



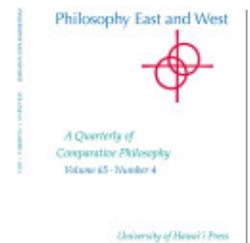
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The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency by Maria Heim (review)

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The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency. By Maria Heim. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 246. Paper \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-19-933104-8.



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Maria Heim's *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency* is a valuable contribution to the study of Buddhist philosophy and in certain respects signals a new stage in the field. This is especially true regarding the study of Theravāda Buddhist thought or the philosophy that is rooted in the Pāli Buddhist tradition. Clearly, leading Buddhist philosophers that history has chanced to include in the Mahāyāna camp, such as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Dīñnāga, Dharmakīrti, Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa, have received considerable scholarly attention, and detailed studies of their work and ideas are available, including philosophical analyses from both historical or philological and theoretical or comparative perspectives. The same cannot be said for the Pāli tradition, which ostensibly, if we were to judge from existing studies, has not produced any real philosophers. One of the achievements of Heim's book is to look at the luminary of the Pāli tradition, Buddhaghosa, through a philosophical looking glass, thereby enriching the study of traditional Buddhist thought and suggesting new ways in which Buddhism can be thought to be philosophical.

To many, the Buddha was indeed a philosopher, perhaps the prime philosopher and most authoritative spokesman of the Buddhist tradition. Thus, an understanding of the Buddha's philosophical voice has generally been considered a reliable representation of "Theravāda," or "early"—that is, all that is not Mahāyāna¹—Buddhist philosophical positions. There have been, of course, divergent presentations of the Buddha's teachings. Yet few would contest the view that the heart of the Buddha's philosophical position is encapsulated in the doctrines of the four noble truths, dependent origination, and selflessness (to which some may add the doctrine of karma). These "doctrines"—they are not only about theory—are normally taken to stand for the philosophical views of non-Mahāyāna Buddhism. Specifically, in accord with the still influential Buddhist modernist framework, these doctrines are presented as free of any type of metaphysics or "belief" and as empirical discoveries made by the Buddha that demand no commitment to ontology.

Let us quickly recall one of the most eloquent voices of this approach to the Buddha, Walpola Rahula's seminal *What the Buddha Taught*: "Among the founders of religions the Buddha (if we are permitted to call him the founder of a religion in the popular sense of the term) was the only teacher who did not claim to be other than a human being, pure and simple. . . . He attributed all his realization, attainment and achievements to human endeavor and human intelligence."² Rahula con-

tinues to quote the emblematic *Kālāma-sutta*, which is considered a paradigmatic expression of the Buddha's empirical approach and which is also the starting point for Heim's analysis of intention (*cetanā*) in the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* and in Buddhaghosa.³ The Buddha teaches the people of Kālāma about the way they are to identify the correct teacher to follow. He gives them advice "unique in the history of religions": "When you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome (*akusala*), and wrong, and bad, then give them up . . . And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome (*kusala*) and good, then accept them and follow them."⁴ This one-sided view of the Buddha's teachings may be outdated, but it continues to be influential in contemporary scholarship. Heim may not have freed herself completely from this approach with its powerful over-emphasis on experience, but she approaches the tradition in a fresh, creative manner, which produces new, fruitful philosophical insights.

The book is first and foremost a study of intention in the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* and in Buddhaghosa's commentaries. It is composed of four chapters, preceded by an introduction that sets the stage for what is to follow and presents the study's intriguing methodology. Each chapter then treats a different genre of Buddhist writing—chapter 1 focuses on intention in the suttas; chapter 2 discusses intention in Abhidhamma. We are accustomed to philosophical discussion ending here (or maybe, to be frank, after the first chapter). But Heim continues to reflect on intention in Vinaya texts in chapter 3 and on Buddhist narrative in chapter 4 (mainly in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* and the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*). Naturally, each of these chapters could expand to a monograph of its own. Rather than entering unnecessary technical detail, the book moves between genres so that discussion remains crisp and multiple levels of meaning are kept in the spotlight. For *The Forerunner of All Things*, as for Buddhism—as a specimen of Indian religion—philosophy is not only theoretical; to professional Buddhist philosophers, philosophy was never detached from the broader patterns of action and imagination that live in Vinaya stories, *Jātaka* tales, or Buddhist legends. The latter were not concessions to popular sentiment but a real part of the Buddhist ideational world. The well-rounded picture of intention that is offered in the book is thus in itself a statement about Buddhist philosophy, which is not only meant to be thought-out and conceptualized in razor-sharp, verbal arguments, but is couched in a carefully cultivated emotional and cognitive framework.

