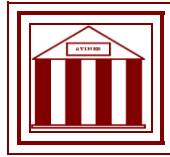


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**Particularism in Buddhism:  
Morality without Frames?**

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## **Particularism in Buddhism: Morality without Frames?**

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### **Abstract**

*“...idiots...and tenets of philosophers...rationally and methodically to find out, and set in order all necessary determinations and instructions for a man's life.”<sup>1</sup>*

Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* could not have been more subtle about his disagreement with the philosophers' way of life. In all fairness though, it might be mentioned that interpreting his words is not always easy. Being a philosopher himself, he might just be meaning to point the misleading traits of philosophers rampant in his time; or, he might just be making the point that philosophical arguments, though important, were not merely for enabling the rational understanding of the world, but to permit those rational understanding to inform the way in which one lived. In any case, 'necessary determination' and 'instructions' for a man's life are pretty heavy terminologies, and give a sense of a certain *givenness* which might not always be either fair or useful. My aim in the present paper is to indicate that the Buddhist metaphysics might have the aforementioned 'givenness', but its ethics does not. And the Buddhist ethics does not have this *givenness* because its ethical structure is primarily particularistic. For this purpose, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section briefly brings forth the distinction between the absolutistic and particularistic models in ethics, followed by explaining particularism as a meta-ethical theory keeping in mind the present purpose, and lastly, showing how the features of particularism explained in the second section can also be noticed in the ethics of specific Buddhist thinkers.

**Keywords:** Particularism, Moral Space, Buddhism, Mindfulness

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<sup>1</sup>Casaubon, Meric (tr.). *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antinious*.

## I

Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* could not have been more subtle about his disagreement with the philosophers' way of life. In all fairness though, it might be mentioned that interpreting his words is not always easy. Being a philosopher himself, he might just be meaning to point the misleading traits of philosophers rampant in his time; or, he might just be making the point that philosophical arguments, though important, are not merely for enabling the rational understanding of the world, but to permit those rational understanding to inform the way in which one lived. In any case, 'necessary determination' and 'instructions' for a man's life' are pretty heavy terminologies, and give a sense of a certain *givenness* which might not always be either fair or useful. The aim of the present paper is to indicate that the Buddhist metaphysics might have the aforementioned 'givenness', but its ethics does not. And the Buddhist ethics does not have this givenness because its ethical structure is primarily particularistic. For this purpose, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section briefly brings forth the distinction between the absolutistic and particularistic models in ethics, followed by explaining particularism as a meta-ethical theory keeping in mind the present purpose, and lastly, showing how the features of particularism explained in the second section can also be noticed in the ethics of specific Buddhist thinkers.

The quest for knowledge owes a large part of its existence to the need to quell anxiety. One truth is as good as another as long as they keep the holder of these truths at ease with themselves. For instance, if I see lightening flash, I can explain that phenomena to be either god or demon. Once I think I know what it is, I can derive future responses accordingly. A scientist might investigate and find out that it is a consequence of the buildup of charges within the clouds. That is *his* truth. He may claim it to be superior by saying that the information teaches him to deal with lightening strikes better, or to harness it for practical purposes or to fit it in with other physical phenomena. All that is valid, but if I do not know all this and the lightning strikes me, I would be equally content because I could not imagine it to happen in any other way. Which is why a generation that knows more is not necessarily also a generation that has lesser anxiety. Philosophy, moral philosophy in particular, is into the business of *explaining* certain features of the world. Long ago, religion could explain everything sufficiently before *reason* stepped in during the Enlightenment. Eventually reason came to be suspected as the play of power because paradigms were designed to explain science to one's advantage. This pattern might be making a point of there being an absence of anything absolute-paradigms, the first principle, theories that govern our existence, truth et al.

