Compassion and the Net of Indra

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1 Introduction: whence compassion?

The thought that compassion (*karuṇā*) is a central moral virtue, perhaps *the* central such virtue, of Buddhism, hardly needs argument.[1] The question that will concern us in this essay is 'why?' What is the ground for its being so?

Of course, compassion is a virtue, or at least valued, in most ethical traditions; and different answers to the question of what grounds it will be given in different traditions. A Christian might answer the question by saying that it is because God—at least, God the Son—commanded it.[2] But in Buddhism, there is no *deus*, and so no *deus ex machina*. If one is to find a ground for compassion, it has to be something *intra-machina*.

The machinery, of course, must be of a kind that is acceptable to Buddhist theory. To illustrate: Aristotle provided a justification for many virtues. He holds to a certain notion of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). The virtues (*arete*) are those human dispositions that are conducive to such flourishing. (See, e.g., Kraut 2010.) Thus, temperance is a virtue: intemperance inhibits

[1] 'Compassion' may not be the best translation of '*karuṇā*', given its connotations of passiveness. 'Benificence' or 'caring' may be closer to the mark; but I will stick with the standard translation here.

[2] '[Y]ou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength ... [and you] shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.' Mark 12: 29-31.

rational reflection, a core part of human flourishing. But if Buddhism has a notion of flourishing, it is not Aristotle's; and in any case, compassion is not a virtue that features significantly in the Aristotelian catalogue.

The notion of a virtue does not feature at all in a Hobbesean account of morality; but his machinery does provide a framework which grounds moral notions. Why, for example, should one obey the Sovereign? Because of a compact made to establish their sovereignty. (See, e.g., Lloyd and Shreedhar 2008.) But the fiction of a social compact has no ground in Buddhist thinking. And again, compassion is not something particularly significant in Hobbesean thought.

What kind of machinery does Buddhism have for answering our target question? Fairly obvious considerations will take us some way. The Four Noble Truths assure us that human life is one of disquietude (*duḥkha*), and that a major cause of this is an attachment to an illusory self. Compassion, the concern for the well-being of others, is a good policy for dissipating such self-centredness. This is fine as far as it goes. But it relegates compassion to a piece of practical advice—on a par with: don't have a heavy meal before you meditate; it makes you drowsy. This has to be missing something important. And in any case, it hardly grounds the role that compassion plays in Mahāyāna thought. In this, the bodhisattva takes a vow of compassion to all sentient creatures, and it cannot be just so that this takes them further down the path of enlightenment. At a certain stage they have achieved individual enlightenment, including the dissipation of the illusion of self and the corresponding attachment. But they voluntarily refuse to take the final step in the process, entry into *parinirvāṇa*, until all sentient creatures can do so as well.

The justification of compassion is, in fact, at its most difficult and crucial in Mahāyāna traditions. In this essay, we will be concerned with Madhyamaka tradition in particular, and those later Buddhist traditions which have endorsed its core metaphysical notion of emptyness (*śūnyatā*) (which is most of them), a notion closely connected with conventional reality as it is conceived in these traditions, as we will see. I will argue that it is emptiness which grounds the virtue of compassion. The next section will provide enough background in metaphysical issues to make the ensuing discussion intelligible. We will then be in a position to look at the envisaged answer. Following that, we will look at an objection and some ramifications of the account.

2 Metaphysical background

So let us turn to the notion of emptiness, and the claim that all things are empty. It will not be my concern, here, to try to justify this claim. I merely explain.

Let us start by backtracking for a moment to the older Abhidharma metaphysics.[3] All Buddhists agree that there is no such thing as a self; that is, something—a part of the person—that persists through their existence and defines them as one an the same person during that time. What, then, is a person? According to the Abhidharma tradition, the answer is as follows. Consider your car. This has lots of bits. They came together under certain conditions, interact with each other and with other things; some wear out and are replaced. In the end they will all fall apart. We can think of the car as a single thing, and even give it a name (like XYZ 123), but this is a purely conventional label for a relatively stable and self-contained aggregate of components. Now, a person is just like the car. The parts they are composed of (the *skandhas*) are psycho-biological; but otherwise the story is much the same.

Of course, it is not just a person who has parts. Lots of things do: chairs, trees, countries, etc. The Abhidharmikas could see no reason to treat other partite things in any different way. They are all conceptual constructions out of their parts.