As Heim emphasizes in her introduction, the most fascinating aspect of the analysis of intention in the sources she treats is the complex phenomenology they recognize. When compared to Buddhist models, modern Occidental conceptualizations of agency appear simplistic or "psychologically thin" (p. 2). According to Heim, modern theories of agency tend to postulate an autonomous subject or agent who acts according to well-defined beliefs, wills, and intentions that are taken to be the reasons for his behavior. Ethics thus becomes the identification of choices, which are supposedly accessible to observation. Although Heim does not elaborate on this contemporary picture of agency, once one enters the polyvalent and multi-layered discussion of intention in the Pāli materials, he or she quickly realizes the uniqueness of the Buddhist approach. To give but one example for now, in Buddhist analysis

intention does not only precede an act but can take place long after it has been completed.

Heim investigates intention in all the central genres of prose writing in the *Tipiṭaka*. But the methodological complexity does not end here, since Heim is interested not so much in the “original meaning” of intention in the primary sources but in their life and *reception* in the Buddhist tradition. Relying on Pierre Hadot, she suggests that one must learn to read an ancient text in order to perceive its strategies of meaning-making. Here Buddhaghosa comes to her aid and serves as her guide for penetrating the tradition’s foundational texts. Buddhaghosa is not a secondary interpreter of the Buddha’s teachings, but another layer of the primary sources. Thus, in each genre treated, the discussion fluctuates between the earlier source (“the Buddha”) and the commentaries, each voice informative in its own way.

Yet an apparent problem arises, since in many respects Buddhaghosa is more an idea than a historical person. Given the nearly endless writings attributed to his name, the skepticism of modern scholarship is probably justified. This does not mean, however, that the traditional clues should be discarded, since “Buddhaghosa” becomes a specific voice or interpretive style within the tradition. If the focus is on how texts were appreciated in a living context, it is clear that “Buddhaghosa” is closer to what Foucault calls an “author-function” that creates “a certain unity of writing” and can “neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts” (pp. 10–11). Scholarship has so far had little capacity to allow Buddhist authors to speak in distinct genres. When this obstacle is removed, reading a text becomes a dynamic process in which new meanings are unearthed and perceived, an approach in which Heim is inspired by Ricoeur.

In what follows I present a synthesis of Heim’s treatment of intention, which I generally find to be illuminating and convincing. Toward the end I will raise my main critical point regarding her overall approach, which I suspect reads the Pāli materials a little too easily as focusing only on the psychological, phenomenological, or experiential.

The discussion of intention begins in the first chapter, “Constructing Experience,” which focuses on intention in the Pāli suttas and their commentaries. Immediately, the close connection between *cetanā* and karma comes to the surface, through references to the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Kālāma-sutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. In the latter, for example, the Buddha states: “Suppose while acting, evil is done, but I do not intend (*cetemi*) evil for anyone. Since I do not do an evil action, how can sorrow touch me?” (p. 36). This passage reveals an identity between intention and action. What can this mean? Moving through different references in the suttas, Heim speaks of intention as closely related to *saṅkhāra* or “construction,” a concept familiar from the schemes of the five aggregates and of the twelve links of dependent origination. In one context, Buddhaghosa explains that “*cetanā* should be taken in the sense of arranging, in that it collects everything together” (p. 39). This arranging or collecting is the act of construction (e.g., *abhisañkaroti*) that is at the root of the capacity of intention to determine karma and experience—intention collects the different factors or *dhammas* that contribute to

experience; it is the very fact that they are brought together in the precise way that they are. These elements are all morally pregnant, so that their assemblage determines the ethical state of the act. Intention is “the moment when our minds put together and arrange our mental factors to experience the world in the particular and distinctive ways that we do” (p. 83), a process that underlies, but does not constitute, rational deliberation. Intention is therefore not an autonomous, clear-cut function, but only the arrangement of actions, which includes perceptual, motivational, ideational, emotional, and other aspects.

