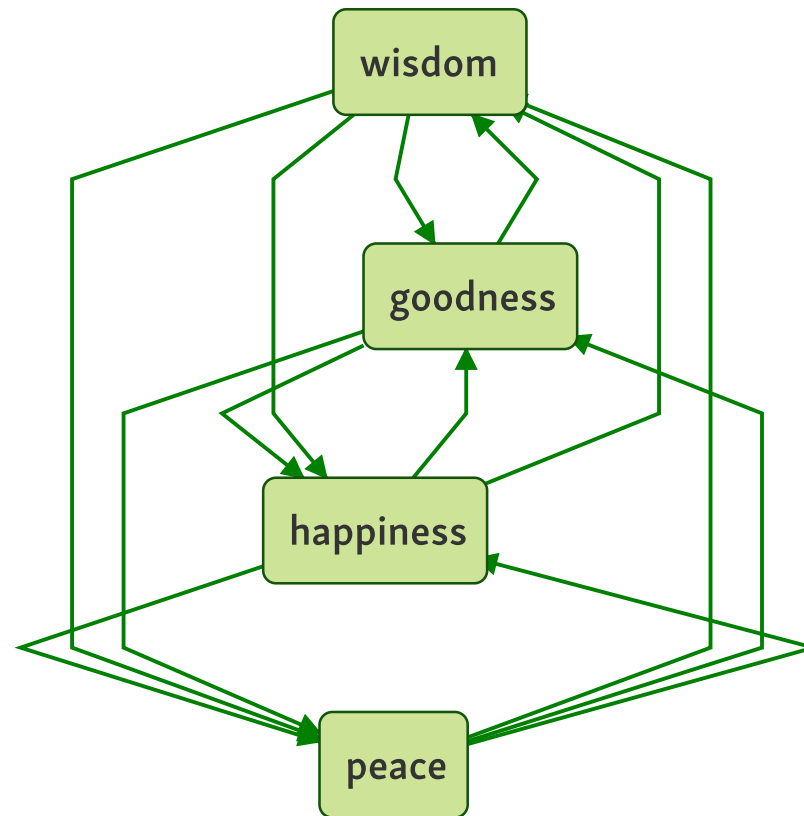


Ethics in Early Buddhism

When an astute person is resting on a chair or a bed or on the ground, their past good deeds—good conduct of body, speech, and mind—settle down upon them, rest down upon them, and lay down upon them. It is like the shadow of a great mountain peak in the evening as it settles down, rests down, and lays down upon the earth.

MN 129, The Fool & the Wise, *Bālappaṇḍita Sutta*

Causality



*The mind is the forerunner of all things,
mind is their chief, they are made by mind.
If you speak or act with a mind that's pure,
happiness follows you
like a shadow that never leaves.*

Dhammapada verse 2

Conduct, morality, ethics

- ❖ Pali: *sīla*
- ❖ Sanskrit: *śīla*

Traditional etymology relates it to *śila* = “rock” in the sense of a “solid foundation”. It is the basis for all higher spiritual development.

*A wise person grounded in ethics,
developing the mind and wisdom,
a keen and alert mendicant,
can untangle this whole mass of tangles.*

Samyutta Nikāya, SN 1.23

The threefold training

1. Ethics (*sīla*)
2. Meditation (*samādhi* = “immersion”)
3. Wisdom (*paññā*)

A little background in philosophy

meta-ethics & applied ethics

Meta-ethics

- ❖ **Semantics:** what does it *mean* to say something is good?
- ❖ **Ontology:** what kind of thing *is* the good?
- ❖ **Epistemology:** how do we *know* what is right or wrong?

Realist approaches to meta-ethics

- ❖ **Naturalism:** moral facts exist in the world objectively, like atoms or light or potatoes
- ❖ **Divine command:** moral truths are created by the decree of a God

