

A Critical Study on the Rational Foundation of Early Buddhist Ethics

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Abstract

Ethics or moral philosophy is a branch of philosophy involves in systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct of a person. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the term 'Ethics' derived from the Greek word 'Ēthikē' which connotes the science or study of human conduct. The main purpose of this ethical philosophy is to provide the criteria or standards to determine the value and disvalue of the human bodily and verbal conducts. For this purpose, different religions and different socio-philosophical thinkers have distinctively presented their opinions to assess the nature and the function of good and bad.

Among those opinions, Buddhist philosophical standpoint on ethical judgement is adequate and satisfactory enough to evaluate the moral questions of human action. In the early canonical scriptures of Buddhism there are some notable references which illustrate the standard moods of Buddhist rational foundation of ethical questions. Most importantly the Kālāmasutta widely exemplifies diverse standards of moral advice which were existed contemporary with the Buddha. In this sutta, while the Buddha is rejecting ten grounds of moral decisions which are considered to be unsatisfactory points in the ethical judgement, signifies the possibility of independent enquiry into moral questions. Another notable explanation on ethical reasoning is found in the Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovādasutta and the Bhāhitikasutta in which rational evaluations for making a contrast between praiseworthy (Anavajja) and blameworthy (Sāvajja) conduct of a person. Prominently, Buddhism not only considers the ethical behaviour of the body and verb of a person, but also the mind of a person can be functioned ethically or unethically. Therefore it is noteworthy to mention that Buddhism gives special attention to the psychological aspect of ethics as well. The Buddha's advice to Ven. Rāhula given in Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovādasutta shows that just as one corrects errors by looking at a mirror, one should perform an action and should make a

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moral choice in the body or verbal after having continuously reflected on it. In addition to that, Buddhist ethical system is much richer as it concerns the inner purification of a person who commits wrong. This is an important place in Buddhist ethical explanation that one should admit his own offence and declare it to a person whom he respects and promise himself not to do it again. It is clearly evident by examining aforementioned accounts that the criteria clarified in Early Buddhist scriptures on ethical conduct and evaluating ethical distinctions are foremost ample and sophisticated.

Introduction

Buddhism does not have direct concern on the ethical theories or systematic set of ideas on moral philosophy. But it consists of sufficient guidance on the actual form of ethical principles and ethical justifications which are rationally based on. Some relevant scriptural sources from the Early Buddhist teachings are prominently investigated in order to understand the rational foundations of Buddhist Ethics. On the other hand, philosophical developments in the history of moral philosophy will also be closely examined paying attention to the major ethical theories that emerged in this ground. In this connection the major ethical theories such as teleological ethical theory, deontological ethical theory and the virtue ethics approach will also be examined for the purposes of recognizing the adequateness of rational foundation of Buddhist ethical system.

Background

Ethics is considered to be a ground on which wellbeing of human relations is preserved. Basically, Ethics deals with human conduct and is concerned with the questions related to what is good and bad, what is right and wrong and what ought to be done and ought not to be done. It is prominently seen in the entire history of humankind that there are different varieties of standards used in order to determine good and bad in different ethical theories and different societies. These ethical theories have emerged on religious and non-religious grounds in different communities of the world. However the cardinal effort of the philosophers of ethics is to examine the rational evaluative methods which can be applied for judging what is ethically good and ethically bad.

When considering Ethics from the philosophical point of view, its primary role is to consider whether there is a well-defined normative standard as the foundation for an ethical system which is universally applicable to all human beings. In fulfilling this philosophical gap, the field of Western moral philosophy has engaged in theoretical stand points which can generally be two main ethical schools called Normative Ethics and Meta Ethics. In the early period, the moral philosophers were concerned mainly with the search for universal standards for ethical judgement. In the more recent development moral philosophy has paid

attention not to the normative issue of laying down universal standards but to questions relating to the logical character of ethical judgment focusing attention mainly on the definition of ethical concepts. The former is considered as normative moral philosophy whereas the latter is considered as Meta ethical philosophy. Normative ethical discussion has produced two main approaches that came to be known as the Teleological approach and the Deontological approach. It also has produced theoretical standpoint known as utilitarianism, hedonism, egoism etc.

Teleological theories focus on the good outcomes of an action or in other words, criterion of an action is determined solely by the amount of good consequences that action produces. Here one question arises regarding what this good consequence is? To answer this question some of teleological thinkers have proposed that good consequences consist of nothing but happiness. The thinkers who affirm that happiness should be the absolute end of an action are identified as hedonists. According to those who considered happiness as the criterion consider the maximization of happiness to be the ultimate end of ethical action, stated that ethics was the act of generation happiness and act of providing a surplus of happiness to the majority of society. But this hedonistic view on ethical actions is not accepted by those who subscribed to Deontological point of view, as a satisfactory basis for moral evaluation for giving no equal and fair consideration of the minority and the happiness of the minority of a society. On the other hand, some contradictory opinions have emerged among the philosophers who held this hedonistic doctrinal stand.

