

IDEALS AND ETHICAL FORMATION:  
CONFESSIONS OF A BUDDHIST-PLATONIST

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I confess: *I am a Buddhist-Platonist.*

There is, I think, an important and meaningful affinity between Buddhist and Platonic ethics – one that would enrich and enlarge our understanding of possible spaces within the moral terrain, and enable us in particular to appreciate a fuller range of manifestations of Buddhist ethical thought. I will call this area of salient overlap in moral outlook ‘impersonal idealism’.

It is not, of course, a view that any Buddhist thinker will have set out in theoretical terms, and even regarding Plato one must analyse together a whole set of diverse claims across several texts in order for the structure I wish to articulate to come into view. In this sense, then, one might consider this project to be an exercise in rational reconstruction, in the spirit of Mark Siderits. I will, however, take it that it is an advantage of this particular reconstruction that it leads with the priorities and questions that we find in the ancient thinkers themselves.

Buddhist-Platonism may sound absurd on the surface of it – and perhaps not only on the surface.<sup>1</sup> For ethics is closely bound up with metaphysics, for both Platonist and Buddhist;<sup>2</sup> yet their respective metaphysical views could hardly be more opposed. Plato thought there were unchanging realities, intelligible, well-ordered and good, and responsible for the good, intelligible order of the sensible cosmos. Buddhists reject all that, from the unchangingness, to the intelligibility and good order. If there is anything

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\* We all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Mark Siderits for his career of trail-blazing work bringing Buddhist philosophy into the field of critical Anglophone philosophical inquiry. I remember in particular a lively exchange with Mark in Oxford, when I was only at the very beginning of my own work in this area, about whether Buddhist ethics is consequentialist. This paper is a continuation of that provocative conversation, offered with heartfelt appreciation for the lively philosophical friendship Mark showed in his critical engagement then, and always. This piece also owes a great deal to audiences at Melbourne and Oxford, whose engagement with earlier drafts substantially contributed to the improvement of this final version. And it has its proximate roots in work with the Moral Beacon Project (Templeton Religious Trust), which supported my first inquiries into Buddhist-Platonism.

<sup>1</sup> I am, however, gratified to be in the company of Iris Murdoch (especially, but not only, Murdoch 1956 and 1970), who picks up on the same aspects of Plato’s moral thinking that I will bring out here, as well as their affinity with Buddhism (especially prominent in her novels, including for instance *The Sea, The Sea, The Nice and the Good, The Green Man*) – in particular, the dedicated attention to an impersonal reality, and the moral effect of drawing us out of ourselves and transforming what she calls ‘vision’, which is prior to all action and choice, and indeed conditions what options reality appears to give us.

<sup>2</sup> As I argue in Carpenter 2014, 4 and *passim*.

on which the classical Indian Buddhists may be taken to speak with one voice it is on impermanence, no-self and suffering as the marks of mutually dependently arising existence. In spite of this, I argue, the impersonal nature of reality for both parties, as well as the centrality assigned to knowing this impersonal reality, constitute a significant and distinctive approach to ethics.<sup>3</sup>

This might be spelled out in terms of a phenomenon and an ethical structure. The phenomenon is the formation and re-formation of character by the ethical ideals one holds, by the depictions of these ideals, and by the practices around these; Buddhist and Platonic moral thinking are similar, I suggest, in foregrounding the formation and re-formation of character around *ambitious* ideals. The Buddhist aims to become an Arhat or a Bodhisattva; the Platonist aims to become a Philosopher or ‘properly dialectical’, as that is described in the *Republic*, for instance, or the *Philebus*. This ideal structures accounts of moral development, its mechanisms and its character, and subordinates rules of action and moments of choice as intelligible and relevant only with reference to these. Beyond this basic idealist-phenomenological structure, the structuring ideals in Buddhist and Platonic ethics share key features: Both put an overriding priority on knowing an impersonal reality, as *the* central and indispensable ideal which will transform one’s character in the necessary way.<sup>4</sup> Both recommend as an ideal state a perspective which appreciates the fundamentally impersonal character of reality as a whole, and a consequent divestment of personal categories. And for both, this freedom from personality and from person-oriented concerns grounds, in different ways, an ability, moment-to-moment, to recognise responsively each particular situation in all of its complexity and singularity.

I will approach the discussion by way of an examination of virtue ethics. This is not because I hold out great hopes for a finally illuminating classification of that mongrel non-entity ‘Buddhist ethics’ into some one or another of the pre-given options of Anglophone analytic moral philosophy of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In fact, I argue that *Plato* is ill-served by pressing him into the virtue ethics mould;<sup>5</sup> and that classical Indian Buddhist ethical thought is likewise ill-served *for the same reason*.<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout, ethics must be construed broadly, as part of what is under discussion is precisely how this terrain should be demarcated; a feature that Buddhist and Platonic thought in this area share is that the defining concerns are not always, and never entirely, those of modern Euro-Anglophone moral philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Carpenter 2018 argues for this reading Buddhaghosa’s ‘Samādhi’ chapter of the *Visuddhimagga*.

<sup>5</sup> Notice how three concepts central to the virtue ethics tradition (*arete*, *eudaimonia*, *phronesis*) are decidedly off-centre in Plato, who for instance converts all talk of virtue into talk of knowledge. Carpenter 2017c argues the case using the debate with Polus in the *Gorgias* to focus the discussion. See also White 2015 for debate over whether Plato should be read as a virtue ethicist.

<sup>6</sup> So although I agree with Harvey 2000 that, taken extensively, “the rich field of Buddhist ethics would be narrowed by wholly collapsing it into any single one of Kantian, Aristotelian, or

should identify a convergence in the two views that goes to the heart of how we conceive of our moral lives and our ethical project. But this convergence gets obscured when we, on the Buddhist side, dismiss out of hand a range of texts and practices as irrelevant to philosophy and moral theory; and when we, on the Platonist side, assimilate all the ancient Greeks and Romans to the Aristotelian virtue ethics mould.

On the Buddhist side, short narratives abound in the tradition; they travel widely throughout the Buddhist world, and persist over time. But by and large Anglophone philosophers, at least, have been strangely incurious about this phenomenon – setting them aside as morality tales central to Buddhist *culture*, perhaps, but not to moral *theory*.<sup>7</sup> This has largely persisted in spite of Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen’s excellent ‘Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life’ (1996), which calls on scholars and philosophers to do otherwise.<sup>8</sup> To understand Buddhist ethics properly, we must take on board the fact that the distinctively Buddhist ethical outlook is formed through the telling and retelling of Buddhist tales.<sup>9</sup> Consider for comparison how ethically vital Plato took myth or story-telling to be: those interested in his thought know that understanding *that* he thought it so, and why, and what sort of tales he thought ought to be told, is essential to understanding his ethical view.<sup>10</sup> What is obvious in the case of Plato should be no less obvious in the case of Buddhist moral thought.<sup>11</sup> What sort of ethos is it that is necessarily – not just accidentally – formed and reformed through stories? What is morally salient and essential when it matters which stories are told? And what does it mean that it is just *these* narratives, tales of this very sort – in the Buddhist case, the *jātakas*, the *avadānas*, the stories collected in the *Dhammapada Commentary* and in the *vinaya*?

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Utilitarian models” (50), I do hope to bring out something salient that runs through much of Indian Buddhist moral thinking which each of those categories would obscure.

<sup>7</sup> Siderits 2015, 121, for instance, distinguishes moral *theory* from moral life in a way that would exclude significant philosophical consideration of narrative tales as relevant to moral theory.

<sup>8</sup> Adam 2018 is a move towards correcting this; and Heim 2014, Ch. 4, is excellent on this. Appleton 2016 and Ohnuma 2017 engage seriously with the story literature of Buddhism; and Stepien, ed. 2020 tackles various aspects of Buddhist literature and philosophy. Obeyesekere and Obeyesekere 1990 offers early and rich comment on the ethos shaped by Buddhist tales, ‘The Demoness Kali’ story in particular.

<sup>9</sup> “Looking back at my childhood,” Ranjani Obeyesekere writes (Obeyesekere 1991, x), “I realize we were never given religious instruction as such... We participated in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies...and listened to many, many Buddhist stories. That is how we learned to be Buddhists.”

<sup>10</sup> For instance Gill 1985, Smith 1991, Janaway 1995, Scott 1999, Jenkins 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Buddhist *jātaka* tales and *avadānas* are as restrictive in their content and in their style *in practice* as Plato recommends for ideal ethical formation in *Republic* II-III (though not perhaps as restrictive as the recommendations in *Republic* X). I discuss details of this in Carpenter 2020.