It holds true especially of philosophy because, as mentioned earlier, philosophy takes upon itself the task of explaining the world. As in science, with certain basic and fundamental truths 'given', the other theories following from them might be questioned and proved fallacious. Similar is the case in philosophy. The basic and fundamental truth, the first principle of asking of each particular thing- What is its nature? What is it in itself? holds still while

the various responses to that question might stand to test. Ethics seems to be the most affected by this because of it being the most unapologetically pragmatic. The discipline of ethics aspires to establish a system where there would be no difficulty at the time of making judgment, moral in nature. The fundamental presupposition of this paper is that morality aims at keeping the world 'ordered' without bringing in external laws. And a well ordered social structure is in the hindsight of all the moral theorists. Ethics is *needed* because it caters to the fulfillment of the two-fold aspects of a human subject (also a moral subject) - the social and the individual. I am ethical because I am a social animal and live in society of fellow humans. But I am also an individual being. And the type of morality that drives me to act in a particular manner when I am a social animal might not convince me to behave in the same manner when I am just an individual. The point of focus here is that morality exists, no doubt, but there is an uncertainty about the credibility of the 'author' of the moral rules. The broader point is who gives *them* the license to theorize about how to live with each other?

The aim of this paper is then to show that to show that moral absolutism do not address the peculiarities of moral problems as better as moral particularism does; and then to show that if moral dictation is a problem then Buddhist ethics escapes it by virtue of adhering to a particularist framework. Moral absolutism, as the meta-ethical theory, contains within itself certain features which help in the demarcation of the ethical principles. According to Moral Absolutism, there are certain ethical principles or laws which exist, and ought to be the parameter of judging the action to be morally right or wrong. Shafer Landau summarizes it in one line- *A moral rule is absolute just in case it may never be permissibly broken.*<sup>1</sup> Kant's deontology and Mill's consequentialism are the classic examples of Moral absolutism. What these both have in common is the search for the fundamental moral principle or law. They agree that in order that an act be called moral, it needs to have some end in mind- acting out of duty and maximizing happiness for maximum number of people respectively. And these are absolute in the sense that there are no exceptions permissible. Kant's famous example of giving away a friend to a murderer as a consequence of not lying, is reflective of the extent to which the moral laws need to be followed. Such cases rebel against the intuition though. Why should I not lie, if all that lies between my friend's life and death, is a harmless lie? Kant, to this would reply that a lie is a lie, and since 'lying' by definition is morally wrong, it is wrong under all circumstances. He would relate it to R M Hare's maxim of *universalizability* and assert that since the act of lying cannot be imagined to be universal, it ought not to be done. Another way to deal with this would be the argument to the effect that one ought not to do to others what he himself would not want him to be subjected to. So, in this case, had I been the murderer, would I have wanted the other person to lie to me? No. Q.E.D. It should be made clear here that even though the primary

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<sup>1</sup>Landau, Russ Shafer (ed.). 2007, *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, pg- 749.

postulate on which the entire ethical system of Buddhism rests is the fundamental premise that there is a supreme end in human life which all rational people ought to aim for- this goal, this *summum bonum* is referred to as *Nibbana*<sup>1</sup>, this does not count as pointing to Buddhist ethics being absolutistic. It only implies that Buddhism has an abstract principle as an end which in no way *guides* the day to day phenomenal existence. The aforementioned end does not 'guide' but 'motivates'. The 'guide' is the ethical precepts mentioned in the Buddhist texts.

Moral Particularism, on the other hand, is a meta-ethical theory which questions the role of principles in ethics. According to this, there are no moral principles or laws. The most eminent particularist Jonathan Dancy argues that there is no exception-less, finite general principle providing descriptive conditions under which a moral verdict is justified. It accounts for the fact that one consideration (Dancy calls these considerations, *reasons*) that are good in one situation might not necessarily be good in other similar situations; moreover, the same considerations might, in fact, be against the situation. Dancy's chief objection to the moral absolutist program has to do with the fact that it absolutely overlooks the role *context* plays in a situation. To understand his particularist program better it could be noted that Dancy is not against any ethical theory- Kant's, Mill's- he never wrote against the theory per se. He focuses on the *reason* that goes into formulating any principle. So, Dancy discusses his theory of reasons when he discusses particularism.

