COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

How Can a Buddha Come to Act? The Possibility of a Buddhist Account of Ethical Agency

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Introduction

In the past decade or so there has been a surge of monographs on the nature of ‘Buddhist Ethics.’ For the most part, authors are concerned with developing and defending explications of Buddhism as a normative ethical theory with an apparent aim of putting Buddhist thought directly in dialogue with contemporary Western philosophical debates in ethics. Despite disagreement among Buddhist ethicists concerning which contemporary normative ethical theory a Buddhist ethic would most closely resemble (if any), it is arguable that all Buddhist ethicists (like all Buddhists) embrace and endorse the Four Noble Truths as a framing assumption. That is, a Buddhist ethic will (1) typically assume that we fallible human beings are in trouble—that is, that there is suffering (Skt. duhkha / Tib. sdug bsngal); (2) diagnose the trouble; (3) posit a strategy for overcoming the trouble (for example, the Eightfold Path); and (often) (4) indicate what life would be like when one has overcome the trouble. Significantly, for any ethical theory that is ‘progressive’ in the sense of positing a strategy or pathway toward a desired teleological end, there will be a symmetric relation of dependence between the teleological end and the strategy employed to achieve that end. That is, not only will the stages of the pathway posited for overcoming the trouble be justified in relation to their role in constituting or producing the teleological end, but the teleological end itself will be determined by this process. Arguably, the Four Noble Truths are also a framing assumption for the Indian and Tibetan tradition of Buddhist logic and epistemology that stems from the thought of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. According to this tradition, one major cause of our trouble is our employment of universals (sāmānya/spyi). Most crudely, this practice leads us to (fallaciously) posit and reify the objects of our intentional states. We think there really are people and middle-sized objects ‘out there’ toward which we direct our anger, fear, and clinging, and thereby perpetuate the suffering that is the central expression of our trouble.

More subtly, our employment of universals leads us to confuse our perceptual judgments or conceptual cognitions (considered, ultimately, to be erroneous or distorted, abhṛānta) with perception (which is considered to be non-erroneous or undistorted, abhṛānta). How shall we understand this? Perception (pratyākṣa / mngon sum) according to Dharmakīrti, is one of only two types of knowledge, or valid cognition (pramāṇa / tshad ma), the second of which is inference (anumāṇa / rjes dpag). Per-
ception is considered to be the initial and direct acquaintance with a real object, where the only real objects in Dharmakīrti’s ontology are unique and momentary particulars (svalakṣaṇa / rang mtshan) capable of causal efficacy (arthakriyā).

Importantly, perception is considered to be free from conceptuality (kalpanāpōḍha) and, as such, is undistorted. By contrast, cognitions that are in any way mediated by concepts, language, memory, or recognition (such as perceptual judgments of the kind ‘this is such-and-such’ or instances of ‘seeing as’) are distorted. This is because their objects are conceptual constructs, or universally characterized phenomena (sāmānyalakṣaṇa / spyi mtshan), and universally characterized phenomena are not real. Moreover, although inference is considered to be a valid form of cognition, it is still a form of conceptual knowledge and, ultimately speaking, does not directly grasp a real particular object in its true nature. Thus, inferential cognition is, essentially, distorted knowledge, unlike perception.

If we return to the framing assumption of the Four Noble Truths, the Dharmakīrtian system suggests a characterization of the mind not only of fallible human beings on the pathway to buddhahood, but also that of a buddha at the end of this process. Fallible human beings rely on inference as a source of knowledge, engage in conceptual cognition, and have dualistic awareness. These practices (and cognitive capacities) rely on universals/concepts and, as such, are distorted. Our reliance on universals is often explained in terms of our ignorance (avidyā / ma rig pa). A buddha, by contrast, is one who transcends all distortion and ignorance. He has knowledge on the basis of direct perception, engages in nonconceptual cognition, and has nondual awareness.

As one might expect, a number of philosophical problems arise from this system. For the most part, respondents (both traditional and contemporary) focus on problems that arise specifically in epistemology, ontology, and logic. What is often overlooked is that this system also has implications for philosophy of mind in relation to Buddhist ethical theory. In a recent article, Jay Garfield (2006) canvasses some of these implications with respect to orthodox Buddhist conceptions of mind. Ordinary, fallible human beings are considered to rely (mistakenly) on inference and universals as a source of knowledge, engage in conceptual thought, and have dualistic awareness. These practices (and cognitive capacities) are all forms of (or presuppose) anumāna and/or conceptual cognition and, as such, are fundamentally mistaken and obfuscated. A buddha, by contrast, is one who transcends all obfuscation and, thus, does not employ anumāna and/or conceptual cognition. According to orthodox accounts, a buddha has knowledge on the basis of direct perception, engages in nonconceptual thinking, and has nondual awareness.

Garfield argues that it is difficult to make coherent the posited transcendent model (i.e., that of a buddha). I believe he is right about this. Without rehearsing his argument, we are presented with a buddha who has inexplicable abilities to recognize, know, and be aware of certain facts (such as that inferential cognition lacks authority and that his disciples are in certain states of spiritual development, where this warrants variation in teaching, etc.) without employing universals, concepts, or inferences. But how can a buddha recognize, know, or be aware of a particular (let
alone more complex facts) without some generality by means of which he grasps it (or them) as such?  

We might add to these worries a specific concern about this model as an ideal for ethical agency. As mentioned earlier, there is a relation of dependence between the teleological end of a Buddhist ethical theory that takes the Four Noble Truths as a framing assumption and the strategy employed to achieve that end. If the teleological end (i.e., that of buddhahood) is not coherent, this fact problematizes (or, more strongly, undermines the justificatory status of) the pathway posited to achieve this end. Moreover, a core assumption in Buddhist thought is that there was a historical figure, Siddhārtha Gautama, who attained enlightenment and became a buddha in his lifetime, thereafter choosing to remain on earth to transmit the dharma (his teachings). These (and their constitutive) behaviors are usually unreflectively described in terms of action and agency. Moreover, they are typically explained as expressions of the Buddha’s compassion for others who are still mired in suffering. But how is this possible if a buddha does not employ concepts, does not infer, and has nondual awareness? To whom does a buddha express his compassion? Is he even aware of doing so if his awareness is nondual and nonconceptual? How can we consider a buddha (including the historical Buddha) as performing ethical actions and, thereby, being an ethical agent?

What do we mean by ‘action’ and ‘agent’? In this essay I define ‘agency’ as instantiated in action and ‘action’ as intentional. There are two things to note here. First, the claim that agency is instantiated in action does not mean that an agent is the cause of action. One might be tempted to think the latter must be the case. Indeed, the view that agents or selves or free will with independent causal efficacy determines actions is the working assumption of those who advance agent-causal accounts of agency. According to this view, action is defined in terms of agency (i.e., action is caused by agents). Following my definition, however, agency is defined in terms of action (i.e., agency is instantiated in action). Action is conceptually more primitive than agency. However, agency is not instantiated in just any behavior (such as mere physical, bodily movement or reaction). In this essay I shall assume that agency is instantiated in intentional action. What do I mean by intentional? At its weakest, an action is intentional insofar as it is in some sense directed or guided behavior (i.e., it is not a random happening or accident). In a stronger sense, it involves the capacity to explain the action in terms of reasons, where these reasons exhibit (the directedness of) the behavior. The weak and strong senses of intentionality are related: it is via reason-giving activities, in response to questioning, that the intentionality of the action is exhibited. This definition does not (yet) commit us to any substantive account of the nature of the inner workings of the mind; it merely posits the minimal fact that intentional actions are directed, and can be endorsed as such via reason-giving explanations.

Notice that this definition of agency does not, in the first instance at least, directly conflict with the Buddhist rejection of the ‘self’ (ātman/ bdag—best known in its Pali form as the ‘anatta’ doctrine). How best to understand this doctrine is subject to much dispute. Arguably, the anatta doctrine is generally and most directly inter-
interpreted as the thesis that there is no substantial ego underlying our experience—we are nothing but a sequence of causally linked psychological and physical events and processes. Understood in this way, the anatta doctrine is an ontological thesis. The question of whether a buddha can be an agent and, thereby, be considered to have intentionally acted is not. Our definition of ‘agent’ and ‘action’ relates to certain cognitive, epistemic capacities (i.e., agency is instantiated in intentional action, and intentional action requires capacities to direct and guide and provide reasons to explain behavior). Such cognitive epistemic capacities need not either include or presuppose the existence of such metaphysical and/or mental entities as a ‘self’ or free will with causal efficacy (as presupposed by certain contemporary agent-causal accounts of action). Intentional action does not require a ‘self,’ so defined, to cause action, and, hence, according to my definition, we can endorse the concept of agency without thereby endorsing the existence of an entity ‘self.’