But must there then be ultimate impartite things? The answer would appear to be 'yes'. To have conceptual constructions, one must, it would seem, have something out of which to construct them. So, the Abhidharmika said, there are ultimate constituents of the world, *dharmas*. These have *svabhāva*, self-being. That is, they exist, and are what they are intrinsically, independently of any process of mental construction. There were different views about what, exactly, the dharmas were: the different Abhidharma schools, disagreed about the details.[4] But all agreed that they were metaphysical atoms, the ultimate constituents of the world. Thus the picture of two realities (*satya*) emerged: an ultimate reality of the things with self-being; and a conventional reality, the *Lebenswelt* of the things conceptually constructed out of them.

[3]For a discussion of the early Buddhist view of the self and, more generally, Abhidharma metaphysics, see Siderits 2008, esp. chs. 3 and 6.

[4]Perhaps the most influential view in the end was that there were tropes (property instances) of a certain kind. See Ganeri 2001, pp. 98 ff.

Mahāyāna Buddhism subjected this metaphysical picture to a fundamental critique. In particular, it rejected the Abhidharma view that things in the world were constructed out of ultimate parts with a different ontological status. In the Madhyamaka version, this took the form of an argument that *all* things are empty of self-being: there is nothing with *svabhāva*.[5]

So, if everything has the same ontological status, and this is not some ultimate reality, in what way do things have their being? Not intrinsically, but only in relation to other things. To give an example from Western philosophy,[6] consider the year 1066. According to Newton, this date refers to an objective thing, a time. The time is independent of the events in time, and would indeed have existed even had there been no such events. On the other hand, according to Leibniz, 1066 has no self-standing reality of this kind. 1066 is merely a locus in a set of events ordered by the before/after relation. Thus, 1066 is just the place in this ordering that applies to things after Caesar's invasion of Britain, before the British colonisation of Australia, etc. Had there been no events in time, there would have been no 1066. 1066 has its being only in relationship to other things.

According to Madhyamaka, everything has its being in this relational way. The partite objects of the Abhidharmikas have their being in this way. A partite object has whatever sort of being it has in relationship to, amongst other things, its parts. The Madhyamaka network of being-constitutive relations included this part-whole relation—though, it would be wrong to think now that the parts are real in a way that the whole they compose is not. Both have exactly the same kind of reality—relational.

The web of relations that were relevant for the Mādhyamikas were wider than mereological ones, however. (Some things may have no physical parts.) Two other kinds were particularly significant for them. One is causal. Thus, you are the thing that you are (including existing) because of your relationship to your genetic inheritance (let us update the picture a bit here), the way your parents treated you, the school you went to, and so on.[7] The other is conceptual. Again, the Abhidharmikas held that an object of conventional reality is what it is, to the extent that, and only to the extent that, we con-

[5]On Madhyamaka metaphysics, see, e.g. Siderits 2007, chs. 7, 9, and Williams 2009, chs. 2, 3.

[6]See Smart 1964, pp. 81-99.

[7]Of course, causation plays an important role in Abhidharma thinking too. The dharmas enter into causal relations with each other. But just because of this, the causal relationship is not part of what determines something's being, as it is in Madhyamaka.

ceptualise it in a certain way. This view is also subsumed in the more general Madhyamaka picture.

The upshot: nothing has ultimate reality; everything has the same conventional ontological status. To be empty is to be conventionally real, which is the only kind of reality there is.

We are not quite finished with our ontological background yet. The Madhyamaka view of emptiness was taken to its limit by the Chinese Huayan school of Buddhism.[8] If something is empty, its nature depends on *some* other things. According to the Huayan, it depends on *all* other things.[9] This does not mean that all the relations involved are equally important. Consider a person again; for example, say, me. Arguably, the behaviour of my parents towards me in my infant years is more important in making me what I am than, say, the behaviour of my first girlfriend. But all of the relations have some role in the making. The matter is rather like that in classical gravitational theory. Every object exerts a gravitational influence on every other, however far apart. Thus, the nett gravitational force on me is partly determined by a rock on a planet in another galaxy. Of course, since gravitation attraction falls off rapidly with distance, this will be very small, but it is there, none the less. So it is with the relations which constitute me.

The step that takes the Huayan from *some* to *all* is a very simple one. Consider emptiness itself—whatever, exactly, one takes that to be. (In this tradition, it is called *principle*, *li*: 禮.) Things get their nature, in part, by relating to it in a certain way—that is, by being empty. But emptiness is not something with self-being either. As Madhyamaka had argued, all things are empty, including emptiness itself. It, therefore, has its nature by depending on other things. What things? The things it grounds: the empty objects themselves. So if a and b are any objects, a depends on emptiness, and emptiness depends on b. By the transitivity of dependence, a depends on b.[10]

The interdependence of all things is illustrated by the beautiful metaphor of the Net of Indra. This is described by one modern commentator as follows:

[8] On this, see Williams 2009, ch. 6, and Liu 2007, ch. 10.