On the Greek virtue ethics side, the long shadow of Aristotle occludes our ability to appreciate Plato's distinctive ethical approach and outlook. The Anglophone Aristotelian Revival partially constitutes and thoroughly influences what is today called 'virtue ethics' – a moral theory or a way of doing ethics that positions itself in distinction to (on the one hand) Kantian theories that ground moral goodness in the rational will and (on the other) to consequentialist theories that vest all goodness in results. While Kant taught us to lump all 'the Ancients' together as eudaimonists<sup>12</sup> – theorists of happiness and not of morality – it is to Aristotle in particular that Anscombe (1958), Foot (1958, 1958-59, 1969) and later McDowell (1979)<sup>13</sup>, MacIntyre (1981), and Hursthouse (1999) looked in their efforts to recover a different way of approaching moral philosophy.<sup>14</sup> And so Aristotle has set the template for what we understand today as virtue ethics – set the questions, topics and categories constitutive of virtue ethics – so that it becomes nearly synonymous with neo-Aristotelian naturalism, even when it departs widely from the particular virtues Aristotle himself recognised – as it does, for instance, in discourse about 'Confucian virtue ethics'.<sup>15</sup>

The resurgence of interest in Aristotelian-style ethics has enriched Anglophone moral philosophy, broadening the range of questions to be asked, and reasserting the philosophical value of a realistic moral psychology. As 'neo-Aristotelianism',<sup>16</sup> it is a rich field for philosophical inquiry. Under the name of 'virtue ethics', however, and its relative 'eudaimonism', all ancient Greek ethical thought is swept into the same category,<sup>17</sup> and what is distinctive, insightful and even challenging in Plato's ethics, at least, vanishes from sight. What vanishes, astonishingly enough, is the Form of the

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<sup>12</sup> KpV 64; 'One must regret that the acuteness of these men...was applied infelicitously in excogitating identity between extremely heterogeneous concepts' (viz., happiness and virtue, KpV 111 in Pluhar, tr. 2002). This lesson, that the gulf between the ancients and the moderns lies in whether they rejected or accepting the dualism of practical reasoning, was taken up by Sidgwick, who calls it 'the most fundamental difference', and is discussed by Frankena 1992.

<sup>13</sup> published the year after Foot's essays collected in *Virtues and Vices*.

<sup>14</sup> See also Sherman 1991, Lovibond 2002, Kraut 2007, Thompson 2008. The dissident revivalist is Iris Murdoch, who was much more interested in recuperating Plato in her moral philosophy (witness the title of her lectures, *Sovereignty of Good*) – and also, not accidentally, a Buddhist outlook in her novels; also Simone Weil by whom Murdoch was influenced. This dissident strain in the Anglophone tradition is picked up by Holland 1980, Gaita 1991 (second edition 2004), Blum 1994, and more recently Chappell 2014, and to some extent by Brewer 2009 and Vogt 2017; and, with a Christian twist Adams, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> An indicative collection of the extensive work in this area is Angle and Slote 2013. Of course one need not go so far afield as China: MacIntyre 1981 advocates the recovery of a different set of virtues from those Aristotle identified, drawing on Jane Austen's understanding of human flourishing and good, and the Christian tradition in which it is embedded.

<sup>16</sup> or even neo-Aristotelian naturalism, for not all interpreters of Aristotle agree with the neo-Aristotelians cited above that Aristotle himself seeks to ground ethics in human nature (see, for instance, Berryman 2019).

Good – its role in Plato’s moral thought, and its implications for the rest of life and thought.

### ***Buddhist Ethics as Virtue Ethics?***

It is a commonplace that classical Indian philosophy has no moral theory.<sup>18</sup> This verdict, of course, rests rather heavily on what one counts as moral theory, which texts one allows might be doing such a thing, and how one reads them.<sup>19</sup> But as Siderits observes (2015, 121-24), the fact that classical Indian thinkers neither go in for debate over the real sources of normativity, nor battle over why we ought to be moral, suggests at least that they typically have rather more affinity with classical Greek ethical styles than with modern European moral theory and its contemporary Anglophone heirs; and this in turn suggests taking classical Indian moral thinking as a type of virtue ethics.<sup>20</sup> However, Indian Buddhist moralists cannot be eudaimonists, Siderits claims, and must rather implicitly hold a consequentialist moral theory.<sup>21</sup> Indeed it may seem obvious that any view on which the ultimate aim is to eliminate suffering can only be consequentialist – Bodhisattvas’ license to suspend ordinary constraints on conduct,

<sup>17</sup> According to Julia Annas, all ‘ancient writers belong to the same ethical tradition as Plato. They are *eudaimonists*’ (Annas 1999: 2); and, starting with Plato’s Socrates, ‘Ancient theories unanimously locate virtue within our overall aim of happiness’ (Annas 2003: 3-4). Striker 1996, Vlastos 1999 (105-36, 108) and Irwin 1995 (53) concur, regarding Plato. Not all contemporary virtue ethics positions are eudaimonist but most are, for typically a virtue is that which either reliably delivers *eudaimonia*, or is a proper part of what *eudaimonia* consists in. (Virtue ethics without eudaimonism, such as Slote 1997, are still typically Aristotelian in their focus on ‘agents’ and thereby actions; Slote 2001’s Humean virtue ethics is an outlier.) Siderits 2015 focuses his discussion on eudaimonism.

<sup>18</sup> Matilal 2002: 19; see also Tillemans 2011 and Barnhart 2012.

<sup>19</sup> “There is a tendency today to think that the job of ethical theories is to give an answer to the question of moral motivation (Why should I be moral?),” writes Siderits (2015, 120), “and to provide decision criteria that help us solve moral dilemmas. This makes of ethics something whose chief focus is *moral* reasons—reasons that concern other-affecting actions—and not *prudential* reasons”. Winch 1972, 171-73 offers sharp critique of this ‘problem solving’ and action-guiding conception of ethics or moral philosophy, which prevails nonetheless. It is true, then, that if this is what moral theory is, one looks in vain for moral theory in ancient India and, as Siderits goes on to argue, this is one reason to find ‘virtue ethics’ rubric apt.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding Buddhist ethics, Damien Keown 1992 was agenda-setting in conceiving it as virtue ethics, and he pursues the line in great specificity, including tying virtue ethics specifically to Aristotelianism.

<sup>21</sup> He is by no means the only one to suggest this; Goodman 2009 argues with great subtlety for a distinctively Buddhist form of character consequentialism. Clayton’s precise and lucid study of Śāntideva’s *Śiṣkāsamuccaya* patiently considers the virtue ethical and consequentialist aspects of the text, before concluding that it offers a provisional, agent-based ‘supererogatory character ethic’ for those on the path, but ultimately a consequentialist ethic for those of fixed good motivation (Clayton 2006, 100, 114-15).

when their perfected insight enables them to discern that doing so would reduce suffering, only makes the point more sharply. If the Buddhist texts, especially the Mahāyāna texts, also talk about *paramitās* – perfections of character, or virtues, including generosity and patience – this makes no odds, for after all even Kant and Mill had their theories of virtue.

Granted: virtue ethics is not just virtue theory, plus an obstinate refusal to answer the normative question, ‘What makes an action right?’ It is the positive assertion of an alternative understanding of ethical inquiry, for which Aristotle offers the template. Still, so understood, I think we capture more of the richness and subtlety of classical Indian Buddhist moral thought, and appreciate better its own priorities, if we understand it as virtue ethics.<sup>22</sup> If there is something that nevertheless fits ill in such a characterisation, this stems from taking Aristotelianism in particular as our template for what virtue ethics is. For Buddhist ethics is much closer to Platonist ethics in respects that both of these labels obscure – namely, in (i) the central importance of knowing reality; (ii) the impersonality of the reality to be known; (iii) the resultant disinterest in the human good, and (iv) the concomitant *transparency* of moral exemplars.<sup>23</sup>

First, however, consider the dimensions of useful good fit in regarding Buddhist ethics as a form of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics prioritises questions about character and its excellences (virtues), and how it comes to have or lack these; what a life with or without these might look like; what the human good is and how and why the human excellences realise that good. Correctness of decisions, principles of choice and particular actions are set into the larger social and psychological context from which they gain their meaning, and subserve primary concerns.<sup>24</sup> Virtue ethics has no ambition to offer us a decision procedure for awkward cases, and no commitment to denying the possibility of tragic conflict.<sup>25</sup> Such an approach may imply theories of human nature, of virtue and the good,<sup>26</sup> of the domain of the moral and its nature; but it resists assimilation into consequentialist or deontological paradigms by insisting on the

<sup>22</sup> While it would be absurd to claim that no Indian Buddhist text engages in consequentialist reasoning, it is telling that when typical problems of consequentialism (about distribution, say, or about the connection between agents and acts) are brought to bear on Buddhist ethical discourse, they seem simply to miss the mark – and *not* because some Buddhist philosophers thought up an especially clever form of consequentialism that answers all such objections (but see Goodman 2009, who would no doubt disagree).

<sup>23</sup> Appreciating these dimensions of affinity responds, I think, to Siderits’ worries about the relation between self and the final end on a virtue ethics view; and it avoids the objection (raised by both Goodman and Clayton) that (Mahāyāna) Buddhist ethics cannot be virtue ethics, because the former demands sacrificing one’s happiness (or being willing to) while the latter cannot do so, since happiness is after all that in terms of which virtue is defined. On the view to be sketched here, neither Platonic ethics nor Buddhist are eudaimonist in the first place.

<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre 1981, Ch. 15, argues this point effectively.

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum 1986 is eloquent on this point of Aristotelianism.

logical priority of virtue and goodness, of character and lives, over decision points and principles of action. In this way, virtue ethics may be naturally associated with particularism of a certain sort,<sup>27</sup> when it is not put forward as a distinct theory in its own right.