As mentioned above, the sphere of ethics can be considered one of the systems in which different varieties of opinions exist with regard to its foundation and affirmative response to the questions of its ultimate purpose. As an outcome of this obvious diversity, many philosophical reflections developed in the Western and the Eastern philosophical ground as well. Especially some of the Western philosophers who lived in the middle of the previous century maintained that ethical norms have no rational foundation to evaluate the conduct of a person. They also claimed that the ethical norms are purely subjective principles for which there is no firm basis. It is noticeable that there is evident to the effect in the Indian context of the time of the Buddha, there were persons who expressed scepticism based on a materialistic outlook on life and took a completely amoral standpoint on ethics. Some ascetic groups who held materialistic views at the time of the Buddha questioned the utility and adequacy of moral conduct. On the other hand, the Brahmanic tradition also disassociated the discussion of morality by refusing to acknowledge human determination. Instead of human determination, a view of biological determinism was replaced by them. As oppose to these stand points it is seen that Buddhism affirms the need for acquiring knowledge relating to ethical matters and understanding adequate grounds for making the distinction between

good and bad.

In examining the Buddhist ethical system that it is not so much concern with the Meta ethical issues that recent moral philosophers raised although one can derive certain implication from the Buddhist ethical system regarding the meaning of ethical terms and the nature of the logical structure of ethical proposition. But there is no direct involvement with these areas for the main focus is being on the guiding people how to live a moral life. Buddhism is concern with providing action guiding principles which can be rationally dependent. Instead of just laying down rules of conduct, the Buddha points out rationally based rules of conduct based on defensible ground. In that sense, there is scope for engaging in a serious enquiry into the rational ground of Buddhist Ethics. It is not just a system which lays down a code of ethics but also there is a justification for whatever ethical recommendations are made. In this approach the Buddha has taken into account certain forms of pre-Buddhist ethical norms which according to him were not based on a defensible rational ground. Therefore, Buddhist reasoning on ethical judgement can be said to be characteristically universalistic and objective.

Research Findings

The paper is an effort to examine the Early Buddhist doctrines related to the rational foundation of ethical system from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Buddhist teachings do not provide direct enquiry into certain theoretical or Meta ethical concerns, whereas the normative ethical propositions are evidently proposed. The attempt of this study therefore is to analytically and critically examine the rational criteria for making moral judgement explained in the Buddhist ethical system.

In examining the Buddhist stand on ethical evaluation, the Buddhist reasoning on ethical judgement can be said to be characteristically universalistic and objective. Buddhism, which describes everything on a rational and causal philosophical basis, discards the belief in Almighty God as universal. As well as, Buddhism is a doctrine that bestows upon individuals to keep their own free will in order to decide good and bad. The Kālāmasutta is philosophically significant on the above matter. When the Buddha visited the people called Kesaputtiyā Kālāmā, they put a question to the Buddha. Their complaint was that they have been taught manifold moral teachings from various sages who visited them and now they were in a puzzle with those moral advices which were mutually contradictory. The Buddha's answer to their question helped them to determine the ethical distinction between good and bad of an action in accordance with their independent reason, leaving ten kinds of traditional and authoritarian moral judgements aside.

Another point is adduced in both Bhāhitika and Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda suttas as a criterion to evaluate the moral values in terms of consequence

produced by the action. Therefore it is possible to say that Buddhism advocates a consequentialist approach to moral reasoning as well. In this regard, the concept of kamma is prominently presented in Early Buddhist teachings.

In order to understand the rational foundations of Buddhist Ethics, the philosophical developments in the history of moral philosophy will be closely examined paying attention to the major ethical theories that emerged in this process. In this connection the major ethical theories such as teleological ethical theory, deontological ethical theory and the virtue ethics approach will also be examined for the purposes of recognizing the adequateness of rational foundation of Buddhist ethical system.

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted is almost entirely a qualitative research method which exercised to nourish the research. In the research a critical and analytical approach based on relevant scriptural sources are taken into consideration. As the primary resources, the most relevant scriptural sources from the Buddhist and pre-Buddhist scriptures, are investigated. I rely on the PTS Tipiṭaka edition, Buddha Jayanti Tipiṭaka (Sinhala Version), From the Western side, critical and analytical conceptual clarities are taken into examination.

Secondary resources cover various investigated writings of past and the modern scholars in the form of research documents, translations of books, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, books, articles in journals and magazines, EBooks and internet sources are taken into consideration.

Keywords: Ethics, Early Buddhism, Moral Philosophy, Rational Foundation

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