[9] One does find views of this kind expressed sometimes by people in the Madhyamaka tradition. Thus, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says 'We begin to see that the whole universe we inhabit can be understood as a living organism where each cell works in balanced cooperation with every other cell to sustain the whole'. Gyatso 1999, pp. 40-1.

[10] This kind of reasoning is perfectly sound Madhyamaka reasoning, though I know of nowhere it is explicitly made in that tradition.

> Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel at the net's every node, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of the jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite.[11]

All the jewels in the net encode each other. Each one, as it were, contains the whole. In the metaphor, the jewels represent the objects of phenomenal reality; and the infinite reflections represent their mutual dependence.

Of course, it must be remembered this this is a metaphor, and has its limitations. In particular, one would naturally understand the jewels as having self-being—which is exactly what the theory of emptiness undercuts. For an account of the way in which the Madhyamaka relations of dependence generate a (non-metaphorical) network, see Priest 201+.

3 Śāntideva's argument

We can now come to the justification for compassion. It is common—maybe even inevitable—for ethical theories to have metaphysical underpinnings. Thus, Aristotle's virtue ethics presupposed his teleological account of nature, especially human nature; and a Hobbesean ethics presupposed a metaphysics of autonomous, independent, agents. It is natural, then, for us to look for such a justification of compassion. How might one do this?

In searching for an answer, the first place one might think to look is in arguably the greatest of all Indian Mahāyāna ethicists, Śāntideva. And in his *Bodhicaryavatāra* we do find what looks like a metaphysically-based

[11] Cook 1977, p. 2. For an English translation of the description given by Fazang, probably the most influential thinker in the Huayan tradition, see Liu 1982, p. 65.

argument for compassion at VIII: 90-103. What I take to be the core of it is given at verses 101-102, as follows:

> A continuum and collection,
> just like such things as a series or an army, are unreal.
> The one for whom there is suffering does not exist.
> Therefore for whom will that suffering become their own?
>
> Since all ownerless sufferings are
> without distinction,
> [they] should be alleviated just because of being suffering,
> What restriction is made in that case?[12]

The argument would seem to be this: It is clear that it is good to get rid of one's own, suffering. One is inclined to think that there is an important difference between one's own pain and that of another. I can feel my own pain in a way that I cannot feel yours. To sustain this thought, one needs to suppose that pains have possessors, like you and me. If there are no such things as people, this thought collapses. There are lots of painful *skandas* out there. If there are really no people to possess them, then a motivation to get rid of any of them is a motivation to get rid of all of them. These things must be bad independent of any bearer: there isn't one.

As a moment's reflection shows, the argument depends on a distinction between the reality of the pain-states and the reality of persons. Persons are not real, so we should not be concerned by the owners of pains. But if the pains themselves were not real, we should have no concern for these either: the ground for compassion collapses. The argument, thus, presupposes an Abhidharma metaphysics. The *dharmas* of pain are real in a way that persons are not. For a Mādhyamika, the argument will not work: persons and pains are on an equal ontological footing. Pains are real enough, though their reality is conventional; but people have exactly the same sort of reality. And

[12]The translations from Śāntideva I use are those given in Ch. 4. How to interpret the passage from which they come is contentious. For a discussion of the various possibilities, see that chapter. It would take me far afield to argue the point here, but let me just state for the record that I find what follows to be the most plausible interpretation of the text. In Ch. 4, it is called the 'Abhidharma Reading'. For different views, and further discussion, see Chs. 5-8.

the possessor of a pain *does* seem to be a relevant consideration. I have a unique relationship with my own pain, giving me a distinctive reason for getting rid of it, in a way that I do not have a relationship with yours. Nor, obviously, does it help to point out that the person has no *ultimate* reality; for neither do the painful states.[13] So if this is the argument which Śāntideva is giving, it does not work from a Madhyamaka perspective (even though Śāntideva was a Madhyamaka).

4 Interconnectedness

If one is looking for an acceptable Mahāyāna metaphysical justification of compassion, perhaps the most obvious place to seek it is with the notion of emptiness. After all, the rise of Mahāyāna occasioned two important theoretical developments in Buddhism. The first was making emptiness the metaphysical keystone. The second was making compassion the ethical keystone. It would seem odd if these were totally independent.