So conceived, virtue ethics aptly brings out important features of Indian Buddhist ethical thought, in the following ways:

(1) Buddhist moral thought is dominated by concern with character – or, more strictly, with patterns in the arising of person-constituting dispositions, inclinations and reactions – and with the excellences (Greek: *aretai*) or perfections (Skt: *paramitā*)<sup>28</sup> of this character-bundle, and how it comes to have or lack these.<sup>29</sup> It is preoccupied with what a life with or without these might look like; what real happiness is and how the virtues relate to it.<sup>30</sup> A consequentialist needs virtue to be ‘whatever gets the job done’; but this is not how Buddhist texts describe the *paramitās*. Even if such a retrospective reconstruction may be possible, the texts consistently emphasise that generous, for instance, is a good way to be – it is part of what real happiness is, and it tends towards the reduction of suffering and the attainment of the final goal. Nāgārjuna’s *Ratnāvalī* is quite explicit about the excellent qualities of character being both *constitutive* of real happiness, and tending towards the final good – and his position in this respect is typical, rather than innovative. *Paramitās* are qualities of the practitioner the perfecting of which *constitute* the path towards the ultimate goal. Or, as Aristotle might say, they are the states and dispositions on account of which a human being counts as ‘good’ and attains the good. Not only do generosity and self-restraint lead to happiness,<sup>31</sup> they constitute it.

(2) Like most virtue ethics, Buddhist ethics has no ambition to offer a decision procedure for awkward cases, and no principled commitment to denying the possibility of tragic conflict. Buddhist ethics emphasises quality of mind and intention<sup>32</sup> – this is

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<sup>26</sup> Kraut 2007 and Hursthouse 1999 are significant instances.

<sup>27</sup> Not so much Dancy 1993 and 2004, perhaps, as the perception-based particularisms of McDowell 1981, Nussbaum 1986, McNaughton 1988, Nussbaum 1990 (Chs. 2 and 5), or Blum 1994.

<sup>28</sup> The *brahmavihāras* of *metta*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *uppekha* might also be thought of as virtues in this sense.

<sup>29</sup> Thus Garfield 2022 and 2015 characterise Buddhist ethics as ‘moral phenomenology’; Garfield 2010-11 offers detailed treatment with respect to Śāntideva in particular.

<sup>30</sup> Consider for instance how Nāgārjuna, in the *Ratnāvalī*, first corrects our notion of happiness, arguing that only a moral life, constrained by *śīla*, is actually a happy one at all. (This is before he shifts the goalposts to enlightenment as a goal – the distinctively Platonist move, discussed in Carpenter 2015a).

<sup>31</sup> the good life, *abhyudaya*, identified with pleasure-happiness, *sukha*, RĀ I.4

<sup>32</sup> Gombrich 1991 goes so far as to call Buddhist ethics an ‘ethic of intention’ (289). For as the Aṅguttara Nikaya famously declares, intention is karma (AN iii.415); and the *Dhammapadā* declares

part of what speaks strongly, though not insurmountably, against forcing Buddhist ethics into the consequentialist mould. And yet it does not recommend assimilation to the deontological, because principles and imperatives of action – the ‘thou shalt not’ of *deon* – are not the measure of intention. In Buddhist moral psychology, an intention might be more readily characterised as a generous one, or a greedy one; and it is ways of perceiving reality – made habitual by experience, including imaginative and historical experience – that generate one quality or another of intention.

In Buddhist ethical thought as in virtue ethics and ancient Greek moral psychology generally, questions of decision, principles of choice and particular actions are set into the larger social and psychological context from which they gain their meaning, and subserve primary concerns. Taking the whole social-psychological context as relevant, there is then no great gulf between ‘moral’ and ‘prudential’. Such an outlook resists assimilation into consequentialist or deontological paradigms by insisting on the logical priority of virtue and goodness, of character and lives, over decision points and principles. This resistance to imperatives and principles of action is one reason Buddhist ethics has also insightfully been called particularist.<sup>33</sup> The *vinaya*’s preservation of the circumstances surrounding the first articulation of a precept, for instance, is not a freak interest in the historical record, but a mechanism for developing moral perception in each new generation, and thus an implicit assertion of the priority of perception and context over principle.

(3) The consequentialist label, as the deontological, is unhelpful regarding the ‘path’ literature comprising the greater bulk of Buddhist moral thought. These texts are simply ‘untheoretical’, and therefore irrelevant to the ‘theory’ point of view. But one can and ought to ask *why* descriptions of the path from ordinary to extraordinary is a dominant mode of moral discourse. Categorising Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics can be helpful here, for virtue ethics is centrally concerned not only with qualities of character, but with the *development* of character. Eudaimonist virtue ethics, like Buddhist ethics, takes the whole of the person’s life and psychology as relevant to its domain, and takes a central area of concern to be the trajectory over time from less good to better. Our task is not to do right in each case, but to become perfect. Because of this virtue ethics, unlike consequentialism, takes story-telling as central to its concerns, not an adjunct. From within virtue ethics, it is obvious *why* there is such a prevalence of story literature in Buddhist ethical thought, and it is part of the domain of inquiry to consider why just *these* types of stories, what were their different uses and what the expected effects of so using them. A notion of ethical theory that strips away these virtue ethics concerns tends to make of classic texts like the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* an awkward amalgam of arguments (mostly tendentious) and the ‘roadshow Powerpoint presentation of a motivational speaker’ (Siderits 2015, 129), instead of grasping the

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in its opening verse, mind is the forerunner of all things. ‘The moral value of an act’, Heim 2003 reminds us, ‘rests on the intention or volition underlying it’ (531).

<sup>33</sup> See Hallisey 1996 and Barnhart 2012.

whole as engaged in protreptic argument;<sup>34</sup> while other texts, such as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* or *Twenty Verses* are read stripped of any ethical purpose whatsoever.<sup>35</sup>

A final sort of motivation for taking Buddhist ethics to be a form of virtue ethics brings us to the edge of the usefulness of the categorisation. This is the will to see Buddhist ethics as naturalistic, in spite of *karma*.<sup>36</sup> Just this is the good that a return to Aristotle – and *not* Plato – was supposed to give us: A legitimacy in our talk of good and bad which did not rest on 'spooky' entities (such as 'rational intuition'), but which also did not unrealistically externalise all good into the biological incentives of pleasure and pain. Those interested in classifying Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics may be motivated by the thought that doing so grants Buddhist ethics this attractive feature of virtue ethics – namely, maintaining robust talk of good and bad without relying on anything that is not found in nature.<sup>37</sup> From this angle, Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics can look like happy bedfellows indeed.

But on closer examination, this easy fellowship starts to unravel. Buddhists, after all, insist in their various ways that there is no substantial self (no enduring agent-subject unity<sup>38</sup>) while Aristotelian virtue theory presumes a self as the bearer of traits, underlying moral development, and ensuring it is *me* who was bad and is now good;<sup>39</sup> surely this alone debars Buddhists from being Aristotelian-style virtue ethicists. Yet this does not quite get to the heart of the matter. The Aristotelian commitment to a

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<sup>34</sup> or an attempt to 'turn the soul' in the right sort of way, by the right sort of means. Carpenter 2019a argues that this protreptic reading does not make the text any less philosophical, or any less in the business of offering reasons.

<sup>35</sup> A view which their respective auto-commentaries belie. For instance, the opening of *AKBh.* I, and the framing remarks of *AKBh.* IX (the Sanskrit can be found in Pradhan 1967, the English translation in Pruden 1991) both frame what is to come in terms of the final goal (enlightenment), and the means to attain it (which I do not take to contrast with some other 'moral' domain; see note 3). The *Twenty Verses* (English and Sanskrit both found in Anacker 2005) places its arguments for mind-only (*prajñātipātra*) in the context of the path at *Viṃś-A* 10 and 21-22.

<sup>36</sup> which perhaps can itself be naturalised; see Wright 2005 and Keown 1996.

<sup>37</sup> Although he rejects the virtue ethics label for Buddhist ethics, Siderits himself shares this motivation towards naturalism, and typically defending distinctively Buddhist positions that are naturalistic, or consistent with naturalism. Westerhoff describes Siderits' naturalism as 'a view that begins from an epistemological position, seeing science as our best route to knowledge' (2016, 2). Of course, the very question of what is and is not found in nature is itself a contested question; see Meyers 2018 for thoughtful discussion of the question in this context.

<sup>38</sup> According to Vasubandhu, "The three kinds, of grasping after self are grasping for one central entity, grasping for an 'enjoyer', and grasping for a 'doer'," *Discussion of the Five Aggregates* (Anacker 2005, 74).

<sup>39</sup> As observed by Siderits 2016, 272.

substance-self<sup>40</sup> may be incidental to virtue theory,<sup>41</sup> and a less metaphysically loaded sense of self suffice to sustain talk of virtue and character development. A Buddhist's bundle of inter-connected dispositions, tendencies, feelings and desires may do the job of securing talk of moral character, without positing some core substratum to which the virtues belong. Instead of a virtue being a disposition of the soul, it might be a pattern of occurrent mental events and conditions for other mental events and actions located *within* a psycho-physical bundle – but this change is no significant impediment to conceiving of a view along virtue ethics lines.<sup>42</sup> If Buddhist non-categorical metaphysics can at all provide a viable alternative to Aristotelian categorical metaphysics, then it should be adequate to providing a somewhat revisionary but sustainable account of the virtues (and if it cannot, there are bigger problems here).