According to the assumption of the Dhammakīrtian system, however, it seems that a buddha cannot even achieve the bare minimum required to engage in intentional action and, thereby, be designated an ‘agent.’ Given that he engages in nonconceptual cognition and has nondual awareness, it seems that he cannot even direct or guide his behavior (i.e., act in one way rather than another, toward one object rather than another) let alone offer reasons for why he did so. It would seem that a buddha cannot act intentionally and, hence, cannot be designated an agent.

The real force of the problem becomes apparent when we realize that this would also apply to the historical Buddha. If a buddha cannot act then the historical Buddha could not act. However, we have already said that all Buddhist traditions assume that there was a historical Buddha who performed various actions. One of his most important (sets of) actions was that of teaching the dharma. However, if he could not be an agent, then he could not act. If he could not act, it follows that he could not teach. If he could not teach, then we could not have the dharma as taught by him. If there is no dharma, then there is no Buddhism. But we do have the dharma, so it seems that the historical Buddha must have been an agent. And, yet, on the assumption of the Dhammakīrtian system, he could not have been.

We have a problem.

Garfield’s Response: Take Buddhism to China

There are a number of ways we could respond to the apparent implication that a buddha cannot act and, hence, cannot be an ethical agent. I shall proceed by addressing a particularly promising response offered by Garfield. Note that Garfield does not particularly focus on the problem of ethical agency (that is for us to solve). His focus is the problem of how one might account for the mind of a buddha and his capacity for action, more generally. According to our definition, a capacity for action is a necessary condition for agency. Hence, a capacity for action is also a necessary condition for ethical agency. Thus, if Garfield’s proposed solution concerning the capacity for action of a buddha works, it should be possible for us to extend it to account for the possibility of ethical agency. Or so I shall assume.
Garfield’s Proposal
According to Garfield, the problems that arise from the orthodox conception of buddhahood are inextricable from what he calls the “representational model of mind” assumed by Indo-Tibetan thinkers. Insofar as we accept such a model of mind, Garfield argues, a Buddhist will inevitably be faced with this problematic model of buddhahood.

Garfield proceeds to argue that we need not accept such a model of mind, that a “non-representational” model would solve some of these problems. Garfield observes that the Classical Chinese seem to offer a non-representational model of mind, and he argues that for the “completion” (Garfield 2006, p. 1) of Buddhism, Buddhist thought had to go from the West (i.e., a representational model of mind in which the Buddhist problems rose to salience) to the East (i.e., a non-representational model of mind for which the key assumptions that motivate these problems are not present). Hence Garfield’s motif of Bodhidharma (the Buddhist monk who is traditionally believed to have transmitted Buddhism to China) progressively leaving India for China in response to the increasing weight of problems inherent in the Indo-Tibetan logico-epistemological system. We need to take Buddhism to China.

How exactly does ‘taking Buddhism to China’ solve these problems? Garfield’s answer appeals to two fairly well-recognized, but contested, aspects of Classical Chinese thought. The first: a so-called ‘non-representational’ account of mind. The second: a certain notion of spontaneous responsiveness. Garfield does not distinguish between these aspects of Chinese thought. Nonetheless, they suggest different possibilities for solving some of the problems that arise with respect to ethical agency for a Buddhist who is worried about universals. I shall discuss them independently.

The Chinese ‘Non-representational’ Account of Mind
Garfield does not provide specific details of what he refers to as the Chinese “non-representational” account of mind but, instead, defers to the scholarship of Chad Hansen. Hansen (1992) interprets the Classical Chinese as advancing a somewhat functionalist theory of mind. Arguably, the Classical Chinese themselves did not formalize their notion of ‘mind’ (xin 心). What Hansen offers, thus, is an account of what he takes to be implicit in the philosophical activities of Chinese philosophers. This interpretation of the implicit Classical Chinese conception of mind has both its adherents (Tanaka 2004) and detractors (Hall and Ames 1995). Hansen’s strategy, followed by Garfield, is to highlight important distinctions between Indo-European languages and Chinese to explain divergences in their philosophies of language and which, Hansen claims, directly influence their respective theories of mind. In particular, Hansen argues that the distinctive pictographic nature of Chinese language removes the need to posit consciousness and mental representations as a medium for interpreting objects of experience. The philosophy of mind that Hansen claims is implied by this linguistic structure is analogous to the functional processing of a computer (Hansen 1992, p. 18). Human behavior is explained simply in terms of the execution of a certain “socialized program” (p. 20) in response to various kinds of sensible input. Such programming may, admittedly, be quite complicated, but, significantly and quite radically, it does not involve consciousness or intentionality;
there is no place for, nor need to posit, any mental cognitive content (Hansen 1992, pp. 18–25).

Of course, functionalism per se need not oppose a representational theory of mind. It may be possible for mental representations to be functionally characterized, at some level, where these functions are realized by (say, neurophysiological) properties of the subject who is having these representations. Thus, it may be possible for an agent to be said to have intentional states (beliefs, desires, thoughts) and for these states to play some kind of functional role. Hansen-functionalism, however, denies the place of any representational content. Chinese philosophy, Hansen tells us, does not recognize “mental contents, the distinction of ideas and emotions, consciousness, awareness, and experience” (Hansen 1992, p. 18). This is because, for Hansen, the Classical Chinese did not conceive of the mind in representational terms given a philosophy of language that arose from their distinctly pictographic language. It need not follow from this that Hansen rejects all mentality. In fact, Hansen concedes that we may attribute beliefs to “a computer” (i.e., his model of the Classical Chinese theory of mind) but only if we allow a dispositional or wide-causal notion of belief. As it stands, however, he assumes that the concept of belief is not merely dispositional but has narrow semantic content and, as such, plays no role in the Classical Chinese theory of mind (Hansen 1992, pp. 377 ff.).

I shall not defend the plausibility of what I shall call Hansen-functionalism.18 Clearly, such a theory has its attractions for a Buddhist who is worried about the status of inference, universals, and intentional objects. Following this strategy, it seems we no longer need to posit a buddha with mysterious capacities for knowledge or awareness (of objects) that does not involve any cognition of intentional objects. Hansen-functionalism simply has no place for such objects. However, it now becomes unclear how this theory of mind would help us solve the problem of agency in the case of a buddha insofar as it would seem to exclude this very possibility. Agency, according to our definition, is instantiated in intentional action, and intentional action involves the capacity both to ‘direct’ behavior and to give intentional explanations for the directedness of such behavior. Hansen-functionalism, however, leans more toward behaviorism than contemporary forms of functionalism insofar as behavior is explained simply in terms of dispositions to respond to given environmental stimulants. While these dispositions may be quite complex (i.e., the black box of the mind need not be empty), there is no room in this account for a capacity to direct (or guide or exercise countervailing authority over) behavior, let alone provide intentional explanations for the directedness of such behavior. Thus, it would seem, a buddha with a mind characterized in terms of Hansen-functionalism does not have the capacity to act (as opposed to merely react) and, hence, is not an agent. We find ourselves back with our original problem: a buddha cannot act, and, thus, a buddha cannot be an agent or an ethical agent.19

But this time it seems worse. It is now not merely a buddha that cannot act or be an agent (ethical or otherwise); neither can the ordinary, fallible being who is trying to attain buddhahood. If a buddha’s mind is characterized in terms of Hansen-functionalism, then his mind before the attainment of buddhahood must also be characterized in terms of Hansen-functionalism. Functionalism (following any inter-
pretation) is not an acquired capacity; it is an explanation of how the human mind works *tut court* (whether a buddha or pre-buddha). If Hansen-functionalism cannot explain agency in the case of a buddha, neither can it do so for an ordinary, fallible being. One implication of this is that intentional action can no longer be accounted for in the progression toward buddhahood. This seems to be quite a radical implication insofar as it is generally assumed that the Eightfold Path toward the cessation of suffering inextricably involves intentional action (e.g., right action, speech, livelihood). Moreover, if we accept this particular non-representational functionalist route, we now have to provide an alternative explanation of one of the main causes of the trouble in which ordinary beings find themselves given that they no longer have intentional objects that they (mistakenly) reify and toward which they direct their intentional attitudes. How do we now explain the cause of suffering if we no longer have intentional objects? As I hope should be clear, going Hansen-functionalist would have significant revisionary costs for a Buddhist.

