations operating between the domination and exploitation of humans by other humans and the domination and exploitation of the natural world and animals by humans. One form of domination is karmically intertwined with the other. Planning and policy making about development through governmental and non-governmental organizations is in need of being constantly checked against the karmic realities of the situation and the actual suffering and needs of sentient beings. This shift toward greater responsiveness can only occur by including those voices that are often silent at the highest levels of developmental planning; the poor, often female and young or old, which V. Shiva has brought to our attention.

Technocratic instrumental planning of others’ fates has produced many of the problems we see today in terms of social inequality and environmental degradation. The imposition of the universal on the particular, the application of plans formulated by elites and applied onto the local level, has been disastrous in both developed and developing countries. It is necessary for plans, policies, programs, and their effective implementation to be oriented toward bettering the situation overall (that is, the flourishing and nourishing of life called for in philosophies such as

Buddhism and Daoism), which requires the democratic dialogue of local communities, rather than merely “naturally” reproducing the established injustices and moral failures that are already powerfully and systematically operative in this imperfect and damaged (that is, karmic) form of life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, an ethically committed and karmically aware Buddhism calls for the reflection and engagement that could help situate the current crisis and dilemma of development. It cannot do so by either ascetically abandoning the world or by accepting its karmic factuality as cosmically “justified.” These two extremes represent the reification and destruction of the critical transformative experience of *kamma* in favor of metaphysical speculation or the ideological justification of injustice.

A Buddhist-engaged ethics of encountering and liberating things in their interdependence and uniqueness indicates an alternative middle way: the potential for a human orientation within nature and toward natural phenomena that can—although inevitably mediated and reinterpreted by present human concerns and interests—inform reflective deliberation and practices in relation to animals and the environment. It can temper the struggle for existence and emphasize a sustainability that is compatible with the life of other human and non-human animals, even as Buddhism necessarily warns of the temporal transience of all things and the dangers of anthropocentric human hubris.

A karmically responsive Buddhism emphasizes and can help bring about the responsiveness to suffering that is desperately needed and occurs by reorienting our hearing to the cries of dis-ease and suffering in the world.