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Comment and Discussion

Roy W. Perrett The bodhisattva paradox

In two of his books Arthur Danto has presented a conundrum that he calls the “Bodhisattva Paradox.” The purpose of this article is to argue that the Mahāyāna Buddhist need not be committed to this paradox. Let us begin with Danto’s own formulations of his puzzle. Firstly, then, from his *Analytical Philosophy of Action*:

Consider the negative attribution that I did not pass yesterday into Nirvana. True as an attribution, it at least does not ascribe to me something *I* did. For I did not forbear transferring to the nirvanic state, since such transfer does not lie within my present powers. Such powers are commonly assigned to, indeed they define, the Bodhisattva. But the case of the Bodhisattva raises some curious questions regarding the logical presumption that forbearance presupposes power: that *does not* presupposes *can*. Mahayana doctrine teaches that in contrast with the selfish conduct of the Elders, who sought salvation for themselves alone, passing one at a time into Nirvana, the Bodhisattva postpones his own bliss until *all* may be saved. This is the theory of the Greater Vehicle, as it is called, entailing a mass and total transfer of creaturehood. The ordinary assumption is that the Bodhisattva *can* nirvanize himself; having purified himself of karma, he is fully enlightened. The question now is whether in fact the Bodhisattva could pass into Nirvana after all. Suppose he decided to. Then surely he must be selfish, seeking his own bliss while countless others suffer. How can such a being be said to be fully enlightened? And if not fully enlightened, how has he the power to pass into Nirvana? He can only do this if he is sufficiently enlightened, and if he *is* sufficiently enlightened he cannot. We might call this the Bodhisattva Paradox, remarking *en passant* that it *logically* guarantees that *none* shall be saved *until* all are saved. The Bodhisattva Paradox is echoed in the western idea of a morally perfect being, the latter defined as so good as to be *incapable* of evil. Since it is logically inconsistent with his nature to *do* evil, he does not *forbear* and indeed he is logically impotent to forbear from evil.¹

In Danto’s *Mysticism and Morality*, the argument is spelled out in this way:

The general conception of the *bodhisattva* is that of one who has attained enlightenment and can pass over into Nirvana, but who postpones his own bliss until all mankind has reached the same point as he—and then all will pass over together. In fact, this description is somewhat vulgar. For by the same logic that negates the *arhat*, the position of the *bodhisattva* just described is also impossible. There is an interesting moral paradox. The *bodhisattva* cannot pass over into Nirvana. He cannot because, were he to do so he would exhibit a selfishness that a *bodhisattva* cannot have. If he has the selfishness, he is not a *bodhisattva*, and so cannot enter Nirvana. If he lacks the selfishness, again, he cannot enter Nirvana, for that would be a selfish act. So either way, the *bodhisattva* is impotent to enter Nirvana. Like God who, in the Christian teaching, cannot do evil because it is inconsistent with his nature, the *bodhisattva* cannot perform the ultimately selfish act. So no one can reach Nirvana: *we* cannot because we are not *bodhisattvas* and the *bodhisattva* cannot because he is a *bodhisattva*.²

The connection of this puzzle with one of the familiar problems of Christian

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natural theology is interesting. The problem about whether God can do evil given that He is both perfectly good and omnipotent is one of a family of traditional “paradoxes of omnipotence” that arise from the consideration of the logical consistency of the divine attributes.³ Now at first sight there might appear to be no difficulty here. The question “Can God do evil?” might seem analogous to “Can an honest man tell a lie?” Of course an honest man *can* tell a lie; but then he ceases to be an honest man any more. Similarly God *can* do evil; it is within His ability as an omnipotent being. If He did so, however, He would no longer be God. But here the analogy breaks down. An honest man can cease to be honest, but can God cease to be morally perfect? Here we have to recall another of the traditional divine attributes: immutability. If God ceased to be morally perfect, He would cease to be God. But how can an immutable God cease to be God?

Consider in this connection the fact that the traditional Christian concept of God includes at least two requirements. First, whoever occupies the divine office will always occupy it; that is, God is a (factually) necessary being. Secondly, any occupant of the divine office will have to be morally perfect (God is all-good). Thus God cannot do evil without ceasing to be God. But He cannot cease to be God. Therefore He cannot do evil. And if He *cannot* do evil, His moral perfection does not involve His *forbearance* from acts of evil.