**Spontaneous Response**

Although Garfield’s proposed solution is *framed* in terms of a move to a non-representational theory of mind, the solution he actually offers focuses much more on certain Chinese notions of ‘spontaneity’ and responsiveness (or ‘spontaneous responsiveness’). Before investigating the details of Garfield’s proposal, we should clarify the idea of spontaneous responsiveness in its Classical Chinese context. This idea is best understood in terms of the Classical Chinese concept *wu-wei* 無為 and the *wu-wei* family of conceptual metaphors. Literally speaking, *wu* is a negation (i.e., it denotes lack, or absence, or non-existence), whereas *wei* tends to be understood as goal-directed, purposive, reflective action that involves evaluation and explicit application of social norms. *Wu-wei* is taken to describe a harmonious state in which actions are considered to flow freely and instantly and yet accord perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand (Slingerland 2003, p. 7). It is a spontaneous, prereflective response (Lai 2006, p. 103). Most contemporary Classical Chinese scholars agree that *wu-wei* and its family of metaphors constitute the ideal of agency for both the ‘mainstream’ Classical Daoist thinkers (i.e., Laozi and Zhuangzi) and Confucian thinkers (i.e., Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi).

**Garfield’s Solution**

How does Garfield use the notion of spontaneous responsiveness to solve his problem? Garfield advances his solution by an initial appeal to the thought of the Buddhist Yogācāra. Yogācāra is a school of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought that rivals Madhyamaka. Garfield argues that only in China, with its seedbed of Daoist thought, was Yogācāra properly understood and embraced. Here we have Garfield’s proposal for how the problems that arise in the Indo-Tibetan context concerning a buddha’s capacity for action may be solved (and Buddhism thereby “completed”). They are solved when Yogācāra is merged with Daoism in a context that does not recognize the problem of universals (given an implied non-representational view of the mind).

How does this work? Garfield explains that the central innovation introduced by the Yogācāra into Buddhist thought was the idea of a ‘foundation consciousness’
(ālaya-vijñāna / kun gzhi nams shes) that underlies all experience. Within this foundation consciousness is thought to reside ‘karmic potentials’ that ripen into dualistic experiences (which are inherently delusional). Through ethical practice, combined with an ever-deepening understanding of the nature of reality, we are thought to be able progressively to ‘exhaust’ these potentials and recover our foundation consciousness in its natural state (sometimes called our buddha-nature, buddha-dhatu).

Garfield attributes the flourishing of these Buddhist ideas in China to the fact that seemingly similar Daoist ideas were already in circulation. As he tells us, “daoist and Chinese Buddhist philosophers agreed ... any dao [or guiding discourse], like any raft, must be discarded if life is to be lived appropriately” (Garfield 2006, p. 21). ‘Liberation,’ according to Garfield, is spontaneously responding to the “immediacy of experience” (p. 24). We “attain the spontaneity in a domain that is the goal of practice” (p. 23). The implication seems to be that buddhas spontaneously respond on the basis of their buddha-nature. Such a response is an automatic, innate reaction to the stimulus of immediate experience.

There is an ambiguity in Garfield’s discussion of spontaneous responsiveness, however. For Garfield also writes of the “acquisition” of spontaneity where this, we are told, is the result of “gaining expertise” in a way that is analogous to “master[ing] a language, an art, a sport, a skill” (Garfield 2006, p. 23). “Action without thinking is an achievement depending on prior thought.” It is “simply the transformation of the need for a recipe” (p. 24). On the basis of these remarks, one could not be faulted for thinking that spontaneous responsiveness is crucially not an automatic, innate reaction; it is an ability that is the result of cultivation.

To feel the full force of this tension in Garfield’s remarks, it is helpful to recognize that the Daoist and Confucian thinkers had roughly two different approaches to the attainment of the ideal of wu-wei. Arguably, for Daoist thinkers (Laozi in particular), wu-wei is a natural or innate ability that is obscured by social conventions and linguistic structures. Wu-wei can also be understood to have specific prescriptive force; for the Daoists, to wu-wei is to rid oneself of socially conditioned responses, which include “society’s purposes, socially induced desires, social distinctions, or meaning structures. We are to free ourselves from social, artificial, unnatural guidance” (Hansen 1992, p. 214) in order to facilitate more spontaneous, automatic ‘natural’ responses. According to the Daoist model, the process toward attaining wu-wei is deconstructive; one progressively strips away conceptualization to uncover one’s innate spontaneous responsiveness.

For Confucian thinkers, however, wu-wei is typically considered to be a cultivated ability to act instantly and spontaneously in a way that is in perfect accord with the dictates of the situation at hand and, importantly, is in harmony with the demands of conventional morality (Slingerland 2003). Unlike the Daoist view, wu-wei, according to the Confucian account, refers to the phenomenological state of the doer; one responds immediately and spontaneously ‘as though’ one were responding naturally, when, in fact, this ability is the result of a process of training one’s dispositions to accord with certain virtues (de 德), grounded in one’s commitment to certain values, and manifested in one’s responses to particular situations. Such responsiveness is often described by analogy to the cultivation of a skill (Hansen 1992, Slinger-
The process of acquiring this *wu-wei* skill is *constructive*: the aspiring ‘gentleman’ (*junzi* 君子) commits himself to the guiding discourse, submitting to study and ritual practice until these traditional forms are somehow internalized. Eventually, the practitioner’s dispositions have been “so thoroughly harmonized with the dictates of normative culture that one accords with them spontaneously” (Slingerland 2003, p. 59).

In this way, the Classical Chinese offer us two very different models of the acquisition of spontaneous responsiveness. In one account (the Confucian) this capacity is acquired as the result of cultivation, and in another (the Daoist) this capacity is recovered by removing the obscuration of culture. One account is constructive, the other deconstructive. The question now arises: to which notion of spontaneous responsiveness does Garfield appeal in his claim that Buddhism is completed when it is taken to China? Which model of spontaneity is supposed to solve the problems concerning a buddha’s capacity for action?

Garfield’s position on this question is fundamentally ambiguous. In explicitly aligning the Buddhist Yogācāra ideas of foundation consciousness with Daoist thought, he seemingly invokes the Daoist deconstructive model of recovering spontaneity to account for a buddha’s capacity to act. Echoing the Daoistic natural capacity for spontaneity, Garfield describes buddha-nature as a “capacity for spontaneous engagement that must lie within our mind as we learn signs, on pain of regress” (Garfield 2006, p. 22). To live appropriately, Garfield seems to be claiming, we must ultimately discard any *dao* (guiding discourse) and respond from the basis of our innate buddha-nature. Such responsiveness, if aligned with Daoism, is not informed in any way by concepts or cultural norms; it is an automatic reaction to the stimulus of immediate experience.

However, in his appeal to the metaphors of skill acquisition, Garfield can be seen also to invoke the Confucian constructive model of acquiring spontaneity to account for a buddha’s capacity to act. By analogy to a virtuoso chef, we initially need “recipes” (Garfield 2006, p. 24) in order to learn the basic possibilities, which are then internalized so thoroughly that one not only accords with them spontaneously but with a context-sensitive flexibility that would be impossible for one who is merely ‘going by the book.’ Unlike the Daoists, for whom, arguably, concepts and cultural norms play no positive role, the Confucian account requires cultural norms; spontaneous responses involve, or at least presuppose, an internalized guiding discourse. Phenomenologically, such responses are ‘natural’ and immediate; however, structurally, they presuppose a complex cognitive architecture.