Intention does not produce action, but provides its shape and structure; it is the ground in which action occurs. In certain cases the commentaries do make a distinction between *cetanā* on the one hand and actions of body, speech, and mind on the other. This shows that intention is not conceived as an action in its own right but as a component of actions and in a certain sense as what gives rise to action or determines its precise nature and moral potency.

When intention is not autonomous, but only the assemblage of all factors in a moment of experience, it becomes yet more difficult to pinpoint. Intention, Heim now demonstrates, is not necessarily personal and can be determined by other people or more broadly by culture; the way we shape our experiences is not only subjectively determined. Intention is therefore concerned not only with agency but also with “patency,” that is, with past influence on present experience. This idea relates to influences on our behavior from outside, but even more to the input of karmic conditioning. Intention is constructed not only through the events of this life and not only from within.

One of the interesting questions that arise from this picture of intention is whether *arhats* have intentions and if their actions carry moral potency. So long as intention constructs experience, it is by definition *samsāric* and opposed to the unconstructed element of *Nibbāna*. A distinction was eventually made between regular intentions and “path-intentions,” which have no karmic imprint (this is the Abhidhamma category of *kiriya*). The main way this type of action was treated was as intentions that relate to abandoning. That is, these actions are constructed by intentions that abandon the habits of accumulating and gathering experience. This is a unique aspect of Buddhist ethical phenomenology, which gives special attention to absences or to drawing back from performing regular human behavior.

In chapter 3 Heim nuances her treatment of intention through the focus on Abhidhamma. I will avoid entering minute detail regarding the maps of intentional action that Heim presents, which analyze the diverse contents intention brings together and assess their moral impact. The enhanced resolution of mental observation in Abhidhamma allows us to see how active intention is in creating its objects and in structuring the world of experience. With the appreciation of the subtle, but continuous, structuring of experience in consciousness, epistemological objectivism seems to lose all ground.

Most intriguing in Heim’s treatment of Abhidhamma is the dynamic and pragmatic character she sees in these ostensibly technical and tiresome maps of the mind. This understanding comes from an appreciation of their open-endedness and

their subtle varieties. A text like the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* finishes its long paragraphs that list the active factors in specific states of consciousness by “making room for ‘whatever other factors’ may also arise in mutual dependence on others” (p. 99). This demonstrates that the lists are not offered as final and closed conceptualizations, but as starting points for an analysis that utilizes them but is not subsumed by them.

A good example of the living and expansive quality of Abhidhamma lists is the differences between the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda traditions, most significant here in their idiosyncratic understandings of “latent biases” (Heim’s translation for *anuśaya/anusaya*). Biases are an important aspect of Sarvāstivāda psychology whose picture of the mind acknowledges unconscious and latent processes; latent defilements sit in the mind and rise to the surface according to circumstances. This certainly makes sense to the modern ear. According to Heim, however, Theravāda Abhidhamma focuses on conscious processes, so it has little use for a concept that describes realities that lie beyond the scope of awareness. For Theravāda, latent biases would not be different from their manifestation in experience, and there is no point in defining an inaccessible reality. The point here is not whether or not latent tendencies are a helpful concept, but that we are speaking of two distinct systems of observation that are grounded in different theoretical understandings. This multiplicity suggests again that there is a significant degree of freedom and creativity in Abhidhamma reflective techniques.