To see a connection, start by coming back to a Hobbesean ethics. Hobbesean ethics makes sense because (and only because) one thinks of individuals as atomic existences, which are what they are independently of others—providing the autonomy for each to enter into a compact with others of the same kind. In other words, one has to think of each individual as possessing *svabhāva*. This grounds the picture in which they look after their own interests, and their own interests only—indeed, of their having independent interests in the first place. From the point of view of emptiness, this is precisely not the case—much as it might sometimes appear that my being is atomic and autonomous in this way. My nature is not self-standing, but depends for what it is on other things; and one of the most important of these is the individuals with whom I interact causally. *Their* natures, in turn, are determined in exactly the same way. By the very order of things, then, there is an interconnectedness and interdependence between things, and between people in particular. Thus, I am what I am, most importantly, because of my causal interactions with others: my parents, my friends, the people I read (about), and so on. Similarly for all people. Let us call this their inter-being.[14] This inter-being is what makes the Hobbesean picture illusory. It is also this which grounds compassion.

[13]The point is well made by Williams 2000, ch. 5.

[14]The term is taken from the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh, e.g., Hanh 1993.

Some have held that the mere interdependence of people is sufficient to establish the claim that we should have regard for their interests—and so be compassionate. Here, for example is King 2005, p. 160:

> The basic Buddhist worldview of interdependence has two implications relevant to universal responsibility. First, because we live in a vast web of interconnectedness, 'our every action, our every deed, word, and thought, no matter how slight or inconsequential it may seem, has an implication not only for ourselves, but for all others too'.[15] That is, it is because of interconnectedness that our actions create a ripple effect that results in a 'universal dimension of every act'. Second, a corollary of interdependence is also relevant to universal responsibility: the fact that "my" interest and well-being are inseparable from the interest and well-being of others means that not only can my interests not trump "your" interest, but that no individual's interest can trump any other individual's interest. What remains is to act in the interest of all.

Unfortunately, this certainly does not seem to follow. The slave and the slave-owner are mutually dependent. The owner depends on the slave to labour for them and make them rich. Reciprocally, the slaves depend on their owner to give them food, shelter, and any other means of life they see fit to provide. It does not follow *from this* that the owner should have any moral compunction to look after the slaves' interests at all. Without further consideration, it could equally be the case that they are permitted to exploit them ruthlessly till they die—especially if they can buy new slaves cheaply.

In the passage from Śāntideva which just mentioned, verse 91 runs as follows:

> As the body, having many parts, divided into hands etc.
>
> should be protected as one.
>
> Just so, the world, though divided, is undivided in the
>
> nature of suffering and happiness.

One might take this to be hinting at something like King's argument. The parts of the body are mutually dependent, so each will look after the well-being of the others. So it should be with people.[16]

[15] She quotes here His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Gyatso 1999, p. 41.

[16] For a discussion, see Wetelson 2002.

This argument is no better, though. For a start, it is not clear that this is a good analogy. The parts of the body look after each other, when they do, because they are all part of one conscious organism, which looks after its parts. This is not the case with the totality of sentient beings. Moreover, even in the bodily case, it is not true that each part will look after the well-being of each other part. The hand might cut off a foot in danger of going gangrenous. Or a person may have a ruptured spleen removed, so that the whole body does not die.

We will return to this matter in a moment when we consider Nietzsche's views. For the present, we just need to note that the argument *simply* from inter-connectedness fails. From the fact that a bunch of entities are inter-dependent, it in no way follows that each should look after the interests of the others. There may be good reason to privilege the well-being of some over that of others.

5 From emptiness to compassion

If there is a connection between emptiness and compassion, then, there must be more to the matter. What could it be? This section will try to spell this out.[17]

Come back to the metaphor of the Net of Indra. Suppose that a mental state of being disquieted (*duḥkha*) manifests itself as a red fleck in a jewel in the net. Then any red fleck in a jewel will cause a red fleck in any other jewel. So disquiet in any jewel will be coded in any other. Of course, this is true of all jewels, those that represent normal adults and those that represent, e.g., rocks, cows, or infants. So this encoding does not imply that the fleck is *experienced* as disquiet. That requires (the agent represented by) the jewel to have certain cognitive abilities and attainments. In particular, a certain kind of awareness is necessary—and rocks, cows, and infants don't have it.[18]

All this is a metaphor, of course. But what it indicates is that disquiet in others occasions disquiet in other sentient creatures of sufficient awareness, such as me. In one way, we are all very familiar with this phenomenon.

[17]The project here, note, is not one of textual exegesis. As far as I know, the following argument is not to be found in canonical texts. The aim is to answer our target question with resources that Madhyamaka has at its disposal.

[18]Maybe even certain psychopaths don't have it. Then they are no more *moral* agents than infants.