**A Possible Reconciliation . . .**

On a charitable reading, these two models of spontaneity may be reconcilable in Garfield’s thought. According to the constructive model, one commits oneself to following a certain discourse, submitting oneself to study and practice until the norms of this discourse are internalized and, eventually, manifested in one’s responses. As in the case of improvisational actors, the desired fluidity is only obtained after years of studied technique and a cultivated ability to recognize cues. This implies quite complex cognitive capacities and some degree of awareness on the part of the agent.
and allows for flexibility in response—although, importantly, it does not involve conscious and explicit calculation or deliberation. Transcendence is acquisition of expertise that no longer requires a “recipe” to provide explicit guidance. However, one could argue that this would only be possible if one has a latent ability to ‘follow’ a recipe or rule or set of norms (which might be considered an interpretation of the Rylean notion of know-how). This seems to be what Garfield is claiming when he writes that the capacity for ‘spontaneous engagement’ must lie within our mind as we learn signs on pain of regress. Here, ‘spontaneous engagement’ could be taken to refer to the foundation consciousness, as locus for the latent ability to follow a rule, in contrast to ‘spontaneity in action,’ which refers to the phenomenology of direct and immediate action. The idea would be that without the ālaya-vijñāna (foundational spontaneity, if you will) one could not cultivate (phenomenological) spontaneity in action.

While this may be a plausible reconciliation in Garfield, the following question remains: when enlightened persons act spontaneously, do they do so in a way that is (at all) informed (however latently) by their internalized discourse, or are their actions purely automatic expressions of their inherent nature? Garfield tells us that the internalized discourse “(like a raft) must be discarded” (Garfield 2006, p. 21); it is “transcended” (p. 23); we “leave the discourse behind” (p. 23). However, it is unclear whether this ‘leaving the discourse behind’ is a mere phenomenological abandonment (i.e., one responds spontaneously, without thinking about the internalized norms, but in a way that is structurally informed by these norms) or whether the abandonment is deeply structural with respect to the mind (i.e., one literally responds from the state of ālaya-vijñāna, free of conceptuality, representation, and subject-object duality). Are the spontaneous responses of enlightened beings essentially the result of cultivation or do they arise from our inherent nature, which, by methods involving the progressive purging of concepts and cultural norms, has finally been uncovered?

The issue of how properly to conceive and achieve wu-wei is not resolved within the Classical Chinese context; it is a point of tension for competing traditions of thought. Moreover, even within particular traditions (i.e., Confucianism) one finds apparently competing assumptions concerning the nature of mind and subtle differences in employment of wu-wei metaphors. Given that the issues arising from the concept wu-wei are not resolved in the Chinese context (and Chinese thought, thereby not ‘complete’) we should not suppose that Buddhism is completed by appropriating these ideas when introduced into this context. The question still remains: in what sense can a buddha be considered to act and, hence, be considered an agent? Moreover, our question still remains: can a buddha be considered an ethical agent?

The Alternative Response: Return to India and Tibet

While Garfield’s discussion does not solve our problem, it has helpfully pointed us toward two accounts of spontaneous responsiveness that may serve as schematic models for developing an account of the possibility of ethical agency in the case of a
buddha—what I call the deconstructive and constructive models. It is my view that we need not go to China to develop these models; rather, we might investigate, develop, and assess these models using the philosophical resources already available in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In what follows I provide some arguments for how these models may be developed in light of the Dharmakīrtian perspective introduced earlier. Given that this is not an issue explicitly acknowledged or addressed by Dignāga or Dharmakīrti, I shall develop my own arguments in order to assess the plausibility of these two models for answering our framing question: if we assume a Dharmakīrtian account of epistemology and its implied theory of the nature of mind, can we account for the possibility of the ethical agency of a buddha?24

The Deconstructive Model
Garfield’s discussion of the Buddhist Yogācāra already gives us some clue as to how a deconstructive model may be developed within the Indo-Tibetan context. A buddha would be one who has ‘exhausted’ his karmic potentials and recovered his foundation consciousness in its natural state. Thenceforth, he would spontaneously respond from the basis of his buddha-nature. Such responsiveness would be an automatic, natural reaction to the stimulus of particulars.

For this to be possible, we need to assume there is some kind of causal relationship between the particulars that constitute the ultimate ontology and the mind of a buddha for the stimulation of such a response. Prima facie, this assumption may seem to be compatible with the Dharmakīrtian approach insofar as causal efficacy is one of the criteria for specifically characterized phenomena.25

The clear virtue of the deconstructive approach is that it gives us an account of a buddha’s behavior that does not seem to involve or require inference or conceptual cognitions. This is an asset for a Buddhist who is committed to the Dharmakīrtian system. The deconstructive model does not require anumāna insofar as behavior is a direct response to the stimulation of particulars and not the outcome of any reasoning process. It also does not require perceptual judgments or conceptual cognitions insofar as particulars do not seem to require any form of mental ‘uptake’ (i.e., identification, recognition, interpretation) in order to cause these responses directly. Thus, it would seem, the deconstructive model is compatible with a commitment to the Dharmakīrtian system.

In what sense would these responses be ethical? According to Buddhist orthodoxy, a buddha expresses compassion in his behavior. As mentioned earlier, a buddha’s compassion is often used to explain why the historical Buddha remained in this world to teach the dharma after attaining enlightenment. He did so, we are told, out of compassion for others who are mired in suffering. The arising of such compassion, however, is partially explained in terms of the Buddha’s realization of the ultimate ontology, namely that the true nature of reality consists of discrete momentary particulars arising in mutual causal dependence.

According to the deconstructive model, however, this complex explanation of why the Buddha remained in this world would not be one that a buddha could actually provide to explain his behavior. His behavior would simply be a direct, innate
response to the stimulation of particulars. However, this fact alone does not negate the possibility of his ‘innate’ responses being compassionate (given, that is, some external criterion). Rather, it would merely negate some exegetical accounts of how the relation between the ethical and ontological concerns in Buddhism is to be properly understood.

We might follow Buddhist orthodoxy here and assume that the kinds of responses that will be generated from a fully recovered buddha-nature will be compassionate. If we do so, notice that we will not be able to specify what these ‘compassionate’ behaviors would be in advance. This is because they will be generated directly in response to the stimulus of particulars, and particulars will never be the same from one time to another (according to Dharmakīrti they are discrete, momentary events).

This may seem to be a welcome outcome for those with particularist inclinations; it seems true that no two situations will ever literally be identical—thus, why should we even suppose it possible to provide a specification of what counts as compassionate in advance of a given situation? But note the extremity of what is being proposed. In most analyses, the normativity of the term ‘compassion’ is derived from ordinary language use, where an ordinary understanding of the word compassion involves awareness of certain types of actions (or act descriptions) to which this term is generally applicable (given certain general assumptions about context) and types of actions to which it is not. Even if we do not know precisely which act token will count as compassionate in a given context, we know, quite generally, what types of action will (and will not) be in the vicinity. If this were not true, the term ‘compassion’ would be ineffective as an evaluative concept.

In radical contrast, however, the deconstructive model excludes all reference to types and generalities (i.e., one of the virtues of this approach is that it did not involve or require anumāna or conceptual cognition). A result of this is that there is no sense in which a buddha’s responses can be considered actions. A buddha’s responses are merely ‘behaviors’ (i.e., publicly observable events) that are generated by the stimulus of particulars. The only commonality between these behaviors will be that they are the responses of a buddha (i.e., one who has recovered his buddha-nature and responds from that basis). We might call these behaviors ‘compassionate,’ but, in so doing, we are not to appeal to ordinary language use; ‘compassion’ would have no extension beyond the actual responses of a buddha. A significant implication is that we would not be able to counterfactually analyze what a buddha would do given the radically particular nature of the causes of his behavior. All we have to go on are reports of the historical Buddha’s actual behaviors (roughly, what he did do), where these behaviors were a direct result of the causal efficacy of particulars.26

Now, we could take a revisionary approach and junk the term ‘compassion’ altogether. Ethical behavior could perfectly well be defined in terms of the responses of a buddha (and, importantly, how we would respond if we were also to recover our buddha-nature). Once we recover our buddha-nature we will also be able to respond spontaneously, and our responses will, quite naturally, be ethical in the relevant sense. Understood in this way, it does seem that a buddha’s behavior could be considered ethical on a deconstructive model.

