

**Rule-Consequentialist Reading of Theravada Buddhist Ethics: Interpretative Issues**

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The research on Buddhism by the western academic circle has been evolving in two directions, one is doctrinal interpretation and the other is interpreting ethical teachings. According to recent views expressed by western scholars on Buddhism, the first line of interpreting in terms of doctrinal tenets have not served to produce positive results among the western readers. So, the latest interest among western scholars in Buddhism has turned towards interpreting ethical teachings present in the Buddhist literature. The scholars engaged in studying Buddhist ethics assume that presenting the Buddhist ethics in terms of western ethical categories would serve the western reader to feel much easy to understand Buddhist ethics.

The growing interest in Buddhist ethics has led the western Buddhist scholars with the background training in western ethics to find a theoretical structure for Buddhist ethics. However, the task of finding a theoretical structure from the western ethical traditions analogous to Buddhism, particularly to Theravada Buddhism has been a bone of contention among scholars.

In spite of the ever-growing literature on Buddhist ethics within the academic circles, this trend itself has become an issue. In other words, bringing mutually contradicting western ethical categories, to name few, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and virtue ethics in general, utilitarianism, consequentialism, Kantian deontology, moral particularism and pragmatism etc. to compare with Buddhist ethics/Theravada Buddhist ethics has generated confusion over the understanding of Buddhist ethics. This situation raises the question which Western ethical theory does exactly resemble Buddhist views, and in what respects. To name few ethical categories which were sought to interpret theoretical structure of the Theravada Buddhist ethics, virtue ethics, utilitarian/ consequentialist ethics, Kantian deontological ethics, pragmatism and meta-ethics. The latest interpretation came as Theravada Buddhist ethics resembles Rule-Consequentialism. This was suggested by Charles Goodman. Goodman in his work *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*, addresses the issue of interpreting Buddhist ethics in terms of western ethical categories. He

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finds it as sort of confusing task and still assumes that we need to find a theoretical structure within the Buddhist ethics, all the three Buddhist traditions, Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Goodman denies the influential argument of Damien Keown that Buddhist ethics, especially Theravada Buddhist ethics resembles Aristotelian Virtue ethics (1992). Goodman finds it consequentialism is the plausible comparison for Buddhist ethics. He recognizes Theravada Buddhist ethics maintains evidence of consequentialism in general and Rule-consequentialism in particular.

Rule-consequentialism decides morality of rules based on the consequences that can be produced by their following. Further, to designate a certain ethical theory as a rule-consequentialism, it must propose a theory of well-being. After building the consequentialist reading over Theravada Buddhist Ethics, Goodman embarks on the task of postulating a consequentialist theory of well-being. Analyzing a list of ten kinds of moral actions to follow, Goodman interprets that TBE has an **Objective List Theory**. In explaining the place given to sensual enjoyment and material wealth in Theravada, he makes a sound judgment that Buddhism does not deny enjoying sensual pleasures since they are bad, but due to the fact that attachment to them is conducive to prolong the worldly existence (*samsāra*).

Textual analysis proves that Theravada Buddhist Ethics has theory of well-being which includes both spiritual success and material success.

Though inviolability of rules, theory of well-being and consideration of consequences of an action can be met in Theravada Buddhism, its moral criterion is inclusive of several elements, particularly the nature of 'intention' behind an action, which is not highlighted in consequentialist ethics. So, the rule-consequentialist interpretation does not go without contentions. As to consequentialist theories, priority is given to consequences.

It is a general understanding that emphasis only on consequences would allow looking for even immoral acts but with good consequences. Certain disparities found between the two ethical systems require further discussion. In the consequentialist theories, there is moral permission to sacrifice the minority for the well-being of the majority. This element has been subject to criticism on this theory even by the other rival theorists of western ethics. Thus, comparison of rule-consequentialism and Buddhist ethics meet serious differences. In this paper, I will attempt to discuss differences between the two ethical systems and it will help to further understanding of each system. Finally, I will look at the general problem of interpreting Buddhist ethics in the lens of western ethics. With regard to interpreting Theravada Buddhist ethics by the western

scholars, one observable fact is that the writers find a text or reference which supports their view and interpreting Buddhism they propose. I find here Goodman also has not been able to avoid this mistake. Rather than counting the wholeness of the Buddhist ethical system, the writer has picked one element from the whole and tries to convince the part as the whole.

The suggestion to be made in interpreting Theravada Buddhist ethics is to build the relationship between Buddhist wisdom to morality. In this context, by 'wisdom', I mean the realization of causality mainly and related other concepts such as impermanence, suffering and non-self. Realization of the truth is the demarcation between the enlightened being and ordinary sentient beings. The Buddhist tradition mainly emphasizes 'wisdom'. So, any philosophical discussion, ethic or epistemology should be centred on the issue of suffering and method of removing. Insight that Buddhism offers is the intellectual understanding (wisdom) of the reality is the source of all the other goods. It is special to Buddhism, what Buddhism calls 'wisdom' or intellectual understanding does not limit to mere theoretical understanding as if in the west. There is no dichotomy in Buddhism as practical reason and theoretical reason.

**Key Words:** Theravada Buddhist Ethics, Rule-Consequentialism, Rules, well-being, Objective List theory, Charles Goodman