

Christopher W. Gowans. *Buddhist Moral Philosophy: An Introduction*. Routledge 2014. 334 pp. \$140.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780415890663); \$49.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780415890670).

Tying Buddhist moral thinking into Western moral philosophy is a project that could distort both of them. It is not just a matter of philosophy but of widely different cultural assumptions. This project is what I thought might be the goal when I started Christopher Gowans' book on Buddhist moral philosophy. Fortunately, that is not what Gowans tries to do. In fact, he is very aware of the difficulties involved in the juxtaposition of the two approaches to ethics. What he does, and does well, is to compare the two ethical approaches without somehow trying to fit the two together. The result is an excellent introduction both to Buddhist moral thinking and to a useful contrast with Western approaches to moral theory.

The book is in three parts. The first part is an overview of Buddhist ethical thought with chapters on the teachings of the Buddha, the historical development of Buddhism, an analysis of what exactly Buddhist moral philosophy is, and a very good overview of the skeptical concerns about the metaphysical underpinnings of Buddhist morality. The latter include karma, nirvana, rebirth and other topics. I have taught Asian philosophy for over thirty years and Part One of this book is one of the best synopses of Buddhist thought I have read. Gowans' explanations of the development of Buddhism are clear and readable to those unfamiliar with the religion. His critical comments based on Western thinking are well-organized. He presents the Buddhist view, then lays out potential criticisms, and then gives possible Buddhist responses, including responses of contemporary Buddhists. For example, in discussing karma and rebirth Gowans spells out the 'consistency objection' (e.g., how the no-self concept can be reconciled with karma across lives), the 'naturalism objection' (how Buddhist concepts differ from modern science), and the 'morality objection' (e.g., the moral problem with a theory that explains a child being born with a terrible disease that is justified through karma and actions in previous lives). Following these in each section are Buddhist responses. One of the results of this technique, as shown in Gowans' discussion of karma, is to clarify what exactly 'karma' means, its role in Buddhism, and its power in Buddhist moral thinking. A good point in the karma discussion concerns an issue that many Westerners misunderstand. Karma is not concerned with retributive justice and has nothing at all to do with divinity. It is, pure and simple, a law of the universe for the Buddhists, not dissimilar to other universal laws. If a young child falls off a cliff while exploring, we do not say that gravity produces injustice and tragedy; it just is the way it is. Likewise, if the Buddhist understanding of karma over multiple lives often seems grossly unjust to Westerners, it is a misreading of karma. Karma has nothing to do with a just God or what 'should be' in a fair world. It is the way the universe functions. A reader may not agree with some of the Buddhist views presented in this book, but the important point about Gowans' work is that he or she will know far better what they are talking about.

The same clarity holds in the chapter in Part One on the history of Buddhism. Gowans does a very good job distinguishing the moral ideals of Abhidharma Buddhism (generally associated with southern Buddhism and usually viewed by scholars as close to or identical with original Buddhism) with its model human being embodied by the 'Arahant' compared to Mahayana Buddhism (generally northern Buddhism) with its model human embodied by the 'Bodhisattva'. The names may mean little to Westerners but Gowans spells out how they relate to individual moral responsibility toward others and how meditation and/or enlightenment in each form of Buddhism relates to the world we live in. It is an interesting and useful comparison between two major branches of Buddhism.

The second part of the book is on theoretical topics in Buddhist moral thinking. Here Gowans compares Buddhist thought with classic Western moral theories—deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. A couple of the subdivisions in this section might be difficult for students in a beginning course on Asian philosophy. But the obstacles are nothing that good background material presented by the instructor could not overcome. Some of the chapters are excellent. The chapters on ‘Well-Being’, ‘Moral Psychology’, and ‘Freedom, Responsibility and Determinism’ are especially well done. Gowans implies that, even though Buddhism’s number one practical goal is relief of suffering—a goal that has obvious consequentialist implications—Buddhism is in many ways much closer to virtue ethics. Along with other ancient ethical theories, Buddhism’s emphasis is on the kind of person you are. Your intentions are critical for the Buddhist and virtues are central for how you will act. Gowans discusses the fundamental virtues for the Buddhists, what are called the ‘Four Divine Abodes’. They are loving-kindness (an active concern for the welfare of others), compassion (an awareness and concern for the many types of suffering on this planet), appreciative joy (being able to share joy and happiness with others) and equanimity (consistent calmness and inner peace in the face of whatever the world throws at one). These have many issues and objections associated with them. Among these are the possible inconsistency between the fourth one and the first three, how far compassion and loving kindness should extend beyond immediate family and friends, how the Buddhist concept of no self relates to these virtues, and many others. (Gowans points out some similarities to Stoicism that I found particularly interesting.) Gowans covers all these in a clear and readable way. So, while some of the sections in part two may seem abstract to someone unfamiliar with either Buddhism or the Western analytical tradition, overall, it is an excellent comparison of the two approaches to ethics.

Part three of the book is about practical issues in Buddhist moral philosophy. Here Gowans discusses ‘socially engaged Buddhism’, an approach that is becoming more and more important in modern Buddhism. After an initial chapter on what socially engaged Buddhism means and its sources in the texts, Gowans has chapters on ‘Human Rights’, ‘Violence, War and Peace’, and ‘Environmental Ethics’. He deals with issues such as whether the Western concept of ‘rights’ can make sense in Buddhist thinking and whether the modern concern with the environment has comparable roots in Buddhism. Again, one of the things I like about this book is that the answers are not as clear cut as one might expect and it often depends on the particular school of Buddhism being discussed. I found the most interesting chapter to be the one on violence and war. How do we fit the self-immolation of Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War into the nonviolence doctrine of Buddhism? Much more problematic is the actual involvement of Buddhist monks in the civil war in Sri Lanka from 1983-2009. How does Buddhism handle direct violence against others that they can do something about? Gowans does not give extended analyses of such situations but he raises the issues with great clarity. Students will find much to reflect on here about issues that they themselves may have thought about and how these issues relate to Buddhist thought.

This book is definitely an ‘Introduction’. While the second part dealing with theoretical comparisons is a bit more detailed in sections, the first and third parts of the book are clearly overviews. But there is nothing quite like this book on the market. Nowhere is there a book that gives both an overview of Buddhist ethical thought and an overview of Western ethical thought, compares them, and does it well for students. I would recommend this book whole-heartedly for upper division courses in comparative religions or any course contrasting Eastern and Western thought. I would be somewhat more reserved recommending it for basic first level Asian philosophy courses simply because, even though the book is an introduction, it would help enormously to have at least some

background in either Western ethical theory or Buddhism or both. However, as I noted earlier, if the instructor can fill in the required background material and especially help new students work through part two, I would highly recommend it here also. This is a fine book and one much needed in philosophy. Even instructors who are familiar with either or both of these traditions would find it interesting and in places highly insightful.

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