Negative emotions of others, even of those we simply pass in the street, tend to be communicated to us. We naturally respond to fear, hostility, anger, in a like manner. Fear in others can trigger a wave of fear in us; the hostility of another triggers a hostile response; and so on.

Of course, matters are not altogether as simple as that. We do not always seem to be troubled by others we know to be suffering. I know, for example, that poverty is rife in certain countries (and certain parts of even affluent countries); but sometimes I do not seem to be moved by this at all. However, all kinds of things can affect us unknowingly. For example, as doctors often note, one can be stressed, but quite unaware of this until the stress manifests as headaches, other bodily pains, and even serious illness. I take it that disquiet in others *does* affect us, even if we are not conscious of this. Deep in the unconscious, it plants the seeds of unease—if only because we know that things of the kind that have happened to others to disquiet them can equally happen to us—much as we might want to repress this thought with an act of bad faith.[19]

Is this simply special pleading? No. There is evidence from experimental psychology that this is, indeed, the case. One recent study says:

> The key suggestion is that observation or imagination of another person in a particular emotional state automatically activates a representation of that state in the observer, with its associated autonomic and somatic responses...
>
> These results suggest that regions associated with feelings of emotion can be activated by seeing the facial expression of the same emotion, a phenomenon described as emotional contagion.[20]

Another says:

> ...results showed that those participants who have viewed negative news items reported significantly greater increase in anxiety and negative affect along with greater decrease in positive affect than those participants who viewed the combined positive and negative news items.

[19]Returning to our metaphor, the further away the source of the red fleck is, the weaker the effect. Similarly, the further one is from the sufferer (cognitively), the weaker the effect. It may not be surprising, then, that much of the effect of the suffering of others falls below my conscious cognitive horizon.

[20]Singer, *et al* 2004, p. 1158.

> This study ... demonstrates that anxiety and momentary mood disturbance do not dissipate with a distraction activity.[21]

And yet a third says:

> The study ... adds to a small but growing, number of studies indicating that television coverage of traumatic events may have significant [negative] secondary impacts on on public mental health.[22]

Disquiet in others does, then, disquiet us—even if we are unaware of it.

Sometimes, of course, matters are more extreme than mere apparent indifference. We can actually enjoy the suffering of others. Thus, for example, most of us know what it is like to experience pleasure when something bad happens to someone we dislike, such as someone to whom we bear a grudge. In such cases, something is blocking or undercutting the natural "resonance". But as the example makes clear, we enjoy the suffering because we have a negative attitude to the other in the first place—such as dislike, envy, or hatred. In other words, such a thing is possible only because we are already in a state of disquiet.[23] (The jewel, as it were, is clouded by such attitudes.) If that disquiet goes, so will the pleasure in the other's disquiet.

In sum, if all this is right, it follows that the disquiet of others is very much my concern. It may be suggested that it follows only that one should be concerned with the well-being of those with whom one comes into contact: one does not need to have any concern for anyone else. This is short-sighted, however. It may be true that the immediate effects on me are from those with whom I interact personally. But they, in their turn, are affected by others, who are affected by others, and so on. And the chain of encoding is transitive. Disquiet will knock on down the line.

Indeed, many of the effects on a person are ultimately from sources entirely beyond their ken. And one does not have to have a profound understanding of the world to see that *duḥkha*—in the form of poverty, oppression, greed, distrust, hate, desire for power—generates much suffering in the world: from simple violence and theft, to war and genocide. Even when such events

[21] Szabo and Hopkins, 2007, pp. 58, 61.

[22] Putnam 2002, p. 310.

[23] And if someone *is* truly indifferent to the disquiet of others, this, itself, is likely a sign of a troubled person; indeed, in extreme cases, it is the sign of some sort of disturbed psychopathology. See, further, Garfield 2011.

are at a distant location in space, their effects ricochet through international relations, concerning the use of the military, international aid, refugees, and so on. These events and their consequences ultimately involve us all. As John Donne put it in his poem *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Severall Steps in my Sickness—Meditation XVII.* of 1624:

> No man is an iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.

And if it be suggested (unrealistically) that you should just, then, take yourself off to a desert island so that you do not have to interact with others, one should remember that putting people in solitary confinement is a form of punishment. The inability to interact with others is wont to generate profound disquiet of its own.

6 The import of metaphysics

Let us be clear about the nature of the project engaged in here. This is to read off facts about moral psychology from a metaphysical picture of the world. It might be thought that there is something fundamentally misguided about such a project: inferring facts of cognitive psychology, such as disquiet, from facts about the metaphysical nature of people. I think not. Facts concerning the physical nature of people can obviously have consequences in cognitive psychology; and facts of metaphysical nature are even more fundamental. Recall, also, that some of the relations of dependence that generate the encodings in the Net of Indra are causal relations.