## II

Dancy's Particularism emerges out of WD Ross's theory of prima facie duties. It is evident that Dancy's contention that reasons are capable of working both ways in seeming similar situations is directly influenced by Ross who despite being a generalist agreed that our moral decisions are based upon a variety of considerations, some of which favour the actions while others oppose it. There is no system of rules that tells us how to weigh different relevant competing considerations. And for this very reason, it might be argued, moral principles or laws are nothing more than *probable opinion*, and open to revision. Now, this point won't seem too farfetched if we look into other significant moral phenomena like, moral guilt or moral conflict. If a given set of moral rules could sufficiently address *every possible* moral scenario, then the above mentioned concepts would be non-existent. But it seems unlikely so. But Dancy found Ross's anti-generalist stand to be insufficient for two reasons: because of the conclusiveness of the list of prima facie duties; and the fact that despite opposing generalism, Ross still remained one. His opposition to generalism never got beyond the point where the

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<sup>1</sup>Premasiri, P. D. 1989. *Ethics of the Theravada Buddhist Tradition*, in S Cromwell Crawford's World Religion and Global Ethics, Paragon House Publishers.

valency (whether the feature counts in favour or against an action) could be variant. He continued to presuppose that the valence rests invariant.

It is interesting to see that Moral Particularism has been defined and re-defined from the time of its first appearance. It is defined as ‘approaching ethics in an analogous manner’<sup>1</sup>, a ‘claim about moral psychology’<sup>2</sup>, a statement about ‘nature of reason’<sup>3</sup>, view about the ‘relationship between descriptive and evaluative predicates’<sup>4</sup>, thesis about the ‘normative priority of particular moral judgment’<sup>5</sup>, denial of the existence of exception-less moral principle<sup>6</sup>, a theory that morality cannot be codified by any finite set of principles<sup>7</sup>, a claim that the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles<sup>8,9</sup>.

Dancy’s pioneering work on Moral Particularism is commendable, and yet we notice paradigmatic shifts in his belief system as far as particularism is concerned. It is worth mentioning that particularism is a theory that has developed over the time, and since certain important points are introduced later than others, the difficulty to keep the discussion ordered is inevitable. Even though Dancy is still in the process of improving his theory, *Ethics without Principles* presents his unchanged, definitive views on particularism, and it is that which shall be the point of reference here. Now getting back to the shift in Dancy’s understanding of particularism. Dancy initially thought that holism<sup>10</sup> simply implies particularism and for this very reason one of his major philosophical works<sup>11</sup> has been contributed to defending and developing holism. However six years later another publication by Mckeever and Ridge shook his fundamental assumption of equating holism with particularism when they showed that holism is in fact compatible with moral absolutism. This led Dancy to renew his claim that from holism one cannot derive the impossibility of moral principles. More needs to be done. It is for this reason that we notice a major shift in the definition and characterization of particularism in his two works. Whereas in *Moral Reasons* Dancy characterizes particularism in the following manner: *Particularism is at its crudest the claim that we neither need nor can see the search for an ‘evaluative outlook which one can endorse as rational as the search for a set of principles’<sup>12,1</sup>*, in *Ethics without Principles*

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<sup>1</sup>Hallisey, Charles ‘Ethical Particularism in Theravada Buddhism’ (1996), pg-7

<sup>2</sup>Dancy, Jonathan (1983)

<sup>3</sup>Hooker & Little (2000), Richardson Kirchin (2007)

<sup>4</sup>Jackson (2000)

<sup>5</sup>Irwin (2000)

<sup>6</sup>Landau (1997), McNaughton and Rawling (2000), Dancy (1983), Raz (2006)

<sup>7</sup>Holton (2002)

<sup>8</sup>Dancy (2004)

<sup>9</sup>This entire reference of definitions is taken from D Uri Leibowitz’s *A Defence of Particularist Research Program*. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice. Vol 12, pg- 182.