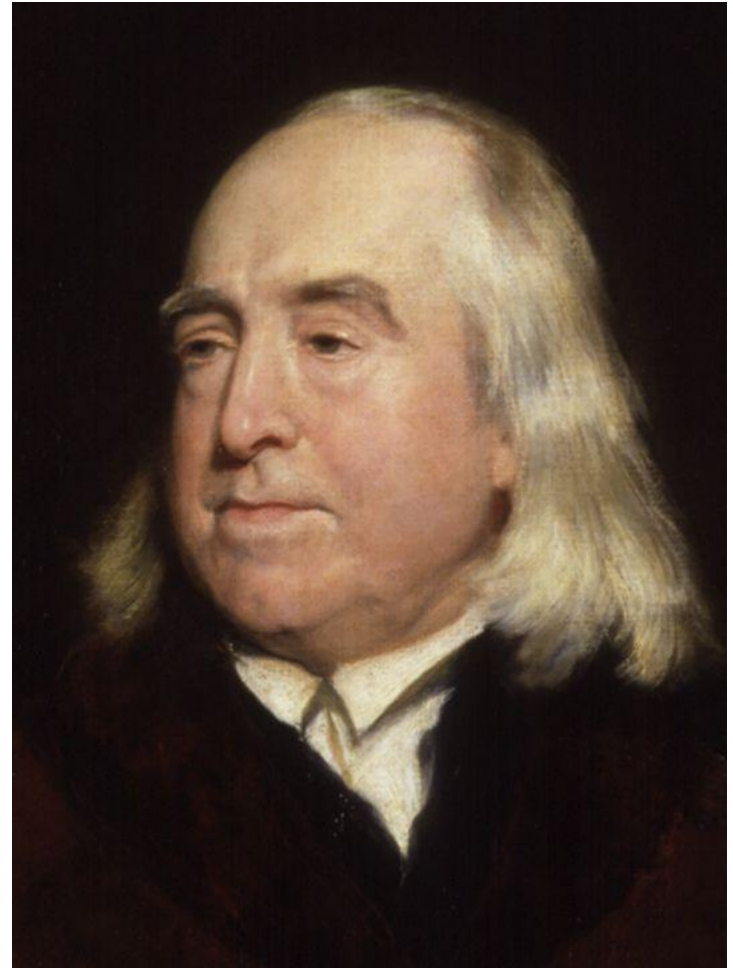
Relativist approaches to meta-ethics

- ❖ **Subjective:** moral statements express a personal approval or a prescription
- ❖ **Intersubjective:** moral “truths” are conventions agreed upon by people in society

Utilitarianism

It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)



Utilitarianism

One-way causality: *if* it leads to happiness, *then* it is good.

=

Advantages of Utilitarianism

- ❖ Based on something *real* and *knowable*, i.e. happiness or suffering
 - ◆ Secular psychology rather than divine decree
- ❖ Useful in many practical ethical questions
- ❖ Shifts focus from narrow personal preferences to big picture

Peter Singer

- ❖ Animal liberation
- ❖ Effective altruism
- ❖ Euthanasia of severely disabled

Was the Buddha a Utilitarian?

Like utilitarians, the Buddha emphasized the close relation between *morality* and *happiness*.

- ❖ Good choices lead to happiness →
- ❖ Bad choices lead to suffering →

Kind of!

Adds emphasis on *choice* or *intention*, motivated by *desire*.

It is “intention” that I call karma.

The Buddha was a *relationalist*

Desire → choices → suffering → desire → choices → suffering → desire → choices ...

- ❖ Complex feedback networks, not one-way causality
- ❖ All these things are knowable
- ❖ All these things are triangulated: we experience them with others

Yes, but

Why are bad people happy and good people sad?

Tim and Debbie-Tax



Transmigration (*saṃsāra*)

The ongoing course of rebirth, analyzed in three phases

- ❖ Motivation (*kilesavaṭṭa*)
- ❖ Action (*kammavaṭṭa*)
- ❖ Result (*vipākavaṭṭa*)

(Don't forget these three things, they are very handy!)

Mendicants, transmigration has no known beginning. No first point is found of sentient beings roaming and transmigrating, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

What do you think? Which is more: the tears you've shed while roaming and transmigrating for such a very long time—being united with the unloved and separated from the loved—or the water in the four oceans?

Samyutta Nikāya, SN 15.3

*Suppose a man was to draw up two or three drops of water from the ocean.
What do you think, mendicants? Which is more: the two or three drops drawn
out or all the water in the ocean? ...*

*In the same way, for someone who has seen the four noble truths, the suffering
that's over and done with is more, what's left is tiny, it's not even a fraction.
That's why you should practice meditation.*

Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 56.49

Ethics depends not on belief but wisdom

A sensible person reflects in this way: ‘If there is another world, when this individual’s body breaks up, after death, they will be reborn in a good place. But let’s assume that those who say that there is no other world are correct. Regardless, that individual is still praised by sensible people in the present life as being a moral individual of right view, who affirms a positive teaching.’

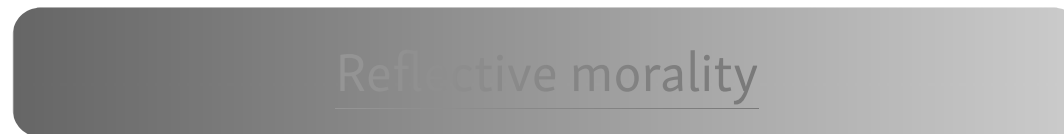
MN 60 *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*, The Guaranteed Teaching

Two levels of ethics

- ❖ Transcendental (*lokuttara*)—leading to Nibbāna
- ❖ Mundane (*lokiya*)—leading to happiness in this life and the next
 - ◆ (Oft-forgot: purely conventional)