This open-ended, experiential quality of what appears at first sight as a rigid scholastic system echoes Heim’s basic approach to Buddhist philosophy. Meaning resists closure and is inherently expansive and multi-dimensional. Buddhist philosophers are thus interested more in the active pursuit of understanding than in abstract theory. Heim may over-emphasize the role of experience in her account, and the sources she relies on for defining Abhidhamma as relating to meditative practice are one-sided. There are other, purely theoretical, aspects of Abhidhamma as well. Nonetheless, her treatment of the materials is persuasive and brings to light a unique quality in Theravāda Abhidhamma, which is deeply interested in, and has exceptional patience for, the direct observation of the mind.

At this stage the focus of the discussion moves from the intense observation of “ultimate reality” according to the Abhidhamma to the contexts in which this observation is grounded, that is, the complicated realities of human life. Chapters 3 and 4 work with Buddhist stories that bring to light the deep complexity of human phenomenology approached from the perspective of intention. All these stories expose the unique capacity of Buddhist philosophy to engage with the complexities of human motivation and come to terms with the conflicting inclinations that inform human agency.

Take, for example, the story of Sudinna, the protagonist of the event that led the Buddha to formulate the first *Pārājika* rule of defeat in the Vinaya that inhibits sexual conduct. Sudinna is a devoted monk who arrives at his prior home for the first time since he had gone forth eight years earlier. He is an only son who forced his parents to consent to his enrobing through a hunger strike. They were adamantly opposed

at first, since this would ultimately cause the family to lose their property. Sudinna comes by searching for alms and is identified by the house servant. She informs his father, who cannot accept that his son is eating leftovers in the backyard and leads him into the house. Eventually, Sudinna is requested to sleep with his wife for one time only so that he would produce offspring. He succumbs to family pressure and completes the sexual act reluctantly and, so the story goes, with no passion or interest in sexual gratification. Once this happens he feels immense shame and remorse. Indeed, if the rule against sexual action would have been formulated earlier, he would never have complied with his family's will. It is too late, however, for Sudinna, who has introduced impurity into the order and must be expelled. The Buddha learns of the case and formulates the first rule of the *Pātimokkha*.

This story is complex enough even before Buddhaghosa's treatment of it. Why is it, for instance, that Sudinna arrives in the vicinity of his earlier home in the first place? Is this tale a karmic mirror-image of his aggressive manipulation of his parents' consent to become a monk? More specifically, should Sudinna's sexual act be seen as intentional or not? Is he responsible for impurity, given the complex reality he had to deal with? Is there no way in which he may repent and remedy his impurity? Interestingly, Buddhaghosa makes no effort to clear these questions away and to justify the Buddha's castigation of Sudinna and the harsh punishment on behalf of the Sangha. Rather, Buddhaghosa elaborates on the complex phenomenology and harbors the complexity of the specific reality, which allows for no straightforward, simplified, and satisfying solution. His humane treatment of Sudinna, however, does not free the latter of his culpability. In line with the definition of intention in the Suttas and Abhidhamma, the discussion of intention in the Vinaya sources focuses not on the motivations that underlie an action, but on the conscious structuring of experience. One is culpable so long as one is aware of one's actions. Having pure motivations—and such purity seems not to be the rule in human realities—does not free one from responsibility that results from the knowing implicated in the very nature of action.

Again we observe that the discussion is not closed off by the story and its analysis. We could go on telling the different Vinaya tales Heim assembles, or investigating the fascinating stories she chooses from Buddhist narrative, which all exhibit how complex moral phenomenology can be and how intensely conditioned agency is. Many stories explain motivations as resulting from previous lives, such as the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* tale of Kāṇā, who is furious at monks who again and again took as alms the cakes she baked for her husband, so that he eventually grows impatient and takes another wife. She is so aggressive toward monks who now pass by that they avoid coming into her vicinity. The Buddha learns of the case and comes to instruct her, which leads to her attainment of stream-entry. Later the king marries her off to a nobleman. The whole story, it turns out, was precipitated by events in Kāṇā's former life as a mouse, when she brought gold coins to the Bodhisatta (the Buddha in an earlier life), who would share with her the meat he bought with the money. But the future monks who take her cakes are now cats that crave her meat. So her resentment of the monks is now explainable and is seen to be rooted in far deeper

causes than cannot be perceived without the help of an all-knowing narrator such as the Buddha.

