

# Value pluralism in early Buddhist ethics

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## Introduction

Following Susan Wolf, I understand ethical pluralism as “the view that there is an irreducible plurality of values or principles that are relevant to moral judgment.”<sup>1</sup> Wolf distinguishes between two types of ethical pluralism: evaluative and deontic. Evaluative pluralism is concerned with the nature and the lexical order of values or goods. Deontic pluralism on the other hand, discusses principles, not in the sense of specific precepts but rather in the sense of decision procedures and criteria to determine the rightness of actions.

I have argued elsewhere that early Buddhist ethics proposes several criteria to determine the rightness of actions.<sup>2</sup> In the present essay, I focus on the specific type of value pluralism represented in early Buddhist ethics. The distinction between evaluative and deontic pluralism is important because one can be a pluralist in terms of values and a monist in terms of principles. For instance, contemporary consequentialists tend to be pluralists in terms of values but monists in terms of principles. That is, they accept diverse kinds

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf 1992: 785.

<sup>2</sup> Vélez de Cea 2004a. I claim that the Pāli Nikāyas contain several criteria to determine the rightness of actions. I use the term goodness instead of rightness to challenge narrow understandings of the realm of the good in Buddhist ethics. Specifically, I question the *abhidharmic* tendency to reduce the moral fruitfulness of actions to the wholesomeness of the agent’s motivation, that is, the tendency to conflate the rightness of actions with the goodness of the agent’s motivation. In other words, I question interpretations of early Buddhist ethics as agent-based forms of virtue ethics. Instead, I view early Buddhism as presupposing a pluralistic approach to virtue ethics.

of goods but the rightness of actions depends exclusively on the net amount of value that an action, rule, or virtue promotes.

In the first section of this essay I discuss the principal values that can be inferred from moral exhortations and what early Buddhists considered spiritual and non-spiritual benefits. In the second section, I clarify the nature of early Buddhist values. In order to accomplish this goal, I challenge the application to the Pāli Nikāyas of diverse categories common in current western ethical discourse. As an alternative, I distinguish between ultimate and penultimate values, and speak about their enabling, favoring and intensifying functions. In the third and final section, I compare the lexical order of values in early Buddhism to Damien Keown's (1995) list of three basic Buddhist goods.

### **1. Deriving values from exhortations and claims regarding spiritual and other benefits**

In this article, I do not deduce early Buddhist values from our natural inclinations or from what make humans good and healthy specimens of their kind. Likewise, I do not derive early Buddhist values from *a priori* accounts of what constitutes human fulfillment or the highest function of humans. Rather, I infer early Buddhist values from the most common moral exhortations found in the Pāli Nikāyas, and from what these texts consider beneficial, whether spiritually or non-spiritually.

The non-spiritual benefits to which the Pāli Nikāyas refer reflect the actual values of early Buddhists. These non-spiritual benefits are clearly presented as inferior to spiritual ones. Nonetheless, they are nevertheless presented as valuable and worthy of pursuit. From the early Buddhist perspective, these benefits usually derive from ethical and spiritual practices, but this is not necessarily the case (SN IV.230; AN V.10). Even if it were the case that non-spiritual benefits, such as prosperity, repute, social influence and status, were always the consequence of ethical and spiritual development, this would not render non-spiritual benefits valueless.

Some scholars of Buddhist ethics tend to reduce the value of non-spiritual benefits to the value of spiritual benefits.<sup>3</sup> However, interpreting the value of non-spiritual benefits as mere consequences of spiritual values makes the Pāli Nikāyas “too spiritual.” Besides, this romanticized “too spiritual” interpretation of early Buddhist axiology renders early Buddhism unnecessarily inconsistent with the actual practice of many traditional Buddhists today. Instead of contrasting an ideal abhidharmic Buddhist ethics and a somehow degenerated Buddhist ethics in practice, I interpret the Pāli Nikāyas and early Buddhism as legitimizing from the beginning diverse types of ethical practice, not always motivated by pure and ideal spiritual concerns.

Moral exhortations usually appear in the form of precepts, but sometimes they appear as part of simple prudential advice. Here however, I understand the term moral in a broad sense as including not only ethical precepts but also social and spiritual recommendations, which, from a traditional Buddhist perspective, belong to the ethical realm.