Is there a similar problem attending the concept of a *bodhisattva* in Buddhism? Suppose we reply once again on an analogy with the case of the honest man: the *bodhisattva* can enter *nirvāṇa*, but if he did so he would cease to be a *bodhisattva*. Now *bodhisattvas* (unlike God, but like honest men) are not required to be immutable. Indeed one day they will all presumably become Buddhas. (All that is disputed is whether they could do this before all sentient beings were capable of becoming Buddhas.) Thus the difficulty that dogs this sort of reply for the Christian need not trouble the Buddhist.

But the Buddhist position is not quite as simple as that. In the first place, although *bodhisattvas* are not immutable, once they reach the stage of the seventh or eighth *bhūmi* their status is said to be “irreversible” (*avaivartika*).⁴ That is, at that stage a *bodhisattva* is incapable of switching over to the methods of salvation practiced by the *arhants* or *pratyekabuddhas*. He is no longer free to stray from the path to complete enlightenment, to deviate from his avowed goal of releasing all sentient beings from suffering. Nevertheless, there is a lower stage (the sixth *bhūmi*) at which point the *bodhisattva*'s position is said to be equivalent to that of the *arhant* in that nothing remains to be “done,” so that if he chose to he could enter *nirvāṇa*. Thus it is true that after the eighth *bhūmi* the *bodhisattva* is said to be unable to shift to another *yāna*, and hence it might seem that at that stage he cannot opt for Buddhahood without renouncing his *bodhisattva* vows. But at the sixth *bhūmi* he *can* opt for the goal of the *arhant*, but forbears.

So far, however, I have been assuming that there are three distinct salvatory goals within Buddhism leading to the respective enlightenments of the *arhant*, of the *pratyekabuddha*, and of the *bodhisattva*. This is the early Mahāyāna view:

three separate paths leading to three distinct goals (*arhant*, *pratyekabuddha*, *bodhisattva*). But there is an important later Mahāyāna tradition which denies the enlightenment of the *arhant* and the *pratyekabuddha*. Thus the One Vehicle (*ekayāna*) doctrine of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*) denounces the view that there are three paths to salvation. Only the *bodhisattvayāna* really provides salvation; one who becomes an *arhant* or a *pratyekabuddha* in actuality just attains to a corresponding stage of the *bodhisattvayāna*. As the *Lotus Sūtra* puts it (V, 74):

Just so are all the auditors possessed of the notion
that they have attained extinction,
And then the Victorious One tells such persons that
this is mere repose, not Blessed Rest.⁵

Similar claims are also to be found in the *Śrīmāla-sūtra* and in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.⁶ According to this line of Mahāyāna thought, then, there is only one sort of enlightenment (Buddhahood which is equivalent to *nirvāṇa*), and there is only one path to it (the *bodhisattva* path). Hence, strictly speaking, it is not true that the *bodhisattva* at the sixth stage *can* opt for the goal of the *arhant*, if by that we mean he can abandon the *bodhisattva* path. But in that case neither does he *forbear* from choosing to abandon the path.

It seems, then, that the “Bodhisattva Paradox” is harder to avoid than it might at first appear. However, let us go back and look at Danto’s puzzle again. The central assumption of his argument is that the *bodhisattva*’s entering into *nirvāṇa* would be incompatible with the unselfish compassion that characterizes such a being. In other words, the act of passing into *nirvāṇa* must be a selfish act (unless all beings simultaneously pass into *nirvāṇa* together). But to warrant this assumption we have to be working with an essentially Hīnayānist conception of *nirvāṇa*, that is, the kind of conception one presently encounters in the Theravādin countries, where the official doctrinal claim is that the Buddha by virtue of his attainment of *nirvāṇa* is no longer available to us. Ritual worship directed to him, then, is said to be properly understood as mere commemoration of a dead monk.⁷ But this, of course, is not the Mahāyāna conception of *nirvāṇa* or Buddhahood.