The more insurmountable difficulty in this area is not selves as substrata, but selves as *agents* – which Aristotelian adult humans are. Indeed it is this agency that makes the doings of Aristotelian selves liable to praise and blame, and makes humans capable of that distinctively human good, *eudaimonia*. Actions, in order to fall within the domain of the moral at all, must be voluntary, or 'up to us' (*eph'hēmin*, *EN* III.1-5). This is not quite setting 'free will' as a requirement on moral responsibility, but it is the seed of that tradition.<sup>43</sup> It sets up the capacity for decision as the crux of moral value, even if particular decisions and moments of choice remain evaluable as expressions of virtue.<sup>44</sup> Contemporary virtue theory might underplay this theme, but the Buddhist outlook is fundamentally different in kind regarding agency. Intentional action may be related to distinctive effects and warrant distinctive responses from us as most efficacious in reducing suffering; but Buddhist interest in the quality of one's intentions in no way leads to an interest in whether our choices are 'free', or our actions 'up to us',<sup>45</sup> and

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<sup>40</sup> Individual animals, and indeed human beings, are the paradigm examples of 'primary substances' in *Categories* 5 and at *Metaphysics* Z.8.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed the Buddhist even argues that such a substance self positively precludes the possibility of moral development.

<sup>42</sup> "A Buddhist Reductionist," Siderits observes, "might welcome a narrative view of self" – such as is supported by the neo-Aristotelian Alasdair MacIntyre (Siderits 2011, 299).

<sup>43</sup> See Sauv -Meyer 2013 for discussion of how it is *not* a 'free will' claim in Aristotle (*cf.* Frede 2013); and Frede 2011 for insightful discussion of how that claim arose from this tradition, via Stoicism, and flowered within Christian thought.

<sup>44</sup> How choice as Aristotle discusses it at *EN* III.3 relates to responsibility when we take into account responsibility for our character and its development is an enormously complicated question (on which Bobzien 2014 is careful and illuminating; for Aristotle on moral responsibility generally, see Sauv -Meyer 1993/2011). The use of decision or will to mark out the morally responsible from the rest took on a life of its own over the course of the development of European moral thought, a life closely related to the emergence of 'free will'.

<sup>45</sup> This may partly explain why the question never arose in those terms among classical Indian Buddhists. See Siderits 2008 for a rational reconstruction of what an Abhidharma position on 'free will' might be; see also Riccardo Repetti's 2010, 2012a, 2012b, and 2014 for a comprehensive

there is no special kind of *moral* responsibility arising exclusively from moments of choice.<sup>46</sup> For the Buddhist, deliberation and choice hold no privileged position in characterising ‘who we *really* are’; we are not essentially or truly deliberators, and so deliberating collectively about the human good in particular plays no special role in constituting human goodness.<sup>47</sup> The Aristotelian agent must still be a special sort of uncaused cause, autonomous, voluntarily initiating action. But this autonomous agency, or the special sort of choice that is truly us and our own (the excellent functioning of what most makes us what we are), is for the Buddhist just another version of the mythical agent-self that causes us so much misery. So this is one way in which Buddhist ethics sits ill with virtue ethics: Buddhists do not just happen to have a different vocabulary or a different way of thinking about agency; they have a diagnosis of the Aristotelian way of thinking about agency as positively pernicious. And this Aristotelian concept of agency cannot be substituted for something a Buddhist could endorse without destabilising the whole organisation of virtue ethics.

This is related to a second point of ill fit. When Aristotelian naturalism does avoid appeal to spooky entities like the ‘rational will’, it does so by appealing to *natures*.<sup>48</sup> The nature of a thing is what makes it the thing it is, and determines what, for that thing, counts as an excellence or virtue. Buddhists of course deny there are essential natures, whether they do this Abhidharma-wise or Madhyamaka-wise. But again, this doctrinaire point alone is not yet decisive in cleaving Buddhist from Aristotelian ethics, for some neo-Aristotelians argue that we need not be *essentialist* in our claims about human nature.<sup>49</sup> Instead of much-criticised Aristotelian forms or natures, virtue ethicists can work ground up, empirically; we just look and see what all human beings experience, are capable of, and confront due to their particularly human situation, and from this generate an account of the distinctively human and thus what is the human good. What could be more Buddhist in spirit than to work from experience as our baseline? According to the much-cited ‘Kālāmā Sutta’ (AN iii.65) even reasoning is not to be trusted over our own experience (PTS A.I.190).

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state of the discourse and useful bibliography of the Buddhist free will discourse. Repetti, ed. 2017 contains excellent and nuanced contributions to the discussion from contemporary scholars.

<sup>46</sup> Unlike choice, intention (*cetanā*) – in a very wide sense of that term that covers awareness of what one is doing (or lack thereof, *Milindapañha* II.6.viii) – does have a special connection to action in most Buddhist texts. Carpenter 2017a considers how the significance of quality of motivation can be maintained without intention marking out a special domain as ‘moral’.

<sup>47</sup> Contrast neo-Aristotelians such as MacIntyre 1981 (‘The good life for man is the life spent seeking the good life for man’, 219); Hursthouse 1999, Ch. 10, *On Virtue Ethics*, Chapter 10; McDowell 1995, esp. §10; and even, in a qualified way, Kraut 2005, §53.

<sup>48</sup> As I read him, something like this objection and the previous are what lead Siderits 2015 to conclude that Indian Buddhist ethics, alone among classical Indian ethics, *cannot* be eudaimonist.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Kraut 2007 is a prominent example of such an approach.

The difficulty, however, is not the virtue ethicist's account of human nature, but the use she makes of it. A virtue is a characteristic that makes that which has it good; and which features make it good depends upon *what it is*. In the case of human beings, it is the fact that humans are such-and-such-like that determines which states of any particular human beings are virtues – namely, those states which enable one to enjoy distinctively human forms of flourishing, or to avoid characteristically human vulnerabilities, and in general to be a good thing of the human kind. This becomes the naturalistic ground on which ethical value is built. On a virtue theoretic account, good human beings are good at being human beings. In the perfectly virtuous, human nature is perfectly realised, and virtues are those qualities of the individual which both enable and constitute this perfect realisation of human nature. Thus our primary practical aim and ultimate goal is to become good-things-of-our-kind, exemplars of humanity.

But now just consider the crashing dissonance of supposing a Buddhist hortatory text enjoining you to *become a good thing of your kind*, or to be the best *human being* you can be.<sup>50</sup> There is for the Buddhist no 'good for a human being' distinct from 'good for an elephant' – the elephant Pārileyaka is good and virtuous for just the same sorts of reasons as any human being (compassion and devotion to the Dharma or to the Buddha) – and likewise the monkey, partridge and elephant of *Vin. ii.161-162*.<sup>51</sup> Although this is often overlooked, the same is true for Plato – unlike Aristotle, Plato is relatively uninterested in what makes a human being *human*. It is, of course, useful to know the material we are working with when we are trying to improve it; but what makes a human being human is not a source of natural normativity, on which a theory of virtue depends. On the contrary, it is only the Good itself that makes the difference in whether justice or temperance is good or bad<sup>52</sup> – and even these are not qualities special to human beings because of what human beings are. Both Buddhists and Platonists, then, have in effect no particular interest in the *human* good.<sup>53</sup> On both

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<sup>50</sup> One might be tempted to think this was because of *karma*-rebirth theory; yet without appeal to it, Plato does not think in such terms, while *with* *karma*-rebirth to hand, the ethos of the *Rāmāyāna* is perfectly able to put forward Rāma as the perfect *man*.

<sup>51</sup> quoted by McDermott 1989, 270. Contrast Aristotle's claim that only adult human beings can be *eudaimon* (*EN* I.9); only they can be properly praised or blamed, and only they can be virtuous. Even human children are only so-called as a courtesy, in light of what we hope they will become (*EN* I.9, 1100a2-5).

<sup>52</sup> *Republic* 504a-509b; cf. *Charmides* 161a1-2. In the *Philebus*, only forms of goodness (proportion, beauty and truth) determine which things make a life good, practically by-passing virtue altogether.