Nor am I the first person to engage in this kind of project. A moment ago bad faith was mentioned—the pushing to the back of the mind unpalatable thoughts. As hardly needs to be said, the notion is Sartre's. And Sartre is a master of trying to read off facts of human cognitive psychology from the metaphysical nature of people (*être pour soi*)—both in his philosophical writings, such as *L'Etre et le Néant*, and in his novels, such as *La Nausée*.

Sartre's metaphysics of essencelessness, and its consequence of radical freedom, are not, of course, the metaphysics of emptiness.[24] But the move from metaphysics to psychology which Sartre makes is of the same kind.

So once more back to the Net of Indra. Change the metaphor slightly. Let us suppose that the interaction between the jewels is not one of reflection; suppose instead that the interaction is one of resonance—in the way that vibrations of an object can cause similar vibrations in closely located free-standing objects. Interpret the vibrations as the "vibes" of a tranquil mind or of a disquieted mind which we all show to others. When we are surrounded by people who are agitated, angry, aggressive, it is much harder to be peaceful; and conversely, disquiet will normally be mitigated if we are surrounded by compassionate, peaceful, people—and so on, transitively. The effect, of course, is reciprocal. There can, then, be no radical disjuncture of being between myself and others.[25]

7 Making others suffer

What has been argued is that the inter-being of people does indeed ground an important solidarity. In the end, my peace of mind cannot be divorced from that of those with whom I interact. Compassion is, indeed, the consequence of inter-being.

[24]Though there certainly are similarities which it would be worth exploring. For example, Sartre's slogan that *hell* (*suffering*) *is other people* (from the play *Huis Clos*) could be thought of as simply the downside of the slogan that heaven (peace of mind) can be other people. As the Zen story goes: 'A Soldier named Nobushige came to Hakuin, and asked: "Is there a paradise and a hell?" "Who are you?" inquired Hakuin. "I am a samurai," the warrior replied. "You are a soldier!" exclaimed Hakuin. "What kind of ruler would have you as a guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar." Nobushige became so angry that he began to draw his sword, but Hakuin continued: "So you have a sword! Your weapon is probably much too dull to cut off my head." As Nobushige drew his sword Hakuin remarked: "Here are the gates of hell!" At these words the samurai, perceiving the master's discipline, sheathed his sword and bowed. "Here open the gates of paradise," said Hakuin.' (Reps and Senzaki 1971, p. 80.) For more on the connection between Buddhism and Existentialism, see Batchelor 1983.

[25]To change the metaphor yet again: Jay Garfield once commented to me that Buddhist ethics is like plumbing. You have a problem with your draining and sewage system? Okay, let me show you how to fix it. I would add: and if the people in the next apartment have a problem with their drainage and sewage system, it quickly becomes yours. You should help them fix it too.

Of course, one may object. In this section, let us consider one well-known objection. Nietzsche is well aware that my well-being depends on others. He holds, none the less, that suffering may be a good. As he said, notoriously: anything that does not kill me makes me stronger.[26] Moreover, he holds that making others suffer may be good—and compassion a corresponding weakness. Thus we have, for example:

> Let us be clear as to the logic of this form of compensation: it is strange enough. An equivalence is provided by the creditor receiving, in place of literal compensation for an injury (thus in the place of money, land, possessions of any kind), a recompense in the form of a kind of pleasure—the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely upon one who is powerless, the voluptuous pleasure "*de faire le mal pour le plaisir de la faire*," the enjoyment of violation. This enjoyment will be greater the lower the creditor stands in the social order, and can easily appear to him as a most delicious morsel, indeed as a foretaste of higher rank. In "punishing" the debtor, the creditor participates in the *right of the masters*: at last, he, too, may experience for once the exalted sensation of being allowed to despise and mistreat someone as "beneath him"...[27]

and:

> [T]he essential feature of a good, healthy aristocracy is that it does *not* feel that it is a function (whether of the kingdom or of the community) but instead feels itself to be the *meaning* of highest justification (of the kingdom or the community), — and, consequently, that it accepts in good conscience the sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools, all *for the sake of the aristocracy.*[28]

Why does Nietzsche make these somewhat extraordinary claims? As best I can understand it, it is because the surviving of suffering, and its

[26] *Twilight of the Idols* 1, Maxim 8.

[27] *On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, sec. 5. Translation from Nietzsche 1969, pp. 64-5.