The Mahāyāna view is that *nirvāṇa* is equivalent to Buddhahood. When one attains Buddhahood after following the *bodhisattvayāna* (and, as we saw, according to the *ekayāna* tradition there is only the *bodhisattva* path to enlightenment), one also attains all three *kāyas* of the *trikāya*. With the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, then, a *bodhisattva* becomes not just a Buddha, but Buddha. It is not the case that on this account one who has attained Buddhahood is no longer available to us (as in the Hīnayāna conception). This is the point of the *trikāya* doctrine: the three aspects or “bodies” of Buddhahood. True, in attaining *nirvāṇa* one attains the impersonal *dharmakāya*, the *kāya* of pure consciousness which is the absolute transcendental reality. However, those who follow the *bodhisattva* path achieve upon enlightenment not only the *dharmakāya*, but also the *sambhogakāya* and

the *nirmāṇakāya*. In these latter two *rūpakāyas*, the Buddhas are available to other sentient beings to assist them: in the *sambhogakāya* they assist *bodhisattvas*, and in the *nirmāṇakāya* they help humans and other sentient beings to achieve enlightenment.

Thus the attainment of *nirvāṇa* does not, on the Mahāyāna account, involve a selfish abandonment of other sentient beings. Rather, it can fit one better to be able to assist other sentient beings on more levels. And if this is one's motive for entering *nirvāṇa*, this can hardly represent a selfishness incompatible with the nature of a *bodhisattva*. This point is implicitly recognized, for example, in the dGe-lugs-pa tradition of Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhism, which incorporates into its daily practice a prayer for the development of *bodhicitta* that ends:

From the virtuous merit that I collect
By practising giving and other perfections,
May I attain the state of a Buddha
To be able to benefit all sentient beings.⁸

If, then, one attains Buddhahood or *nirvāṇa* for the benefit of all sentient beings, this attainment is not incompatible with the compassionate nature of a *bodhisattva*. And since such an attainment is not in this sense necessarily incompatible with the nature of a *bodhisattva*, then it could be an attainment within the ability of such a being. That is, a *bodhisattva* of the appropriate rank and motivation *can* enter *nirvāṇa*, but forbears.

Now I do not wish to claim that the traditional notion of the *bodhisattva* is entirely unproblematic.⁹ However, it does seem that the Mahāyāna Buddhist need not be committed to Danto's "Bodhisattva Paradox." What Danto's argument does point up is that the *bodhisattva* conception cannot be properly squared with a Hīnayāna conception of *nirvāṇa*. But this is presumably one of the reasons why the Mahāyāna thinkers felt obliged to develop the conception of *nirvāṇa* as Buddhahood that includes attainment of the three *buddhakāyas*.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 166.

2. Arthur C. Danto, *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 82. In other words, Danto affirms precisely what T. R. V. Murti denies in his *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955), p. 263: "It is not that the Bodhisattva cannot achieve his freedom without achieving the freedom of all. This would involve a vicious circle: he cannot free others without first being free himself, and he cannot free himself without freeing others."

3. Two interesting recent studies of these traditional problems about God's attributes, both of which refer extensively to the literature, are Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). See also Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969): 208–216.

4. Cf. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 235. On the *bhūmi* schema see Nalinaksha Dutt, *Aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its Relation to Hīnayāna* (London: Luzac & Co., 1930), chap. 4; Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932), chap. 6. An excellent Tibetan manual of the *bodhisattva* path is *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* by *s.Gam.po.pa*, trans. Herbert V. Guenther (Berkeley, California: Shambala, 1971); the *bhūmis* are discussed in chap. 19 of this work.

5. *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, trans. Leon Hurvitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 118.

6. Cf. *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmāla*, trans. Alex and Hideko Wayman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 40, 81–84, 92; Jikido Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga* (Rome: Is.M.E.O., 1966), pp. 261–263.

7. However, Gombrich suggests that in Sri Lanka there is something of a tension between this official doctrine and actual practice. See Richard F. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), especially chap. 3.

8. *The Bodhicitta Vows and Lam-Rim Puja*, trans. Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey and others (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1974), p. 19 (my emphasis).

9. Consider, for instance, this conundrum from the debating tradition of the dGe-lugs-pa school of Tibetan Buddhism: “If one of the perpetual attributes of a Buddha’s Body of Enjoyment is that he is always surrounded by Bodhisattvas, how can it be said that all sentient beings eventually attain Buddhahood?” And this proffered solution: “All sentient beings will attain Buddhahood, but there is no time when all sentient beings will have attained Buddhahood because the number of sentient beings is infinite.” (Quoted from Paul Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1973), pp. 350–351).

10. My thanks to my wife Valerie for assisting with scriptural references.