<sup>53</sup> This is obscured in the Plato discourse by the way that scholars such as Vlastos, for instance, elide Socrates' talk of 'good' and 'happiness' into a single subject, 'the human good' (Vlastos 1999, 109n20). Plato may seem closest to posing the question of a specifically human good in the *Philebus*, which sets the agenda with a bald claim that 'pleasure is (the) good' (*Philebus* 11b4), unqualified by whose good it may be; against which Socrates gives as his own view that cognition is 'better and more desirable than pleasure for all things insofar as they are able to share in [it]' (*Philebus* 11b8-c1). Contrary to Vogt 2017, I take one of the primary lessons of the

views, our ultimate aim is simply to become good, full stop – and if we cannot become perfectly good (because both views set this bar very high), then our life’s task is to strain every nerve to come as near to it as possible.<sup>54</sup>

***Reality is Impersonal; the Task is to Know It***

The disinterest in a specifically human good rests in both cases on the *impersonal* nature of reality, and the way we should relate ourselves to it. For Plato, the only source of goodness is the Good itself, the wholly impersonal cause of an intelligible reality undifferentiated according to human and non-human, devoid of anything essentially personal. It is this impersonality of Plato’s Good that Aristotle objects to when he complains in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 that to investigate such supra-categorical good (were it even incoherent) would be useless for ethics, which directs our attention to the *human* good, determined by *human* capacities, and their deployment in actions.<sup>55</sup> Plato’s ‘Good’, Aristotle rightly saw, is not beholden to individual, or even human concerns. The reality it stands for is wholly *impersonal*. It does not contain persons or the central categories of personhood (agent, action, decision, choice). On the contrary, if we are to deploy such concepts as agent, action and choice aptly and fruitfully, then we must understand them and their relevance in terms of the impersonal, intelligible reality that is prior to any merely human perspective or concern. Our task with respect to this reality, and the Good itself, is to know it.<sup>56</sup> But doing so will not, as Aristotle rightly saw, give us maxims for action or even information about what the virtuous person would do in a particular situation. Rather, the right relation to reality – namely, knowing it – is

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*Philebus* to be that even the ‘second contest’ into the cause of goodness in a life (*Philebus* 22d) cannot be addressed without reference to *the* good, grasped here in three forms (beauty, proportion, and truth, 65a1-2), which is the necessary orientation point and criterion for understanding goodness in a life.

<sup>54</sup> This focal point for development given by a fixed ideal (the Good, Awakening) is what may raise doubt that particularism is the most apt way to characterise either Buddhist or Platonic moral thought.

<sup>55</sup> “For even if there is some one good predicated in common, or some separable good, itself in its own right, clearly that is not the sort of good a human being can achieve in action or possess; but that is the sort we are looking for now” (*EN* I.6, 1096b30-35, tr. Irwin and Fine). “Moreover, it is a puzzle to know what the weaver or carpenter will gain from his own craft from knowing this Good Itself, or how anyone will be better at medicine or generalship from having gazed on the Idea Itself. For what the doctor appears to consider is not even health [universally let alone good universally], but human health, and presumably the health of this human being even more, since he treats one particular patient at a time” (*EN* I.6, 1097a10-15).

<sup>56</sup> Thus Plato makes no distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom (see Lane 2005, 343). Plato’s concern with knowledge and what is fully knowable is pervasive in the dialogues; the *Symposium*’s discussion with Diotima, the *Phaedrus*’s palinode, the central books of the *Republic* and the culmination of the *Philebus* are conspicuous expressions of the unparalleled value attached to knowing reality.

itself the morally improving activity. It will so shape our perceptions of everyday, particular and messy realities as to engender motivations which cause us to cause goodness in and around us, as the opportunity arises.

Similarly, the Buddhist focus is on knowing reality as it is – and how it is, is personless. The first Noble Truth is to be known; and from Buddhaghosa in the Theravada tradition to Śāntideva in the Mahāyāna, the perfection of wisdom or insight is the culmination of the whole trajectory of ethical development, so that from beginning to end the Buddhist path is permeated by the orientation towards knowing an impersonal reality.<sup>57</sup> Practices of seeing reality as it is are improving and clarifying all along the way, even if different Buddhist thinkers have different views of what the reality is into which perfected wisdom has insight.<sup>58</sup> Such insight is not just liberating (the insight into reality itself sets one free from suffering); it is *awakening*. The reality one is awaked to is devoid of persons as elements, and not properly characterised by the categories proper to personhood (agent, subject, individual, unifier, controller). If the aim is the transformation of our phenomenology, awakened to reality *is* that transformed phenomenology, not merely the external route to it. And, as with Plato, the discipline of knowing impersonal reality as it is should also have knock-on effects on action via the transformation of our perceptual and motivational engagement with the particular, transient world around us.

The Buddhist no-self claim, in its many competing varieties, is the claim that individual persons and the categories pertaining to them are not fundamental or prior, and in this there is substantial agreement with the Platonic perspective according to which real reality is an impersonal Good which grounds the being of fully intelligible and impersonal reality of eternal Forms.<sup>59</sup> Whether knowing reality is knowing the

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<sup>57</sup> Consider as indicative the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*'s opening praise of the Buddha: the first quality to praise in the Buddha is that he 'has destroyed all blindness', where 'blindness is ignorance, for ignorance hinders the seeing of things as they truly are. By this, the Buddha, the Blessed One is sufficiently designated'; he is *secondarily* praiseworthy for having thereby 'drawn out the world from the mire of transmigration'.

<sup>58</sup> and even dispute over whether it is, in a certain sense, *real*, as when Siderits disputes that Nāgārjuna is making metaphysical claims at all, and interprets the ultimate *truth* to be that there is no ultimate *reality* (a 'semantic' interpretation, on which understanding emptiness means 'one abandons the idea of an ultimate nature of reality' (Siderits 2007, 182-190; and see Siderits 2003a).

<sup>59</sup> Mann 2000, Part II, even argues plausibly that Plato's metaphysics is not one of substantial individuals, but rather one of mixtures of property-occurrences, making Plato's understanding of sensible reality rather akin to some Buddhist understandings. *Theaetetus* 184b-186b might suggest Platonic souls are at least bare unifiers of apperception, which of course is at odds with most Buddhist views; but Plato shares the Buddha's caution about the pernicious way that 'I' leads to a damaging 'mine' (*Republic* V.462c). The most significant difference between Buddhist views and Plato's, I will argue at the end, is not whether there is a unified soul, but whether we ought to aim to make ourselves unified.

fixed explanatory relations between unchanging non-sensible intelligibles, or whether it is knowing reality as inter-dependent, transient and suffering, the reality to be known will not contain or be governed by the central categories and features of personhood. In both cases, our central task is to know this reality, and to understand our experiences in light of this and in relation to this. And in both cases, such insight transforms the arising mental events constitutive of character and leading to action.

### ***Knowing Impersonal Reality and Ethical Formation***

So on both views, reality is impersonal, and our task is to know it. Moreover, accomplishing this task should have a transformative effect on our dispositions, inclinations, thoughts, beliefs, feelings. Afflictive emotions will be permanently quelled, and there will be consequently no impetus to actions that give rise to suffering for self or others. Socrates in the *Republic* (500b8-c2) notes this connection between attending to impersonal reality and emotional engagement with persons, “No one whose thoughts are truly directed towards the things that are has the leisure to look down at human affairs or to be filled with envy and hatred by competing with people”. It may well be that, in contrast to Plato, there is not, according to many Indian Buddhist lines of thought, some *other* reality we should know, apart from the one around us. But the practical implications of seeing reality selflessly are still evident, even in early Buddhism, where it is disputed whether the Buddha actually thought that there is no self, or indeed cared much about metaphysics at all.<sup>60</sup> What the Buddha certainly did recommend was to stop thinking in terms of self: stop *seeking* the self, stop looking for things to identify with, or supposing the answer is to be found by ‘looking inside’ and discovering the ‘real you’. It is *theories* of the self,<sup>61</sup> the associated assertions that ‘this am I, this is mine’,<sup>62</sup> obsessive concern with getting this right – as if by this I would have laid hold of something truly valuable<sup>63</sup> – that causes the misery. Seeing reality

<sup>60</sup> For an excellent discussion of the original indeterminacies in the early *sūtras*, see Priestly 1999, Chapter 1. Schmidhausen 1973 and Frauwallner 1953 deny that outright rejection of self was an original part of the Buddha’s teachings.

<sup>61</sup> “I too do not see any doctrine of the self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it” (*MN* 22.22). See also the claim that moral improvement is made impossible by any view identifying the self (*SN* 12.35).

<sup>62</sup> *MN* 22; cf. *Ratnāvalī* I.27-28. Harvey 1995, discussing a text from the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, (*Niddesa* II.278-82, in particular), notes that “Self is practically equivalent to ‘what pertains to Self, I, mine, ‘I am’,” (*Selfless Mind*, 50). Vasubandhu confirms this. Rejecting “the view of self has two parts: to say ‘I’ and to say ‘mine’,” he observes “If the idea of ‘mine’ were different from the idea of ‘I’, then the ideas expressed in the other grammatical cases, such as *mayā* (by me) or *mahyam* (to me) would thus constitute so many new views” (*AKBh.* V.9a-b, tr. Pruden).

<sup>63</sup> *MN* 109 argues against holding a view of self on the grounds that there is nothing worthy of being considered a self (cf. *MN* 22.26-27); by implication in looking for the self, we are looking for

impersonally, such damaging mental practices of identification, self-assertion and appropriation become incoherent, and ultimately find no foothold.