[28] *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 258. Translation from Nietzsche 2002, p. 152.

infliction on others, is an exercise of the "will to power", which characterises the "superior person" (*übermensch*).

Now, it is true that one who survives a tragic experience, such as incarceration in a Nazi concentration camp, may well have had to develop an admirable strength of character; but it would have been better had it not had to be done in this tragic way. The self-discipline required to develop a robust peace of mind is much to be preferred. And, it must be said: for all that some people develop the strength to survive a tragic experience, such circumstances will just as often, if not more often, damage and crush people in the process—as the example of the Nazi concentration camps reminds us too clearly.

As for the need to valorise oneself by making others suffer, I can only regard this as a sign of a deeply troubled person. (Nietzsche, indeed, is not known for his untroubled psyche.) Why would one feel any need to do this unless one felt some deep sense of inadequacy, and the *duḥkha* that goes along with it? Indeed, such a need is a prime example of *tṛṣṇā* and its doings. There are better ways of dealing with it than by feeding it.

Neitzsche was contemptuous for those who had the mentality of sheep, who followed the herd, and submitted passively. Whether or not he was right in this matter (he wasn't), peace of mind does not entail such passivity. Compassionate action is often not easy—it often means *not* going along with the herd—and neither is non-violent resistance of the kind sometimes undertaken by Buddhists. (See, e.g., Keown (2005), ch. 7.) Indeed, compassion often requires as much strength of character as surviving suffering; and others do not come off worse as a result of it.

8 Implications of the Net

The preceding sections have argued for an account of compassion based on the Net of Indra. In what follows, let us look at a few of the consequences (and non-consequences) of such an account.

Buddhism is often taken to be sympathetic to environmental ethics, concerned with the flourishing of all environments/species.[29] One might well try to read this off of a metaphysics of interbeing. Here is King again:

[29]See, e.g., Keown 2005, ch. 3. For further references, and a critique of ways in which this is often done, see Ives 2009.

> The Dalai Lama is also an ardent environmentalist who does not see the welfare of human and non-human life as separate categories. 'If an individual has a sense of responsibility for humanity, he or she will naturally take care of the environment.' His Holiness promotes respect for the environment and non-human species from two perspectives. The first is pragmatic. In light of our dependence on the web of interdependent life, he writes, 'the threat of nuclear weapons and the ability to damage our environment through, for example, deforestation, pollution, and ozone layer depletion, are quite alarming'. His second approach is to observe that caring for other species and the environment is a natural expression of benevolence. 'Compassion and altruism require not only that we respect human beings, but that we also respect, take care of, and refrain from interfering with other species and the environment'.[30]

Clearly, there is much sense in this; but one should not get too carried away.

Compassion concerns suffering, and suffering involves sentience. Our mental states, it is true, are very dependent on our interactions with others and our environment. But it does not follow that we should respect the well-being of all species and all environments.[31] How far down the evolutionary scale sentience goes is debatable; but mosquitos are too far down. Of course one should eradicate the mosquitos in Africa that cause much human suffering, and if that means draining the swampy environments in which they flourish, so be it.[32] The improvement in human living conditions, health, and well-being in history owes much to our ability to manipulate inhospitable environments and hostile species (such as those of certain bacteria and parasites), with engineering, drugs, and other bits of technology.

Of course, this is not to say that we should treat the environment and other species in a cavalier fashion. Many species other than humans are sentient. Compassion requires a regard for their well being. And many of

[30]King 2005, p. 131. The quotations come from Gyatso 1992, pp. 3-10.

[31]Nor is it to say that all sentient creatures are *equally* important. If there is a hard choice between the suffering of a person and the suffering of a cat then, *ceteris paribus*, phronesis would dictate attending to the well-being of the person.

[32]If people can be reborn as mosquitos, this may complicate the discussion, though not, in the end, I think, alter the conclusion. In any case, I do not accept the doctrine of rebirth. Neither, I think, does Buddhism need it. See Priest 201++.

the things we are now doing to the environment are likely to cause significant suffering to future generations. Compassion requires us to stop these, and find better ways to bring about any beneficial ends these activities are supposed to deliver.

9 *Phronesis* and compassion

Of course, how to determine what is the best (most compassionate) action in these and similar cases may well not be obvious. If one is a doctor, should one respect the wish of a parent for their child not to be given a blood transfusion, even though one knows that without it the child is very likely to die? To take a more extreme example: Violence always causes suffering and should be avoided if possible. True; but sometimes it may be necessary to avoid greater suffering. One might argue that if it had been possible to kill Hitler in 1933, this would have been the best thing to do. What should one do in such cases? What one should do is determined by compassion: certainly compassion to those who are suffering; but also to those whose actions bring about the suffering.[33] But what is that?