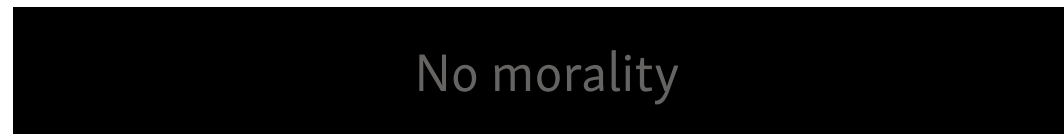
Transcendant morality



Reflective morality



Conventional morality



No morality

An ethical person need not make a wish: ‘May I have no regrets!’ It’s only natural that an ethical person has no regrets. When you have no regrets you need not make a wish: ‘May I feel joy!’ ... ‘May I experience rapture!’ ... ‘May my body become tranquil!’ ... ‘May I feel bliss!’ ... ‘May my mind be immersed in samādhi!’ ... ‘May I truly know and see!’ ... ‘May I become disillusioned and dispassionate!’ ... ‘May I realize the knowledge and vision of freedom!’ It’s only natural ...

And so, mendicants, good qualities flow on and fill up from one to the other, leading from the near to the far shore.

Āṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10.2

How do these levels relate?

- ❖ Transcendental builds on mundane
- ❖ But there is an irreducible tension between the two



Warning!

Beware elevationism AKA spiritual bypassing AKA Dhamma bullshit
(*gomayam*)

“The Buddha taught liberation, not washing up!”

The smell of *gomayam*

- ❖ Grandiose “I” statements, especially about not-self.
- ❖ Speaks with authority beyond experience.
- ❖ Mentions own attainments in FB profile.
- ❖ See “On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit”, Gordon Pennycook et al:

Bullshit, in contrast to mere nonsense, is something that implies but does not contain adequate meaning or truth.

The pre/trans fallacy

- ❖ Someone *beyond rationality* knows how to use rationality but is not trapped by it.
- ❖ Someone *beneath rationality* has never learned how to be rational, so cannot distinguish the profound from the irrational.

So!

*Not to do any evil;
to embrace the good;
to purify one's mind:
this is the teaching of the Buddhas.*

Dīgha Nikāya, DN 14

Applied ethics

Rules vs. principles

- ❖ The Buddha preferred to teach general principles encouraging good conduct
- ❖ But he also saw the value of rules

Five precepts

1. Not to kill any living creature
2. Not to steal
3. Not to lie
4. Not to commit sexual misconduct
5. Not to drink

Ten Ways of Performing Deeds

1. Killing
2. Stealing
3. Sexual misconduct
4. Lying
5. Divisive speech
6. Harsh speech
7. Talking nonsense
8. Covetousness
9. Malice
10. Wrong view

Rather than:

“Thou shalt!”

We say:

“I undertake the training”

sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

1st person singular, present tense, indicative

So we just do whatever we want?



Yep. That's the point.

Buddhist ethics is not about stopping you from doing what you want. It's about getting you to *want better things*.

Remember those three things?

1. If your *motivation* is to be happy
2. You will *choose* to do ethical actions
3. The *result* is happiness

Then you're even more motivated!

All this happens when you use your noggin.

What's good is skilful

The most characteristic Buddhist word for “good” is *kusala*, “skilful”.

Like Socrates, the Buddha trusted even children to understand

*The Buddha saw those young boys catching fish. He went to them and said:
“Are you afraid, boys, of suffering? Is suffering unpleasant to you?”*

“Yes, reverend Sir, we are afraid of suffering, suffering is unpleasant to us.”

Udāna, Ud 5.4

Metaphor & object lessons: to Rāhula

“What do you think, Rāhula? What is the purpose of a mirror?”

“It’s for checking your reflection, sir.”

“In the same way, deeds of body, speech, and mind should be done only after repeated reviewing.”

Advice to Rāhula at Ambalaṭṭhika, Majjhima Nikāya, MN 61

Building character

It's possible that some mendicant might wish: 'I hope that I alone give the verses of gratitude after eating in the refectory, not some other mendicant.'

Unblemished, Majjhima Nikāya, MN 5

Kinds of ethical deed (*kamma/karma*)

Solve ethical ~~dit~~tetralemmas with this handy formula!

- ❖ Dark deeds
- ❖ Bright deeds
- ❖ Deeds that are both dark and bright
- ❖ Deeds that are neither dark nor bright

The two guardians of the world

- ❖ *Hiri* = “conscience”, an inner sense of right and wrong
- ❖ *Otappa* = “prudence”, a concern for consequences

Regret or remorse is healthy, guilt not so much

- ❖ *Kukkucca* = “remorse”, lit. “bad-done-ness”, recognition that one has done something wrong.

The Western idea of “guilt” implies *punishment* by self or others. This conditions the need for someone to suffer for redemption.

Enough for now