Turning our attention towards this impersonal reality does not so much inform us as it *forms* us. Directing attention away from ourselves, away from the pre-constituted human-shaped familiar ways of categorising experience, and instead orienting ourselves towards impersonal reality, gives us categories, priorities and perspectives which provide a truer understanding of everyday, messy, sensible reality. The *locus classicus* for this in Plato is the philosophers' return to the cave in *Republic* VII, where after grasping the wholly impersonal structure of reality – located *outside* the engulfing cavern of the human social world – the philosophers recognise all the particular things they had known before their transformative appreciation of impersonal reality, but now they can correctly appreciate these things for what they are (*Rep.* 520c). This is familiar in Buddhist discourse as the phenomenon of recognising our conventional designations *as conventional*. To improve ourselves, then, we do not introspect and tinker with our insides; we look rather outside ourselves, to reality as distinct from wishful appearance – for Plato, to the impersonal good itself which informs the structure of reality; for the Buddhist, to the transient, essenceless mutual dependency of reality which cannot in truth sustain the construction our desires and fears put on it.

Doing this not only changes our minds – we literally have different thoughts; it changes our mode of engagement with, indeed our very perception of ordinary, everyday matters.<sup>64</sup> By recognising *of* our old person-centred categories and concerns that they are constructed – by circumstances, society, by desires and ignorance – we thereby recognise that they are not forced on us by reality. Our relationship to these categories and concerns is transformed *tout court* – we are no longer in the grip of them, driven on by their logic. We are liberated from compulsive behaviours and emotions by seeing reality. So similarly for Plato true knowledge of what impersonally exists liberates us from the tyranny of sensual desires, pleasures and pains, which ‘make the soul believe the truth is what the body says it is’ (*Phaedo* 83d6-7). It does so by focusing the attention on an impersonal reality, which guides our understanding of and relationship to everyday experience. Understanding reality as it is liberates us from the compulsions of wayward appetites and misguided pride.<sup>65</sup>

The liberating effects of knowing impersonal reality arise from the comprehensiveness of the process or activity of reaching understanding. The sort of knowing we strive for commandeers, organises and orients every part of the soul. “[T]he power to learn is present in everyone’s soul,’ as Plato has Socrates say (*Republic* 518c-519a), but it “cannot be turned around... without turning the whole soul”. Thus

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something *worthy* to be the self, not just something that solves a metaphysical puzzle.

<sup>64</sup> I argue the case specifically for the *Philebus* in Carpenter 2006 and Carpenter 2021.

<sup>65</sup> This theme is woven throughout the *Republic* especially, but also the *Gorgias*, and *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

every discussion of virtue in Plato turns into a discussion of knowledge, and discussion of knowledge is an opportunity to ‘turn the *whole* soul’ from its engrossment in the everyday familiar affairs towards the unchanging intelligible reality that is necessary, on his view, to make proper sense of sensible reality. Attend with your whole soul to intelligible reality, says Plato, and transform your whole soul – your values, ambitions, expectations, hopes and desires;<sup>66</sup> what is ordinarily recognised as good action will follow (cf. *Rep.* IV.441e–44e).

This reverses the direction of neo-Aristotelian moral development, according to which we become just by doing just deeds. Through doing right actions, says the neo-Aristotelian, we become better able to appreciate the right reasons for them, and from this come to acquire a stable motivation to do just deeds *because they are just*. Eventually this motivation becomes part of how we look at the world and new situations. Buddhist ethics, by contrast, like Plato’s, typically leads with understanding, in this sense: the priority is revising our basic outlook, what we see when we look at the world, whether this be effected through engagement with narratives, with arguments, or with explicit practises in recognising impersonal reality as it is.<sup>67</sup> This prioritisation is the fall-out of recognising that all our choices and ‘rational deliberations’ are embedded, not autonomous; they arise as they do due to mental causes and conditions.<sup>68</sup> If we expect the choices to change, we need to change their causes and conditions – the mental factors of perception and conception that lead to them. Our fundamental understanding of reality operates at the level of the background conditions of any more specific experience, so that changing this basic understanding transforms the way we experience particular, everyday situations – in particular, we experience them in ways that do not invite envy, resentment and fear, but rather as occasions for compassion and care.<sup>69</sup> Feeling care and joy, lacking resentment and fear, motivations for harmful actions are simply absent. Seeing reality *sub specie doloris* opens up new possibilities for responsiveness.

Such wholesale transformation of fundamental outlook or orientation does not come by getting to the QED at the end of a proof about the nature of reality, but works rather at the level of what makes it possible to draw the conclusion and appreciate its meaning. Such reorientation and reworking of the categories through which

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<sup>66</sup> I explore the mechanisms of this with respect to the *Philebus* in Carpenter 2017b, and with respect to the *Republic* in Carpenter 2023.

<sup>67</sup> “I can only choose within the world I can see”, writes Iris Murdoch (1970, 36).

<sup>68</sup> *Republic* VIII and IX are studies in this phenomenon; and consider also the *Timaeus*’ advice that ‘it is not right to reproach people’ for their wicked deeds, for all bad deeds are ‘a result of one or another corrupt condition of the body and an uneducated upbringing’, neither of which anyone would will to have (*Tim.* 86e). See Carpenter 2017a.

<sup>69</sup> Plato does not use the language of care; but he insists that goodness wants only goodness and has only good effects on others (*Republic* II), and that the gods, being good, have no envy, but rather want everything to share in the goodness they enjoy (*Timeaus*).

experiences take shape at all requires sustained, repeated engagement.<sup>70</sup> This is why both narratives and, for Buddhists, meditation practices, have the ethical significance they do.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Modes of Transformation: Meditation and Narratives***

Although Plato emphasises the repeated practice and effort required for wholesale transformation, the Platonic tradition did not hand down a set of tools and array of practices by which we might all advance further in seeing reality as it is, transforming ourselves fundamentally along the way.<sup>72</sup> The so-called ‘Socratic method’ is hardly methodical; and there is no clarity or consensus about how the much-vaunted ‘dialectic’ should actually be practiced. The Buddhist tradition, by contrast, developed and transmitted a handsome suite of meditative practices. Buddhaghosa’s 5<sup>th</sup> C. C.E. *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*) is one comprehensive and authoritative source for these, and dedicated meditation manuals (such as *Yogāvacara’s Manual*<sup>73</sup>) and Abhidharma handbooks which incorporated detailed meditation instructions (such as Anuruddha’s *Abhidhammattha Sangaha*) are not uncommon.

A great part of these meditational exercises aim at appreciation of reality as non-self, transient and suffering, whether locally or globally. Common meditational practices, which predate Buddhaghosa, such as meditation on the breath or the body, tend to take something we are ordinarily personally involved in and change our relation to and experience of it into something impersonal. ‘In this way, one abides contemplating the body as body...its nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is simply established in one to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world’ – and so on for the feelings, thoughts, and objects of thought or perception (*MN 10*).<sup>74</sup> Through meditation, one knows person-constituting elements as

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<sup>70</sup> The training for philosophers in the *Republic* includes ten years of higher mathematics before even beginning a five-year training in dialectic, which only concludes fifteen years later with comprehension of the Good (*Republic* 538b-d, 539e-540a; cf. *Meno* 85c8-d2; *Parmenides* 135d-36a).

<sup>71</sup> On the way that narratives might specifically target our way of reading the world and reality, see Hansen 2002 and Carpenter 2020. For meditation as an ethical activity, see Dreyfus 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* has become a standard point of reference for understanding classical Mediterranean philosophies as practices. None of these, however, show us how to practice what Plato recommends. Certain elements of Stoic practice come close, but their emphasis on *prohairesis* (rational choice) writes person-involving categories ineradicably into the fabric of reality. Plotinus and those influenced by his reading of Plato may have had such practices, but communities of practitioners never became widespread.

<sup>73</sup> translated as *Manual of a Mystic* by F.L. Woodward 1961.

transient, and regards each as being simply itself, not attached meaningfully to any narrative. This is detachment.

Of Buddhaghosa's forty suitable meditation objects for the practitioner looking to advance along the path, seventeen are clearly impersonal,<sup>75</sup> while a further twelve de-personalise something ordinarily strongly regarded as personal.<sup>76</sup> Meditations on the ten foulnesses, for instance, like exercises in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, focus on the (dead) human body. Practices of careful definition of the corpse in a specific state of decay (by its colour, its shape, its direction and location; by its joints, its openings, its concavities and convexities), converts it into something we regard impersonally, and therewith both sensual desires *and* the concomitant revulsion towards corpses is dissolved (*Vism.* VI).

Recollections of the Buddha, Sangha and deities might be expected to be invitations to meditate explicitly on persons – just the opposite of cultivating an impersonal view of reality. But as Buddhaghosa describes this exercise, meditation on the Buddha, for instance, has nothing to do with recounting the legend of Prince Siddhartha, or the noble and selfless deeds done on the path to awakening, and everything to do with rehearsing reality as the Buddha taught us to see it, such that he brought suffering to an end. In fact, on Buddhaghosa's account the Buddha becomes oddly *transparent*. To contemplate the Buddha is to contemplate his teaching of reality as selfless, dependently arising, and transient; so that in looking to the Buddha, we look *through* the Buddha to his Dharma, and specifically to his teachings of the personless nature of reality. While Buddhaghosa in other places rehearses various tales of moral success and failure,<sup>77</sup> here in the Recollection of the Buddha, the *person* of the Buddha becomes wholly transparent, dissolved into the impersonal reality which liberates when seen. Transformation is effected not by doing as the good man does, but by seeing as the good man sees.