<sup>10</sup>Holism is a doctrine about properties. It holds the thesis that a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another case.

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Dancy. *Practical Reality* (2000). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup>Dancy, Jonathan, *Moral Reasons* (1993), pg- 56.

he writes, particularism is ‘the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles’<sup>2</sup>. Whereas in the former definition, the absolute principles are completely shunned as being ever even remotely close reasons; in the latter definition, it merely asserts that morality does not depend on such principles. In response to a criticism by Sinnott Armstrong, and as an answer to his question: what sort of a particularist are you? Dancy replies: *my leading aim is to decide whether moral rationality depends in any way on the existence and application of true general principles.*<sup>3</sup>

Moving on, now, to the tracing of particularistic elements in the Buddhist ethics.

### III

There has been on-going debate about whether or not Buddhism adheres to the particularist code of conduct. Particularism in Buddhism is not always explicit; the search might even be misguided, but the examination is worthwhile. It goes without saying that when it comes to interpreting Buddhism, one essentially must clarify as to the specific school which is being referred to. There are over more than twenty three major schools and sub-schools of Buddhism, taken geographically, historically, and philosophically. If one sees Buddhism as a system where the moral precepts are dictated first<sup>4</sup> and the mind is cleansed later in order to make it ‘mindful’ enough to grasp the precepts as if it comes naturally, it becomes harder to see how particularism of any kind could possibly be found. Interestingly, quite a few researchers on Buddhist ethics are coming around to the opinion that there might, after all, be a particularistic account of Buddhist ethics. For the present purpose, I use Charles Goodman and Charles Hallisey’s research to make the point. Charles Goodman in his book *Consequences of Compassion*<sup>5</sup> starts off with an evaluative examination of the three major ethical theories of all times- consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics- and shows how even though the consequentialist and deontological theories succeed in laying out a system of moral principles where moral issues could be addressed, they also, on the other hand, encounter cases which leads to ‘strange and disturbing results’<sup>6</sup> if they advocate the same principles as the basis of criterion of judgment for other cases. What counts as an interesting mark is that Goodman calls these ‘strange

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<sup>1</sup>The quote within the quote is referenced by Dancy. The source is McDowell’s ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’ in Ted Honderich, ed.. *Morality and Objectivity*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London. (1985), pg- 122

<sup>2</sup>Dancy Jonathan, *Ethics without Principles* (2004), pg- 1,5,7.

<sup>3</sup>Dancy Jonathan, ‘Defending Particularism’, *Metaphilosophy*, Vol 30, Nov 1/2( 1999 ).

<sup>4</sup>The moral precepts are said to be dictated in the sense of them being there forever. They are the objects of introspection which requires mindfulness.

<sup>5</sup>Goodman, Charles. *Consequences of Compassion*, OUP (2009), chapters 2 and 6.

<sup>6</sup>Goodman, Charles. (2009). *Consequences of Compassion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pg- 37.



and disturbing results' *counterintuitive consequences*. This might seem like a long shot but is the disturbing result being called intuitive because both the theories are, kind of, agent-neutral? Moral agent is independent of the principle making process. He is merely the principle-abiding unit. This stand leads to problems. Henceforth Goodman moves on to Aristotle's virtue ethics. Aristotle's solution to the aforementioned problem makes us want to believe the presence of Buddhist element in it; the point of a virtuous being who would know what to do in a moral-binding situation by virtue of his *virtue*. Goodman writes:

*"The knowledge of what to do in problematic situations where different moral considerations pull in different directions must derive from a kind of practical wisdom, and cannot be reduced to a general rule."*<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle's account of virtues and the eudaemonist principle that follows from it both agree that the kind of circumstances that we need to attain happiness (the circumstances would also contain the virtues which will lead to happiness when expressed in action) depend upon the facts about human nature. And the human nature in Aristotle is very much a part of the 'rational soul'; one of the three aspects of human soul along with the vegetative and the animal soul. And the rational soul is the one capable of *forming beliefs and deciding what to do*.<sup>23</sup>

Goodman explains the Buddhist stand especially that of Vimalakirti, in the chapter 6 titled *Transcending Ethics*. The crux of the chapter was to make the point that Vimalakirti, through the years of Buddhist way of life, became so perfect that he was beyond ethics. He could ask Mara for the heavenly maidens and still be virtuous. And if he had to be attached to some ethical theory at all, he would come closest to moral particularism. The fact that Vimalakirti's concern for the welfare of others is intensely internalized to the extent that he does not, at all, refer to any given general principle, and rather rejects them as being disregarding, points towards the particularistic element being discussed here.

Chandrakirti is yet another very important representative of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism who reproaches the normative views that are taken for granted by the society, and offers a systematic criticism of the same in his commentary of *catuhsataka*. According to him, we should not hold of any philosophical theory that requires us to reject descriptive aspects of the

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<sup>1</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, pg-39.

<sup>3</sup>There can be a whole argument developed here to the effect that a human being as a moral agent needs to have a sound belief in the principles he adheres to. Once the belief is formed, it is not difficult to decide what is to be done. How much space does an objective principle give for belief formation is another significant question to be addressed. If the answer is 'none', then Aristotle's definition of a rational soul bends towards particularistic way of morality.

experience of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Of course, what he means by this is primarily the external objects in the world and the like, but there is no difficulty in inferring this clause to values and norms too. For Chandrakirti an endorsement from the everyday life is as important for a thing as its existence in itself. So by this token if the general moral principles do not endorse the peculiarity of everyday life, they are not something worth pursuing or depending on. The precedent accounts of the two Buddhist thinkers, when seen in entirety, seem to present the following picture: maintaining the *vyavaharika* (phenomenal) and *paramarthika* (ultimate) divide, everything has to make sense in the former and remain blank<sup>2</sup> in the latter. General principles, so long as they remain agent-neutral, can never really address the particular problems of daily existence; and hence could neither explain the problems better nor provide any solutions to them.

Charles Hallisey's account of Moral Particularism is of special interest. He writes<sup>3</sup>:

*"By ethical particularism I mean: something analogous to a very old problem in western philosophy, the 'problem of criterion'...."*

This problem of criterion, in brief, is a mistaken belief that only by theoretically knowing the criteria for ethical knowledge; we can recognise the particular instance of morality. In the absolutist/particularist debate this problem could take the following form- it would be a mistake to suppose that only by knowing the ethical principles, we would know that those principles could be used to cases where they claim they can be used. He brings forth Buddhaghosha's work as a spot to look for the particularist element in the Buddhist philosophy. It warns against any attempt to look for one or few general meta-ethical principles that is expected to serve as a solution of moral problems of all kinds. He writes:

*"The diversity of the story...encourages us to respond to the rich particularity of each situation before us without holding ourselves to a standard of moral consistency generally associated with taking guidance from a single ethical theory."*<sup>4</sup>

So, like Dancy's particularism, Buddhist ethics (the schools discussed above) too gives the impression that what is important while deciding an action to be moral/immoral are the *reasons* for action. Even though the phenomenality of the *vyavaharika satta* is denied as being unreal, it is of supreme importance because it is the locus of action which will ultimately lead to *nibbana*.

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<sup>1</sup>*Ibid*, pg- 126

<sup>2</sup>'Blank' in the sense of not having any affect at all. Being just in its real *rupa*. Everything, anyway, extinguishes at the ultimate level, according to the Buddhists.

<sup>3</sup>Hallisey, Charles. 'Ethical Particularism in Theravada Buddhism' (1996), *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol 3, pg- 37.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, pg- 42

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