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This approach would seem to be compatible with Buddhist normative ethical theories that are framed in terms of the Four Noble Truths. According to Buddhist orthodoxy, the Eightfold Path toward buddhahood involves, *inter alia*, learning right ways of acting (*samya-karmanta*) and speaking (*samya-vāc*). Although seemingly constructive, such practices may be interpreted in deconstructive terms as functioning to purge the conceptions that obscure one’s buddha-nature.\(^\text{27}\) Note, however, that if this model is plausible, it must begin by assuming a mind that employs universals and has intentional states. It is through the employment (and purging the employment) of universals that ordinary beings recover a latent ability for stimulus-response. (This is a result that the Daoists, and even Hansen, would presumably want but doesn’t seem achievable without assuming some initial form of representation).\(^\text{28}\)

As mentioned, there are clear virtues of this deconstructive model. It gives us an account of the ethical behavior of a buddha (albeit a very thin one) that avoids commitment to *anumāna* and conceptual cognition and is, to this extent, compatible with the assumptions of the Dharmakīrtian system. It also sustains a sense in which Buddhism is a progressive ethical theory. Despite these virtues, however, the deconstructive model does not solve our problem. While a buddha’s behavior may be designated ethical, a buddha cannot be claimed to act intentionally or be designated an ethical agent in this model. The deconstructive approach allows no room for a buddha to direct his behavior, let alone to provide reasons that explain the directedness of his behavior. In this model, a buddha simply reacts to particulars.

With respect to a limited range of behaviors (e.g., eating, walking, sitting) this might seem a plausible bullet to bite. However, it becomes quite problematic when we think of more complex behaviors that are usually attributed to an enlightened buddha, such as conversation, interaction with others, and the abstention from certain behaviors. The Buddha is considered to have transmitted his *dharma* dialectically, that is, through teachings given to his various disciples that were posthumously recorded. Moreover, perceived inconsistencies in his various teachings are usually explained in terms of his ‘skillful means’ (*upāya*) in selectively conferring teachings to fit listeners’ abilities to understand. These behaviors are usually described in terms of action and agency. In the deconstructive model, however, the historical Buddha no longer has the capacity either to choose *not* to leave this world after attaining enlightenment in order to transmit his teachings to others (i.e., particulars can only cause behaviors, not non-behaviors) or to *withhold* or *selectively* confer teachings insofar as he does not have the capacity for discrimination between the levels of spiritual development of his disciples (which would require, at the very least, perceptual judgments).

In fact, it is now quite difficult to say in what sense he can be considered to have *taught* his disciples. Presumably this model would allow the possibility for a buddha to make vocal sounds, but it would disallow considering these sounds as speech acts, that is, articulations of the speaker’s intentions, using a language, in a context of attempted communication.\(^\text{29}\) Thus, not only would the Buddha *not* be able to provide reasons to explain or justify the verity of the *dharma* in response to his disciples’ questions, but also we cannot even guarantee that he would utter words (given that,
according to this account, all language and concepts have been purged, his sounds being mere reactions that are entirely determined by the external stimuli of particulars). This undermines the status of the dharma, which is at the very heart of all Buddhist philosophical traditions (not only those that accept the Dharmakirtian system). Thus, a rejection of the possibility of intentional action, agency, and ethical agency would seem to have grim implications for a Buddhist.

In short, if we follow the deconstructive model, we make several gains but at heavy cost. We gain spontaneity in behavior, avoid anumana and conceptual cognition, and sustain a sense in which Buddhism can be considered a normative ethical theory within the framework of the Four Noble Truths. The costs, however, are that we lose the sense in which a buddha performs actions; hence, we lose agency; we lose the sense in which the Buddha was a historical figure transmitting the dharma; and, crucial to our purpose, we lose the possibility of a buddha as an ethical agent.

The Constructive Model

Can a constructive model of spontaneous response fare better? How might such a model go? According to the Confucian paradigm discussed earlier, spontaneous responsiveness is a cultivated ability to act instantly and spontaneously in a way that both accords with the particularities of a given situation and is in harmony with the demands of certain ‘internalized’ norms. Confucian scholars describe the cultivation of this ability in terms of skill acquisition. The aspiring ‘gentleman’ commits himself to following a certain discourse until the norms of this discourse become ‘manifest’ in his responses. If we extend this to Buddhism, the parallel might be of ordinary beings committing themselves to following the dharma as taught by the historical Buddha until this discourse ‘manifests’ itself or is instantiated in their behavior.

This analogy is promising, but has its limitations. If Hansen is correct to characterize the implicit Classical Chinese theory of mind as a form of strictly non-representational functionalism, it would seem that we could not explain this internalization process. Admittedly, Hansen-functionalism allows for the notion of a ‘program.’ Ritual norms, or li 禮, are largely considered by him to function in this way. However, it is difficult to conceive of a process of ‘internalizing’ or ‘self-programming’ in a theory of mind that does not recognize any intentional states, consciousness, or awareness. What is it that we are internalizing if not, in the first instance at least, a rule or prescription or concept or representation (i.e., the content of intentional states)?

What might be an alternative to the Hansen-functionalist approach? There are several possibilities. In order for our theory to be compatible with the Dharmakirtian system, however, the one we choose cannot presuppose that spontaneous responsiveness is the product of some inferential process that immediately precedes and causes the action. Fortunately, accounts of skill acquisition typically do not presuppose such underlying inferential processes. Rather, it is quite popular among contemporary psychologists and philosophers to talk about skill acquisition as the development of a complex and highly sophisticated associative network between, inter alia, types of responses and types of conditions or situations where the perception of the
latter is thought sufficient to generate the former.\textsuperscript{30} We might appeal to just such a model in developing our constructive account.

To see how this might work, consider a contemporary example of spontaneous responsiveness \textit{gone wrong}. In March 2006 a prominent Indigenous Australian opera singer and community leader collapsed from a mild stroke at a bus stop at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. It was reported that she was ignored for over five and a half hours by hundreds of Australian students getting on and off buses.\textsuperscript{31} It was publicly speculated that the reason why she was ignored was because the students assumed she must have been drunk because she was vomiting and an aboriginal.\textsuperscript{32}

Saying that (at least some of) the students must have ‘assumed’ the woman was drunk because she was vomiting and an aboriginal is not to say that this belief was occurrent in their minds when they ignored her. One might reasonably suppose that many of the students didn’t ‘choose’ to ignore her at all. They simply responded with a type of action that they implicitly associated with their perception of the situation. Insofar as they perceived or understood the situation to be of a certain type (i.e., a drunken aboriginal), they responded with a relevant type of action (of which there might have been many possibilities). These implicit associations between situation types and act types that inform behavioral responses are not innate or hardwired. They are acquired via prior learning processes, most significantly during the process of language learning. Insofar as these associations between types of situations and response types have been acquired, they can also be changed. For instance, in the case of the collapsed opera singer, it became a subject of public outcry that so many students could have responded by ignoring her. The purpose of this censure was, \textit{inter alia}, to shame the students into questioning, and hopefully altering, the racist associations that may have informed their response. While an alteration of these types won’t affect the way they originally responded (one cannot change the past), the idea was that it may alter future responses that are shaped and informed by these types and their network of associations with this type.

The basic idea is that spontaneous, prereflective responses presuppose, and are informed by, a complex associative architecture of conceptual types. When we alter our understanding of a type of situation (for instance, from ‘drunken aboriginal’ to ‘woman who has collapsed’ or ‘woman in need of help’) we also alter what act types we take to be possible (and impossible) with respect to that type (for instance, while ‘walking away’ may have seemed to a particular student to be an appropriate response to a drunken aboriginal, it may \textit{not} have seemed appropriate to that very same student if the situation was one of a woman in need of help). As we proceed to adjust and develop more sophisticated understandings of the types that inform our responses, we learn increasingly subtle ways of associating possibilities.

We can extend this account to the Buddhist context by an analysis of ignorance (\textit{avidyā}). Fallible human beings are considered to be ignorant of the true nature of reality and, hence, experience situations through mistaken conceptual constructs. The ways in which they experience situations inform their responses, on the assumption of an underlying associative network. Phenomenologically, such responses are immediate and do not involve any consciously represented beliefs about the situa-
tion (there need be no accompanying thought). Nonetheless, there is an underlying cognitive structure that informs their responses and in terms of which these responses are explicable. From this basis, we can argue that as the agents develop wisdom (prajñā) with respect to the true nature of reality, they alter the ways in which they experience situations and, hence, respond.