In any situation, what to do will depend on both the concrete details of the context in which we find ourselves, and the exact consequences of our actions. These, in turn, will depend on laws of nature, such as those concerning the environment, and laws of human (or better, sentient) psychology. Indeed, just because of the Net of Indra, situations are always complex. Any action is likely to have both good consequences and bad consequences. The determination of the best course of action will therefore require an act of judgment, or *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as Aristotle put it. (*Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 6, Chs. 5, 7.) This does not, of course, mean that all situations are unclear. In many situations the most important effects of a possible action will obviously be on a certain individual and those close to them. We should act in such a way as to promote their well-being. Thus, it is quite clear that if, next time I am in pub, I pull out a gun, and shoot one of those enjoying a quiet drink, this is not going to do this. But in general, the ethics of compassion provides no simple-minded answer to hard moral questions.

[33]It should be remembered that those who deliberately make others suffer are almost certainly suffering themselves. Plausibly, this is the source of their desire to hurt others. At the very least, it is very very hard to see how someone at peace with themself could want to perpetrate suffering on others.

What, then, of the Precepts? Buddhism has a standard set of moral guidelines: don't kill, don't lie, and so on.[34] These look like pretty universal edicts. Violating them can certainly get one kicked out of the *Saṅgha*. In the Māhāyana traditions, it is recognised that it might be right to violate the Precepts sometimes. There are stories, for example, of the Buddha in an earlier rebirth killing someone because it was the best thing to do in the context. But none the less, the edicts are enforced pretty rigidly. Don't expect to get away with breaking one if you are a much lesser mortal!

As is clear from what has been said, however, rules of any kind can be at best rules of thumb, and they should never be promoted to thoughtless demands. This does not mean that the Precepts are not generally good guidelines. Most of them probably are. But the effects of an action will always be context-dependent, and this must be taken into account. In particular, it must be remembered that the Precepts were formulated at particular times and places, and might well be heavily dependent on the socio-historical contexts in question. And rules of thumb that were pretty good at one time, may not work at another. This should be borne in mind when thinking what is of value in historical formulations of Buddhist ethical codes. For example, much traditional Buddhism has been down on gays and lesbians (and being patriarchal, particularly down on male homosexuality).[35] Now it may well have been the case that being gay at various times in Indian and Chinese history was not a great strategy for leading a happy life. But in enlightened contemporary societies—or at least those parts of them that are enlightened—where sexual preference is not an issue, gay sexuality is no more (or less) problematic than straight sexuality.

10 Conclusion: why be moral?

Let me conclude the essay with one final observation. There is a standard conundrum about morality: why should one be moral? If, for example, one were given the Ring of Gyges, which makes its wearer invisible, why should one not behave entirely out of self-interest? There are various standard answers to the question. It suffices to point out here that the above account of ethics provides a very simple answer to the question.

[34]See Harvey 2000, ch. 2, and Keown 2005, ch. 1.

[35]See Harvey 2000, ch. 10, and Keown 2005, ch. 4.

For a start, why should a person behave in such a way as to develop their own inner peace? This hardly needs an answer. A troubled state of mind is not a state we feel happy being in. Of course one would like to get rid of it. (You enjoy the headache? — Okay don't take the aspirin!) But what of others? Nagel puts the point in the following way:

> Do pleasure and pain have merely agent-relative value or do they provide neutral reasons as well? If avoidance of pain has only relative value [sc. to the agent], then people have reason to avoid their own pain, but not relieve the pain of others (unless other kinds of reasons come into play). If the relief of pain has neutral value as well, then anyone has reason to want any pain to stop, whether or not it is his. From an objective standpoint, which of these hypotheses is more plausible? Is the value of sensory pleasure and pain relative or neutral...?[36]

The objective standpoint is provided by the Net of Indra. From this perspective, there is no absolute duality between myself and someone else. My being encodes theirs, and theirs mine. The value, then, is not relative to an individual agent. As far as peace of mind goes, my relation to your interests is the same as my relation to my own—or better: we both have an interest in our common interest. This is not, note, to say that one should be compassionate simply as a matter of self-interest (as, maybe, for Hobbes).[37] The Net of Indra undercuts the very nature of the distinction between self-interest and other-interest.

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[36] Nagel 1989, p. 158f.

[37] Another answer to our question that is sometimes given by Buddhists is that you should act well because otherwise unfortunate consequences will boomerang back on you because of the laws of karma. This really does reduce moral action to self-interest.

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