Once again, the prism of questions raised here regarding human agency and intention is very wide. What is the story telling us about intention when it says that Kāṇḍā's actions are conditioned by her previous experiences as a mouse? What happens when we realize that every human subject has had an infinite number of previous births, each of which may come to life in conditioning present experience? Given the close relation between karma and intention, I would like to conclude this essay with a question about whether Heim's focus on experience is a broad enough framework for the Buddhist understanding of intention.

The discussion of intention in *The Forerunner of All Things* brings to light the complex phenomenology that Buddhist thinkers have identified and charted in a variety of Buddhist sources. This account is highly informative about the way thinkers and practitioners approached the analysis of conscious experience in the historical Buddhist tradition. But with the inherent relation between intention and karma—indeed in light of their possible identity—the discussion of moral “phenomenology” proves to be situated in a comprehensive metaphysical understanding that positions karma as the central dynamic force in the creation of human reality. When karma determines one's rebirth and the nature of experiences throughout one's life, we are speaking of the construction of the world or of objects in a more fundamental sense, I believe, than Heim's language allows for. In this sense, I would suggest, she still conforms to the hopes of earlier generations of Buddhist scholars, who wanted to emphasize the lack of metaphysical commitment in the Buddha's teachings and their being grounded only in empirical observation. Although Heim's discussion demonstrates Buddhism's exceptional ability to examine the dynamics of consciousness in confident, creative fashion, the models for this analysis transcend what is empirically observable. That is to say, we can speak of the phenomenology of experience here only if “the world” itself is subsumed within experience. The world is not only planet earth with its biological creatures, but also the worlds of hells and of the gods and even the realities of wholly different spheres of being, which Buddhism claims to be accessible through meditation.⁵

Let us take a short look at the celebrated *Kālāma-sutta* as an example. As Heim says, this text “captures the Buddha at his most empirical,” especially in the quote above from Rahula in which the Buddha instructs the Kālāmas to accept teachings based on their own assessment of their value; they should only stick to their personal understanding of *kusala* and *akusala*. But a funny thing happens when the Buddha moves to explain what *kusala* and *akusala* are. Here, in surprising conformity with Buddhist doctrine and with the metaphysics of karma, every act that is spurred by greed (*lobha*), anger (*dosa*), and confusion (*moha*) proves to be bad, while opposite actions are all good. Not only are they so easily defined, but they “lead to pain and harm in the long run” (*yaṃ sa hoti dīgharattaṃ ahitāya dukkhāyā*), that is, in this and in future lives. But would a greedy act of theft, for example, necessarily lead to pain? The idea that it would is fascinating, especially when it is grounded in the intense moral analysis described throughout Heim's book. But if this is true, this is a

truth no less ontological than phenomenological, no less metaphysical than empirical; the world proves to be far more intimately related to consciousness than the innocent analysis of experience allows.

The *Kālāma-sutta* has a complex narrative structure that allows for diverse interpretive strategies, and this is obviously not the place to give it the treatment it deserves. I mention these points here not in order to raise any doubt about the value of Heim's contribution, but in order to suggest that its innovative approach can go yet further. Her discussion of the phenomenology of human agency allows an appreciation not only of Buddhism's capacity to conceptualize complexity, but also of the humane sensitivity with which a Buddhist philosopher like Buddhaghosa treated his sources. This focus on human experience is, however, couched in a picture of the universe that may ultimately be no less compelling and therapeutic.

Notes

- 1 – Other imperfect names one encounters are “maintstream,” “Nikāya,” or “Hīnayāna” Buddhism.
- 2 – Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. ed. (1959; New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 1. Notice that the first part of this claim, even if thought to be correct for the Buddha, is historically mistaken.
- 3 – In her introduction Heim explains her translation of *cetanā* as intention, rather than will, volition, or motivation.
- 4 – Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 3.
- 5 – For a good example of Heim's reluctance to take such realities into consideration, see chap. 2, p. 91 n. 24.