According to one reading of the Buddhist tradition, the true nature of reality consists of discrete momentary particulars arising in mutual causal dependence. This complex web of cause and effect is known as ‘dependent origination’ (pratītyasamutpāda / rt’en cing ’brel bar ‘byung ba). In realizing the truth of dependent origination, the historical Buddha is considered to have realized that the particulars that we conventionally designate as ‘self’ (friend, family member, etc.) to which we normally direct our intentional attitudes of compassion and concern are, at any given moment, dependent on the condition of everything else in the universe (at that moment). Given that ‘my’ existence (and that of those to whom I usually direct my compassion) is dependent on the existence of everything else, the proper scope of compassion should be toward all sentient beings, if not all of the elements in the entire causal complex.

We can explain the relationship between the cultivation of wisdom (prajñā) and action in terms of our constructive account of spontaneous response. According to this view, it is not that a buddha consciously represents his knowledge about the nature of reality and infers what action would be appropriate when he responds to situations. Rather, he can be said to have developed and refined the complex associative matrix that implicitly informs his responses. Phenomenologically, his responses are direct and do not involve any consciously represented thoughts (beliefs, intentions), but, nonetheless, they presuppose a complex cognitive structure.

One implication of this is that the fallible agents’ progress along the path toward enlightenment will be constituted not only by revision of the ways in which they experience situations (i.e., via the cultivation of wisdom or right view) but, also, by revision of the associations that extend from these situational types, most especially the types of actions taken to be possible (appropriate, relevant) responses. This is consistent with Buddhist orthodoxy insofar as the Eightfold Path recognizes behavioral revision as well as intellectual revision. The evaluative norms that constitute the Eightfold Path and in terms of which fallible agents revise the associative network that informs their responses are justified in relation to their contribution to the elimination of suffering. Moreover, as the agents consistently attempt to instantiate these norms in their behavior, they not only become increasingly sophisticated in their ability to identify and, thereby, exclude types of action that are incompatible with these norms, they also become more fluid in their capacities for automatic response to cues insofar as automaticity arises from repeated and consistent choice and pursuit.

Can this constructive model of spontaneous responsiveness solve our problem? Can a buddha be an ethical agent on this account? According to the weak definition of intentional action, behavior merely has to be ‘directed’ to count as an action. One might say that a buddha’s responses are directed insofar as they are the product of his progressive effort to exclude types of action that do not accord with certain evalua-
tive norms (i.e., those consistent with the Eightfold Path) and to enact only those that do not accord with these norms. Thus, it would seem, a buddha can act intentionally and, hence, be an agent (albeit in a weak sense) in a constructive model of spontaneous response. Moreover, insofar as some of these norms are evaluative, one might say that a buddha is an ethical agent.

Can a buddha provide reason-giving explanations for spontaneous responses (i.e., can a buddha’s action be intentional in the strong sense of intentional action)? Prima facie, it would seem so. Consider, again, the example of the students ignoring the woman who had collapsed at the bus stop. If the students were asked why they acted the way they did, they could appeal to the various associations that may have informed their responses. This is not to say that they have veridical introspective access to the cognitive architecture that informs their behavior. Quite often, we learn about our beliefs, desires, biases, and stereotypes by reflecting on the behavior in which they are made manifest and ex post facto self-attribute reasons as explanations. However, the fact that associations that inform behavior are acquired via a learning process suggests that they are available for self-attributions of reasons for acting. Analogously, a buddha would be able to appeal to, among other things, his realization about the ultimate nature of reality (i.e., pratītyasamutpāda), his desire to eliminate the suffering of others, and his intention to transmit his dharma to his disciples to explain why he remained on earth after attaining enlightenment in his reason-giving explanations for his actions. This is not to say that these beliefs, intentions, and realizations are occurrent in consciousness at the time of action, nor that a buddha has introspective access to the process that actually generated their action (which, for the most part, will be neurophysiological). It is merely that the associations learned and endorsed during the process of cultivating wisdom are accessible to memory (smṛti / dran pa) for reason-giving explanations. The reason-giving of a buddha is more a matter of translating behavior for the edification of those to whom the action is explained than a description of the actual mental process involved in generating behavior. Nonetheless, the content of reason-giving explanations is related to the cognitive associations that were cultivated during the pathway toward buddhahood.

Thus, it seems that we have a positive answer to our question. Can a buddha be considered to act intentionally and, hence, be an agent? Yes, if we assume a constructive model of spontaneous responsiveness. Can a buddha be an ethical agent? Yes, if we assume that certain evaluative norms are involved.

Our constructive model faces a problem, however. It presupposes that a buddha can recognize types of situations and types of actions, where recognition is a conceptualized cognition. This may not be immediately obvious. Certainly, the constructive model requires that a buddha has the capacity to discriminate between types of situations (to which a type of response is appropriate). However, it is arguable whether discrimination involves conceptual cognition. For instance, one might say that slugs and sunflowers have capacities for discrimination and abilities to respond to discriminated cues (e.g., slugs seem to be able to discriminate between soil and copper and sunflowers the location of the sun, where both are able to regularly respond to
the relevant cue).\textsuperscript{35} Thus, mere discrimination need not require conceptual cognition. However, a buddha’s responses are the outcome of a cultivated associative process (his responses are not hardwired, as in the case of slugs and sunflowers). Thus, these responses are typically informed by previously learned conceptualized information (such as the precepts of the Eightfold Path) even if this information is not consciously occurring at the time of action. Moreover, not only does this associative process enable a buddha to respond in a certain way; it is also the basis for reason-giving explanations. What this means is quite complex, but it is my view that, at the very least, the possibility of a buddha responding to (by accepting, qualifying, or rejecting) a disciple’s interpretation of his behavior and providing an alternative interpretation (as supposed by variations in a buddha’s expression of upāya) depends on recollected knowledge of the associations between situation and act types that he recognizes and endorses. Thus, while many of his responses need not involve concepts consciously represented at the time of action, correcting his disciples’ interpretations by means of his own interpretations presupposes that these discriminatory capacities are, to some extent, conceptualizable (even if by means of very basic concepts, such as ‘like this’ or ‘like that’).\textsuperscript{36}

Is this constructive model compatible with the Dharmakīrtian system? Insofar as it does not presuppose that spontaneous responses are generated by inferential process (and, hence, does not directly presuppose anumāṇa), then the answer may seem to be ‘yes.’ However, insofar as it presupposes conceptual constructs or perceptual judgments, then the answer is ‘no.’ This is because the ‘objects’ a buddha identifies, recognizes, discriminates between, and articulates as content in reason-giving are generally characterized phenomena (i.e., they are conceptual types), and it is conceptualized cognition that is suspect in the Dharmakīrtian system. So we have a dilemma: either we accept the constructive model but revise (or reject) the Dharmakīrtian system or we jettison the idea that a buddha can act and, hence, be an ethical agent.

\textit{Conclusion}

We began with the question: can Buddhism provide an account of the intentional action, agency, and ethical agency of a buddha? On the simple assumption of the Dharmakīrtian system of ontology and epistemology, the answer is no. A buddha does not have the cognitive resources to direct his action or provide reason-giving explanations of his action. And, yet, it seems that Buddhism needs to be able to account for the ethical agency of the historical Buddha insofar as the entire Buddhist tradition is founded on the veracity of the dharma that he is supposed to have transmitted.

In this essay I have explored Garfield’s proposed solution to this problem. Garfield’s proposal was to abandon a representational theory of mind (in effect abandoning the entire Dharmakīrtian system) and adopt the ‘non-representational’ theory of mind standardly attributed to the Classical Chinese together with their concurrent notions of spontaneous responsiveness. I hope to have demonstrated that, as insightful and promising as this proposal is, the implementation of this strategy is unsuccess-
ful. This is because it relies on an appeal to Hansen-functionalism, and Hansen-functionalism cannot provide an account of action or agency given the stringency of its non-representationalism. Moreover, there is residual tension among Classical Chinese philosophers concerning two very different accounts of the nature of spontaneous responsiveness. Insofar as this tension is not resolved within the Chinese context (and Chinese philosophy is not thereby ‘completed’), I have argued that we should not suppose that appropriating these ideas, when introduced into this context, thereby completes Buddhism.