But the *brahmaviharas* – especially the cultivation of goodwill, care and joy (*metta*, *karuṇā*, and *muditā*) – look necessarily person-involving. One cannot ubiquitously exude the wish, 'May all beings be free from enmity, affliction and anxiety, and live happily' without directing it towards *beings* (*satta*), understood 'in accordance with ordinary speech' (*Vism.* IX.55).<sup>78</sup> And yet even here there are surprising elements

<sup>74</sup> Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, trs. *Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha* (*Majjhima Nikāya*); the *sutta* is repeated in an expanded form at DN 22 (*Long Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Walshe).

<sup>75</sup> the ten *kasinas* (earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, limited-space); the four immaterial states (boundless space, boundless perception, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception); the recollections of Dharma and cessation; the defining of the four elements.

<sup>76</sup> The ten foulnesses; the Recollections of the body, breath, and death.

<sup>77</sup> Heim 2014, Chapter 4 discusses Buddhaghosa's use of Buddhist tales in his work.

<sup>78</sup> *Visuddhimagga* IX.50, tr. Ñāṇamoli 1976. This defines *metta* cultivation in particular; *karuṇā* cultivation consist in enlarging the feeling that 'This being has indeed been reduced to misery' – or may become so – 'if only we could be freed from this suffering!' (*Vism.* IX.78-81); and *muditā*,

tending towards impersonalisation, and knowing reality as devoid of personal characteristics. Several of the techniques Buddhaghosa recommends encourage us to dissolve persons into non-personal elements, or to regard reality impersonally. More significantly, the first three *brahmaviharas* are followed by a fourth, deeply impersonal Divine Abiding, *upekkhā* – specifically introduced to correct the personalisation inherent in the previous three. One must ‘see the danger in the former [three divine abidings] because they are linked with attention given to beings’ enjoyment..., because resentment and approval are near, and because their association with joy is gross’ (*Vism.* IX.88). Thinking in terms of beings may be necessary temporarily for proper self-cultivation.<sup>79</sup> Yet there is a danger inherent in it just insofar as it requires thinking in terms of beings, and a deliberate corrective to this must be built into the Path. Ultimately, even the Divine Abidings point towards *prajñā*, the insight into reality as suffering, transient, and impersonal. According to Asaṅga’s alternative account of the *brahmaviharas*, they are not even essentially person-involving in the first place. A form of loving-kindness directed at beings is to be supplanted by a form directed at impersonal elements; and this in turn supplanted by utterly objectless loving-kindness.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to meditation exercises, narratives are another key tool the tradition deploys for inculcating the ethos, the habits of mind – of orientation and appreciation and responsiveness – constitutive of a wholesome way of being in the world. *Republic* II-III infamously insists that children be exposed only to the right kind of music and poems. Plato recognises that the stories we are told, and how they are told, present us with a pre-theoretical sense of the space of reasons and actions. They shape our sense of which concepts and categories are available to be deployed in making sense of experience. While Platonists, however, left no body of actual stories expected and proven by experience to transform the soul in the appropriate way, Buddhist communities by contrast adapted and generated a rich body of narrative literature of the sort that Socrates in the *Republic* only talks about.

The telling and retelling of Buddhist narratives constitutes an induction into and inculcation of an outlook on reality *as* dependently arising and without self, everything at once affected and affecting, without any locus of overall control.<sup>81</sup> The

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‘This being is indeed glad. How good, how excellent!’ (*Vism.* 85).

<sup>79</sup> Compare Śāntideva’s advice that if I-grasping increases due to compassionate engagement with (what are delusionally thought of as) beings, practice selflessness (*BCA* IX.76-77).

<sup>80</sup> Asaṅga, *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, translated by Atermus B. Engle, *The Bodhisattva Path to Unsurpassed Enlightenment*. Snow Lion 2016, 402-402.

<sup>81</sup> Hansen 2002 brings out the centrality of dependent arising conveyed through narratives, and the *Gatilok* in particular. Heim 2014, Ch. 4 draws out the inter-personal entanglement complicating intention in the narratives. Hallisey and Hanson 1996 emphasise how the karmic configuration of the stories creates possibilities for Bandhula to be both innocent and yet getting what he deserved. ‘The Demoness Kali’ beautifully illustrates, as Obeyesekere and Obeyesekere 1990 show, Buddhist narratives’ tendency to deliberately confuse and obscure any

narratives show us a world that is familiar, yet repeatedly shown in the unfamiliar light of insight into the fundamental mutability of the world, its lack of purpose, of providence, and of self-determining agents acting freely upon rational deliberation of the options. One of the modes by which this inculcation is effected is the repeated presentation of the Buddha, the Bodhisattva, or accomplished arhats, engaging with and describing situations and persons in ways that reflect their own appreciation of the deep personlessness of reality. The repetition and the minuteness here of perception is important for the effect. Consistently, devotion to the Buddha and Dharma is admired (particularly in the *avadānas*); repeatedly arhats view themselves and their actions as opportunities for others to become good and exercise virtue. Over and over again beings are traced over lifetimes, and repeatedly the Buddha's perspective highlights the hazards and futility of attempting any ultimate judgements of origins or blame.<sup>82</sup>

One of the mechanisms for displacing our ordinary view and replacing it with a better one is the drastic under-characterisation of the stories' moral exemplars. The *jātakas* may trace the Bodhisattava's trajectory over countless rebirths; but they do not give us stories of his personal emotional development. There is nothing personable about the Arhats and accomplished laity we encounter in the tales, and we no more identify with them than with the perfected Buddha. There is no character development that would help us to see how we, too, could become like that. The radical sparsity of characterisation of persons the Buddhist tales present as normative means we cannot use personal engagement or identification with these characters in the way Martha Nussbaum, for instance, presents the moral edification of engaging with Henry James' novels.<sup>83</sup> The mode of presentation positively resists this, offering nothing of the personalities of accomplished persons for us to become engrossed in and distracted by.

This is not an accidental feature of the *genre*, but directly related to the ethos to be inculcated.<sup>84</sup> Our liability to become distracted by personality continually

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purported clear lines of agency and individuation. Historical narratives may similarly serve to convey basic understandings of reality and the character traits and responses appropriate to that (Berkwitz 2003, which because it is heavily Aristotelian conducts the discussion in terms of emotions, although the Pāli for gratitude, as Berkwitz tells us, may be literally translated as 'knowing what was done').

<sup>82</sup> Carpenter 2019b discusses in detail the connection between of narratives and blame.

<sup>83</sup> Further discussion of the importance of this difference can be found in Carpenter 2020. Compare here Plato's aversion, in *Republic* II, to story-telling which requires impersonation, because of the negative effects of identification.

<sup>84</sup> There is much to be said about the *genre* of Buddhist narratives, which are neither fable nor folk-tale (though some folk-tales were appropriated and repurposed) nor quite parable; and within which there are significant and interesting species — *jātaka*, *avadana*, *Dhammapadāṭṭakathā* collection, and later renderings of these (Ārya Śūra's *Jatakamāla*, for instance) each being quite different in kind, construction and theme from each other, yet preserving across these differences this intentional effacing of personality. Such effacement is not ubiquitous in ancient narrative, nor in short ancient narrative in particular, and it is handled

confounded Socrates' attempts to turn his interlocutor's attention away from him and towards a shared examination of reality; and Plato thus continually highlights the moral danger in attaching oneself to any particular person, including Socrates, instead of looking directly to impersonal reality, or the Good itself. The exemplary persons of Buddhist narratives resist such attachment in the same way that Plato's Socrates rejected attempts to make *him* into something special – but much more effectively. Both Buddhist and Platonic exemplars are thus distinctly self-effacing. If the view they are articulating and recommending is correct, then their personalities are the least interesting – the least *real*, certainly the least important – thing about them.

As in Buddhaghosa's account of the specific meditative practice of recollection of the Buddha, here too in the Buddhist tales we see a transparency of moral exemplars – to see an arhat or a bodhisattva is to see through them to the way they see the world. With little else by way of engaging personality or psychological drama to be distracted by or to hold onto emotionally, this outlook recommends itself to the auditor or reader directly, and then becomes available as a perspective they might adopt for themselves. In place of 'doing as the good man does', the ethos which focuses on the primacy of knowing impersonal reality advocates 'seeing as the good man sees'. Orienting oneself towards impersonal reality pulls one out of oneself, not just in the ordinary sense of making one less self-absorbed (and taking in other persons' equally self-absorbed perspectives instead); this is rather a practice that pulls us out of the personal altogether. The very categories needed to make sense of pride, anger, greed, and so on are displaced – or in fact vanish altogether.<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Both Platonic and Buddhist ethics offer an ambitious ethical idealism quite different from what is usually called 'virtue ethics'. Neither supposes that the human is the proper measure of our ethical task. Each rather takes there to be something profoundly out-of-joint with the everyday world and our ordinary experience of it; each would, therefore, categorically reject the Aristotelian impulse to suppose that, generally and for the most part, most of us have got it mostly right, morally speaking, so that we could look to the good deeds of the good folk around us in order to learn what is good. On the contrary, on both of these views we aim to attain ideal comprehension of impersonal reality. Pursuit of such knowledge organises all other

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in a deliberate way, with specific effect, within Buddhist story-telling.