In response, I have developed and extended these two models of spontaneous responsiveness with a view toward accounting for the action, agency, and ethical agency of a buddha in a way that may be compatible with the Dharmakīrtian system. I have demonstrated that the deconstructive account is compatible with the Dharmakīrtian system but does not generate an account of ethical agency. In contrast, I have demonstrated that the constructive account generates an account of ethical agency but is not compatible with the Dharmakīrtian system.

So, I conclude with a dilemma. The first horn: embrace the Dharmakīrtian system and jettison the possibility that a buddha can act intentionally, is an agent, and, hence, is an ethical agent. The cost of embracing this horn is that we lose the foundations of the Buddhist philosophical tradition, that is, that a historical Buddha chose to remain on earth after attaining enlightenment and transmitted the dharma. The second horn: embrace the constructive model (with the implication that a buddha can act intentionally and be an ethical agent) and reject (or revise) the Dharmakīrtian system. The cost of embracing this horn is that we must substantively revise standard Indo-Tibetan assumptions about the elimination of conceptual cognition or perceptual judgment on the pathway to buddhahood and its supposedly inextricable relation to suffering.

Coda

The latter horn of the dilemma appears to have fewer revisionary costs for Buddhism, as such, and for that reason is preferable. Moreover, calls for revision to the Dharmakīrtian system have long been made with respect to ontology and epistemology (both by historical and contemporary thinkers within the Buddhist tradition). Thus, the fact that I have, here, produced an argument from an ethical perspective that draws a similar morale as those that focus on problems that arise concerning perception, say, might be thought to be merely adding grist to a very long-standing mill. However, this would merely reinforce the dilemma I am presenting; it does not solve it. What this essay has demonstrated is that one cannot both affirm the Dharmakīrtian system and assume (or presuppose) that a buddha can act.

Notes

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the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (IABS), Emory University, Atlanta, 22 June 2008.


2 – Note that this description of a Buddhist ethical theory does not necessarily privilege any normative ethical theory analogue. For that, further argumentation would be required.

3 – Henceforth I shall (not unreasonably) assume that ‘we’ are fallible human beings (and not buddhas).

4 – According to Tillemans, Dharmakīrti considers this to be an essential feature of conceptual thought; it involves a determination of the apprehended intentional object as being a real particular (see Tillemans 1999, chap. 10).

5 – This term comes from Katsura 1984. Georges Dreyfus also employs this term, claiming in a footnote that it is “described by Buddhists as ‘ascertaining consciousnesses induced by perception’” (mngon sum gnyis ‘dren pa’i nges shes). See Dreyfus 1996.

6 – Perception counts as knowledge because: (a) it has the capacity to bring about a successful activity, and (b) it reveals a previously unknown object (i.e., given that its object is supposed to be both real and new every moment). See Katsura 1984 for a translation of Dharmakīrti’s definition of pramāṇa from the Pra- māṇavārttika, chap. 2.

7 – According to Katsura, the reason why anumāṇa is a type of pramāṇa and perceptual judgment is not due to the fact that anumāṇa provides new information. See Katsura 1984.


9 – I follow Dreyfus in characterizing Dharmakīrti’s view of universals as being conceptual (and, therefore, not real) (Dreyfus 1996, pp. 19 ff., 226 ff.). Thus, it follows that cognitions that do not involve concepts do not involve universals.

10 – For instance, is not the claim that perception is the only form of fundamentally veridical cognition itself arrived at by means of inference and, thereby, also ultimately mistaken? Is not the very ‘idea’ of a ‘particular’ itself a universal (i.e., an instance of a generally characterized phenomenon)? Some thinkers challenge the theory of truth that underlies this system (often by appeal to the thought of Nāgārjuna and later Madhyamaka thinkers). Others grant the claim that inferential cognition may not ultimately confer truth, but query: insofar as we (fallible human beings) do engage in this (mistaken and obsfuscated) conventional practice of inferring and employing universals, how can we now account for distinctions between truth and falsity within this practice? For further discus-

11 – For instance, a buddha is considered to be able to recognize that inferential cognition lacks authority, in a way that is non-inferential; to know that his disciples are at certain levels of spiritual development in order to employ his skillful means in teaching, but without appeals to concepts/universals; to be aware that there is no distinction between subject and object and that kinds are merely conventional, but where this awareness of nonduality is, itself, nondually cognized; and to see reality ‘as it is’ but without the mediation of any concepts.

12 – For further discussion of this point, see Dreyfus 1996, p. 211.

13 – One respectable approach to this question might be to provide a definition of action and agency via exegetical analyses of core ‘action’ terms already available within the Buddhist tradition (such as, for instance, karma, kusala, puñña, etc.). An interesting question would be whether a buddha can act in ways that instantiate one or more of these concepts (and if not, why not). It is worth noting, however, that a close analysis of these concepts shows that they are either intertwined with evaluative concepts (e.g., kusala and puñña represent certain evaluative kinds of action—for a discussion of these concepts see Adam 2005) or are tied to substantive metaphysical theories (e.g., karma is a complex concept which, among other things, relates to the conditions that bear on, and the consequences of, action) rather than providing basic definitions of action and agency, per se. Thus, there is a worry that if we employ these terms in our definition of action we may find ourselves inadvertently committing to substantive theoretical and hermeneutic positions that are, in themselves, subject to commentarial dispute and, hence, would require further argument to establish. This is beyond the scope of what can be achieved in this essay. To avoid this, I provide a deflated definition of action and agency that, I believe, is general enough to accommodate many of the action concepts advanced within the tradition but also substantive enough to mark the distinction between action and other forms of behavior (such as reaction or mere happenings or mere physical, bodily movements). Whether I am successful in this attempt is an open question.

14 – For a sustained argument against the agent-causal account of agency, according to which actions are determined by ‘agents’ or free will, entities foreign to the ontology of natural science, see Bishop 1989.

15 – There is currently much controversy among Western philosophers over whether reasons for action should be thought of as citing elements in a subjective motivational set that cause the action (see Williams 1985) or merely refer to factors, such as perceived external features in a situation, in order to make the action intelligible to another (see McDowell 1998). At this point, I assert no particular position on what counts as a sufficient reason for action and, hence, no position on what account of mental processing would be required to ensure the possibility of providing such reasons. These are controversial issues, the solution of
which will bear only indirectly on the problems at issue in this essay. Where these issues do bear on our question I shall address them directly.

16 – There are various accounts of the nature of buddhahood within the Buddhist tradition, many of which are transcendental and posit god-like qualities. In these latter accounts, enlightenment entails transcendence of human existence where this includes omniscience and a transcendence of the need to act or teach or speak. In the Lotus Sūtra, for instance, it is held that a buddha is able to ‘emit’ teachings through rays of light into the minds of his disciples (see, e.g., Watson 1993). In this essay, I shall set aside these transcendental interpretations of buddhahood. Whatever the plausibility of these accounts, the buddha I am concerned with is the historical, human Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama), who chose to remain on earth to transmit the dharma to his disciples via teachings and as recorded in the early Buddhist canons.

17 – Or, at least, the paradoxes will become “less daunting” on a non-representational model (Garfield 2006, p. 24).

18 – The onus for this, I believe, is on Garfield.

19 – Hansen argues that this need not be a problem for the Classical Chinese with respect to ethics insofar as the Classical Chinese have no doctrine of moral responsibility and therefore, it would seem, no need for the concept ‘agent.’ See Hansen 1972.

20 – E.g., being at ‘ease’ 安, ‘flowing’ 順, ‘unselfconscious,’ ‘forgetting’ 忘, and ‘fitting’ 宜. See Slingerland 2003, for further discussion.

21 – This distinction is only ‘rough’ given subtle variation within each of these traditions. For instance, there are subtle differences between Laozi and Zhuangzi in their approaches to wu-wei. While my characterization of the Daoist tradition is influenced by Laozi, it is arguable that, in many respects, Zhuangzi provides a more positive approach to the attainment of wu-wei. There are also subtle differences between Mozi and Xunxi in their approaches to wu-wei given variation in their respective accounts of the nature of mind. However, the distinction I seek to draw in this section of my argument is nonetheless discernible and a subject of debate, even if there is much gray area regarding where each particular thinker in each tradition falls with respect to it.

22 – Wu-wei, interpreted prescriptively, generates a notorious paradox: it is a dao (i.e., guiding discourse) that instructs us to follow no dao.

23 – The term wu-wei is found only once in the Analects; however, it represents a family of conceptual metaphors that convey a sense of effortlessness and unself-consciousness.

24 – This is not to rule out the possibility of investigating these two models via textual exegesis of positions advanced within the Buddhist philosophical canon. For instance, Shoryu Katsura, in private communication, has pointed out pos-
sibilities for developing these models via a more sophisticated investigation of the Yogācāra tradition (one that diverges from the characterization provided by Garfield and which I exploit in this essay but which could benefit from an inquiry framed in terms of a distinction between a deconstructive and constructive approach). Moreover, Barbra Clayton, also in private communication, has pointed out certain structural similarities between my distinction between a deconstructive and constructive account and the distinction between sudden and gradual enlightenment that is a topic of debate in late Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist thought. These possibilities and analogies are compelling and worth pursuing (although beyond the scope of this essay). My concern, in this essay, is merely to present a discussion that highlights the problematic nature of the Dharmakīrtian system when extended into the context of philosophy of mind, action, and ethics. While extending these models into these additional contexts may be illuminating in their own right, it is not clear that such extension directly contributes to the present context of discussion.

25 – For a discussion of the difficulties that may arise for the Dharmakīrtian ontology of particulars with causal efficacy when related to intentional action, see Arnold 2006.

26 – Note also that we won’t be able to perform counterfactual analyses of what a buddha would do in a ‘situation’ as there will be no ‘situations’ (i.e., ‘situation’ is a generally characterized phenomenon and, as such, an object of conceptual cognition).

27 – Although this may become more problematic when we consider other aspects of the Eightfold Path, such as right view (samyag-drṣṭi) and right intention or aspiration (samyak-saṃkalpa).

28 – Recall that if it is true that a buddha’s mind is characterized in Hansen-functionalist terms, absent universals and intentional states, then it is also true that an ordinary being’s mind is characterized in these same terms. The crucial problem with this idea is that we need to assume universals and intentional states in order to theorize their progressive removal.

29 – Here, I am assuming a Gricean account of speech acts that presuppose the possibility of reflexive communicative intention. That is, when communicating, a speaker intends his utterance “to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention” (Grice 1989, p. 20). In the Buddhist context, the assumption would be that, insofar as the Buddha engages in speech acts, he intends for his disciples to understand what he means to convey via his instructions, advice, and teachings.

Interestingly enough, some passages in Dharmakīrti’s autocommentary on the Pramāṇavārttika suggest that he allows the possibility of communicative intention in speech acts (setting aside the issue of whether such intention is reflexive). For instance, he writes (1.227): arthaviśeṣamīh apreritā vāg ata idam iti viduṣaḥ svanidānabhāsinam arthaṃ sūcayati buddhirūpavāgviñāpytor janya-
*janakabhāvah sambandhah* (An utterance is impelled by an intention regarding a particular point; for one who knows that this [utterance thus] comes from that [intention], the point expressed [by the utterance] is the phenomenal appearance which is its proper cause. Hence, there is a cause–effect relation between [an intention] whose form is mental, and its expression in speech” [text quoted in Arnold 2006, p. 420; cf. Dunne 2004, p. 146]).

However, as persuasively argued by Arnold, this passage is not happily consistent with Dharmakīrti’s more general epistemological framework. Moreover, whatever the status of the notion of speaker intention (*abhīprāya*) with respect to semantic reference in ordinary language use, it is unclear whether such a notion can play a role in the speech of a buddha within the Dharmakīrtian framework.


31 – See *Sydney Morning Herald* 2006. The length of time and the number of students who ignored her is debated (bus officers contend it was less than an hour). However, regardless of the numbers who ignored her and the length of time she was ignored, the example stands on the mere fact that she was ignored, and by more than one person.

32 – See http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2006/s1585925.htm: “[T]his was about me being Aboriginal and they have their own perceptions as to why I would be there vomiting. . . I’ve never had a drink in my life, of alcohol.”

33 – Note that the process of acquiring buddhahood in the case of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, will necessarily be distinct insofar as he was the first to attain enlightenment, and, hence, there was no preexisting strategy or guidance that he could have followed. This fact, however, need not undermine the possibility that we may attain enlightenment by means of following the strategy or guidance provided via the historical Buddha’s teachings. There will always be an asymmetry between the acquisitive process of the very first master of a skill (which, for the most part, will involve a series of trial and error) and those who subsequently acquire the skill by means of following the guidance of those who have gone before. Few would accept the claim that we must experience the life of the historical buddha in order to attain enlightenment. This would not only be impossible but would also render his teachings redundant.

34 – One might query whether this associative account of weak and strong conditions for intentional action is sufficient to capture the intentionality of speech acts (i.e., the types of actions that were especially troubling for the deconstructive model). This is a complex issue that cannot be resolved here. However, there are reasons to think that speech acts are spontaneous in the relevant sense (i.e., they are typically not phenomenologically preceded by reasoning and intention-formation—or, if so, only in the early stages of language acquisition). Moreover, the processes that generate speech acts are typically not introspec-
tively accessible; hence, it is reasonable to suppose that the speaker’s meaning
(if not surmised by the hearer from the utterance itself) will only be ascertained
via reason-giving explanations in response to questioning ex post facto.

35 – It is a genuine question whether these observable discriminatory abilities are
based on genuine discriminatory capacities or are causally induced by external
factors. In some explanations, the ‘dislike’ that slugs have of copper is explained
in terms of a chemical reaction that occurs in the moment of contact between
the slug and copper. One might query whether this is a genuine instance of
discrimination (where ‘genuine’ might be thought to beg the question in favor
of conceptual capacities) or a mere causal event facilitated by an innate reac-
tion to the electric charge produced by copper (and, if such is the case for slugs,
we might extend the analogy to sunflowers). We might set aside this issue, how-
ever, insofar as the discriminations of a buddha, in the constructive account, are
not innate reactions (as is the case for slugs and sunflowers) but the result of a
learning process to which a buddha may appeal in providing explanations for
his behavior.

36 – Although, if the examples of the historical Buddha’s explanations found in the
Pali suttas is any indication, a buddha’s explanations will often be much more
conceptually rich insofar as their purpose is typically the edification of the bud-
dha’s disciples.

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Washing the Dust from my Mirror: The Deconstruction of Buddhism—A Response to Bronwyn Finnigan

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I thank Professors Finnigan and Garfield (Jay) and the editors of Philosophy East and West for inviting me to join in this discussion of Chinese Buddhism. I have not taken many opportunities in my career to write about Zen Buddhism and Daoism, although I have been fascinated by their connection. I remember quite clearly a discussion I had with Jay some years back in which I broached the idea that Daoism had contributed important dialectical steps leading to the formulation of Zen, which I join the Chinese tradition in regarding as the highest version of the Buddhist insight. Jay argued to me at that time that the necessary insights were actually all available in Nāgārjuna. I am accordingly pleased to see him exploring the idea of the contributions that features of Chinese thought might have made to this development in Buddhism, although I don’t assume that he needs to repudiate Nāgārjuna’s depth of insight or the claim that it contains all that is strictly necessary for the Zen account of insight or enlightenment.

Accordingly in my discussion here, I will focus on how I see features of Chinese Daoist thought facilitating, if not providing necessary and sufficient conditions for, these insights. The account I will give targets neither Buddhist epistemology nor the state of mind of one who achieves the insight. Nor, strictly speaking, is my account focused on Buddhist ethics, which in my view would be the deontology of the Eightfold Path. However, along with Professor Finnigan, I will take the Four Noble Truths as the beginning point. Chinese schools tend to treat this as kindergarden Buddhism. I would agree that the other three noble truths raise issues in meta-ethics and the quasi-ethical issue of the meaning of life (is it meaningless suffering from which the only goal is escape?). The problem of Buddhism from China’s point of view was how to reconcile the deeply pessimistic, nihilistic, and decadent (apologies to Nietzsche) tone of Buddhism with the upbeat, humorous, joyful exuberance of Chinese Daoism.

Despite their different settings, my narrative will still pass through and deal with Finnigan’s worry that some alleged tension in wu-wei is not resolved in Chinese thought and thus cannot resolve the deeper problem in Buddhism. I was invited