<sup>85</sup> If person-involving concepts are later built back into our thinking and motivations, they are radically revised, determined by and subordinated to impersonal concerns. Think here of the philosophers returning to the cave, who see ordinary things as the partial approximations of real beauty, unity, etc., that they are *Rep* VII.520; think also of the bodhisattva who remains active in *samsāra* by recognizing that what are known to be impersonal processes are conceived and felt by others as objects and projects. This transformed reintroduction of essentially person-involving categories is in the area of what Siderits 2003, 99-111, calls 'ironic engagement'.

facets of moral development, transforming the whole of our phenomenology, and changing the most basic ways in which the everyday appears to us.<sup>86</sup> We are not just directed away from our individual selves, but from the whole way of looking at the world as involving persons.<sup>87</sup> Seeing reality as impersonal frees us from the clamouring demands of the personal and social, enabling us to see and to feel particular situations as articulations of ultimate reality, be that suffering and dependent-arising, or the intelligible Good Itself.

Does it, in the end, make much difference, ethically, whether this impersonal reality is the intelligible Good or transient dependent arising? Perhaps orientation towards reality is good for us regardless, just because it is a disciplining of our experiences according to the preference for reality over appearance.<sup>88</sup> Yet even if this is so, there are still significant differences in how a practice of knowing impersonal reality affects us, according to whether that reality is Platonic or Buddhist. The differences arise, however, not simply from the metaphysics, but from the accompanying radically different conceptions of what it is to know such a reality. The ethical differences between the Buddhist and the Platonic forms of impersonal idealism arise most sharply from their epistemological differences.

Plato's reality is, above all, intelligible – as is captured by the older convention of translating ἰδέα and εἶδος (both of which have connotations of cognition<sup>89</sup>) as Idea. That the intelligibility of reality requires stability, and independence of changing sensibles, tells us much already about Plato's famously robust conception of knowledge. To know – in the *Meno*, the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, the *Philebus* – is deeply connected to explanation, to giving a *logos* (an explanatory account) of the nature of unchanging things. The *Meno* (98a) and the *Philebus* (18c-d) call grasping the 'why' the bond that ties our cognitions together into something sufficiently robust to meet the *Republic's* high demand that we, to count as knowers, be able to defend an account of the being of a thing which we can defend against all interrogation (*Rep.* 534b-c). Explanation is normative, and explanations can only be complete when they are anchored in goodness – 'that it is good so' is the only bedrock in explanation (*Phaedo* 98b-99c). This means that the activity of turning towards impersonal reality is for Plato an activity of drawing increasingly comprehensive explanatory relations between things; discerning the real structure underlying the changing sensible appearances; understanding the 'why' of each known thing as well as of its relations, in such a way that one appreciates by what

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<sup>86</sup> This point is highlighted by Murdoch 1956 and 1970.

<sup>87</sup> It is perhaps no surprise then that both parties have faced criticism of not allowing to personal relationships the sort of overriding importance they are commonly expected to have. Regarding Plato, see Vlastos 1981.

<sup>88</sup> I emphasise the good Plato saw in this minimal truth-orientation in Carpenter 2017.

<sup>89</sup> εἶδος literally means 'what is seen', and therefore the form, shape, look, or even beauty of a thing or person; ἰδέα can mean 'idea, notion', in addition to form (LSJ). Both are related to the verb εἶδω, a verb for seeing, more commonly found in its perfect form, οἶδα, to know.

standard these may be judged good, and fitting within a well-ordered, intelligible cosmos.

One of the reasons we lack a distinct suite of Platonic exercises for soul-transformation is because engaging in theoretical astronomy or theoretical physics or higher mathematics already counts as a reality-orienting exercise of the relevant kind.<sup>90</sup> But the deeper reason for the lack is that, because his conception of knowledge is explanation-based, Plato takes questioning to be the exclusive route to knowledge of impersonal reality. Knowing implies an ability to explain that can only come from having posed questions one genuinely has and accepted only those answers that make sense to oneself, for reasons one grasps for oneself and can articulate.<sup>91</sup>

The effect of such attempts to understand is, above all, *unifying*: Striving to comprehend coherent explanations of a unified reality organises and unites our disparate psychic resources. This unification around a common and unified purpose eliminates conflicts of interest, countervailing desires, inconsistency between word and deed as well as erraticness in behaviour. It should also inoculate us against marketing, advertising, propaganda and other forms of manipulation which depend upon making us feel good, or which serve partial interests insulated from their relation to the real good. Orientation towards an integrated, explicable reality makes each thing appear as something to be fitted into this picture and project, taking its significance – and its attractiveness – from how it fits into this larger aim. Plato can agree that the *psyche* is as disunified as the Buddhists say it is; but *making it into* a real unity by organising our apprehensions of value around the unifying project of grasping a unified reality is a fundamental good, with the host of knock-on benefits identified.

When Plato takes knowledge to be the power to explain the nature or being of what is unchanging, he explicitly contrasts these *intelligibilia* with whatever is known via the senses, of which there can be no knowledge (e.g., *Philebus* 59b). The Buddhists, by contrast, consistently prefer perception-models of knowing ultimate reality. Taking transience to be a mark of existence – indeed, as one of the most fundamental facts that we must appreciate in order to transform our experiences – it is fitting that perception (whether internal or external) is the favoured epistemic mode for capturing that reality. The Buddhists prefer in it precisely what Plato disdains. Where Plato claims that to be intelligible is to be liable to explanation, graspable in well-defined, well-related, stable and correct concepts, the Buddhist holds that this very thing is just so much conceptual proliferation; the only experience of reality as it is will be non-conceptual and quasi-perceptual. So instead of various examples of inquiry, as we get in Plato (*elenchus*, dialectic, the method of hypothesis, collection and division), the Buddhist offers various techniques for manipulating, controlling and improving our attentive-

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<sup>90</sup> Burnyeat 2000 is eloquent and erudite in his articulation of the ‘why mathematics is good for the soul’; Carone 1997 does the same for astronomy in the *Timaeus*.

<sup>91</sup> Carpenter 2023 explores the importance of grasping and giving reasons ourselves for the ethical transformation engendered, including our accountability to one another.

perceptual faculties (primarily in meditational exercises, and in narratives), so that we might clear away whatever is obstructing our direct, immediate perception of reality.

For the Buddhist, practiced attention to transient reality should likewise transform our experiences, and make us immune to the distortions of the many passing phenomena – but now these transient phenomena also include the distortions of reasoning and explanation. There is accordingly no promised *unifying* effect on the soul, nor would this be considered a good thing. Our practice in seeing the disunity, or the accidentalness of transient unity, should rather reduce anxiety about whether we are ourselves such a unity, or whether we have had this momentary unity disrupted. Perceiving ubiquitous dependent arising, we come to expect no overall control alongside pervasive partial responsibility. It engenders then a practical responsiveness to concrete situations which at the same time is divested of the deluded practice of isolating and blaming some ‘real culprit’ distinct from the whole set of inter-connected conditions and causes.

Plato’s orientation offers continual practice in distinguishing real explanatory relations from merely accidental juxtaposition, cultivating a love of truth and reality over appearance that so informs and relates our emotional life that egoistic gratification no longer appeals; until we, like the gods, love good and want to be the cause only of good things in and for others and the world generally. The different Buddhist metaphysics favours the cultivation of an appreciation of relationality *tout court*, undifferentiatedly. Where Platonic inquiry promises to unify the soul, for the Buddhist there is no escape into hard-won independence and reassuringly solid individuation. There is only that escape from suffering, and from creating more suffering, that comes from recognising that this transient, mutually dependent reality is the only reality there is. Such recognition cultivates above all a habit of appreciating the inter-connectedness of things; an ethos of giving patient attention to the multitude of causes and conditions giving rise to their varied effects, and a caution about locking down on any one factor as *the* cause – conversely a way of experiencing others and oneself as always co-conditioned, porous, embedded within multiple conditions without any core independent of these. This should contribute to generating a kind of concern and compassion for the suffering lack of autonomy experienced by all beings by the very nature of things. But this is not the conclusion implied by a consistent belief set. It is rather the fallout of deeply recognising reality as dependently arising, transient and no-self, and of appreciating the causes of suffering in all their fine-grained particularity.

The two views have genuine differences, but these differences stem from their shared ethical commitment to knowing an impersonal reality. This shared ethical commitment is what makes their different epistemologies so salient. Seeking explanation-based knowledge of the impersonal order of the cosmos involves materially different psychological activity and work from seeking a quasi-perceptual knowing of a non-teleological reality. As the labour in search of the end differs, one might expect the effects of that labour on the seeker to differ, too. But whatever the

differences in the details here, both the Buddhist and the Platonist consider that striving for knowledge of reality will purify the emotions, draw us out of ourselves precisely because the object to know is devoid of personal connotations and connections; and this purification of the emotions, on both accounts, returns us to the particular, which we are able to see for the first time truly, and with care.