Precepts point to morally significant items that require from us diverse kinds of response: protection, cultivation, respect, love. Not only positive action, but failure to respond adequately to these items, constitutes “doing” something that is ethically relevant, or using Buddhist terminology, performing an act that is karmically fruitful or unfruitful, wholesome or unwholesome. Thus, precepts indicate the existence of items and actions that are worthy, valuable, good. As Damien Keown states: “precepts gesture beyond themselves in the direction of certain values which it is their function to preserve. Their formulation as negative recommendations flashes an alert that anyone contemplating such actions as killing or stealing is threatening an assault on certain values or ‘goods’.”<sup>4</sup>

The Pāli Nikāyas contain many sets of moral exhortations. Here, I limit myself to discussing the lists of five and ten precepts, the ten

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Damien Keown’s account of early Buddhist ethics, where non-spiritual benefits of actions are reduced to “non-moral secondary consequences entrained by moral acts” (2001: 128).

<sup>4</sup> Keown 1995: 41.

wholesome actions, and the three sections on ethical conduct (*śīla*) of the *Brahmajāla Suttanta*. The following analysis is not intended to provide a comprehensive list of early Buddhist values, just a sense of their nature.

The five precepts are, as Richard Gombrich states, the most obvious principles through which Buddhist values may be examined.<sup>5</sup> Even though the Pāli Nikāyas do not correlate the five precepts with values and virtues, it seems possible to correlate the first precept – abstaining from taking life – to the value of life and virtues such as friendliness or loving-kindness and compassion. Similarly, the second precept – abstaining from taking what is not given – can be related to the values of property and social justice. These values can be protected by virtues such as non-greed, generosity, and honesty. The third precept – abstaining from sensual misconduct – can be connected to the values of self-control, moderation, and fulfilling role-dependent duties: celibacy in the case of monks and nuns, and faithfulness in the case of lay people. These values can be guarded by several virtues including temperance, contentment, and non-greed. The fourth precept – abstaining from telling lies – expresses what Peter Harvey calls the value of “seeking truth and seeing things as they are,”<sup>6</sup> which can be cultivated through virtues such as wisdom, mindfulness, and investigation of things (*dhammavicaya*). The fifth precept – abstaining from taking intoxicants – reflects the Buddhist concern for mental health, as well as for the value of seeking truth and seeing things as they are. Mindfulness, which in this context includes sobriety, is a fundamental Buddhist virtue because it protects not only the values of mental health and seeing things as they are, but also the values associated with the other precepts. That is, mindfulness is a key Buddhist virtue because it prevents reckless moral conduct and the breaking of precepts in general.

The list of ten precepts includes the first five precepts plus five extra precepts. Today, these precepts are usually observed by novices, and nuns who are denied full ordination. On special occasions

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<sup>5</sup> Gombrich 1992: 98.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey 2000: 75.

such as full moon days, lay people may decide to observe some or all of these extra precepts. The sixth precept – abstaining from eating at the wrong time – like the third precept, seems to be intended to preserve the values of self-control and moderation, which relate to the virtues of temperance and contentment. The seventh precept – abstaining from dancing, singing, music, and watching shows – is difficult to understand outside its original cultural context. The seventh precept is not so much about dancing, singing, music, and watching shows per se, but rather about the ambiance that may have surrounded such activities in ancient India, an ambiance that can still be experienced in rural South Asia. Thus, I prefer to interpret the seventh precept as expressing the value of circumspection, which relate to the virtues of mindfulness and prudence in the sense of ability to avoid situations that may endanger moral conduct. Similarly, the eighth precept – abstaining from garlands, perfumes, cosmetics, and adornments – does not target concern for beauty as such, or concern for looking good, smelling good, and being clean or elegant. Rather, the precept seems to be intended to undermine attitudes that go against the values of simplicity and humility, for instance, lack of modesty and vanity. Likewise, the ninth precept – abstaining from using high seats or beds – appears to be intended to preserve the values of simplicity and humility, thus, opposing extravagance and vanity. Finally, the tenth precept – abstaining from accepting gold or silver – applies to monks and nuns, and protects the value of right livelihood, renunciation and simplicity through virtues such as contentment and detachment from material possessions.

The first four of the ten wholesome actions overlap with the first four precepts. The fifth wholesome action – abstaining from divisive speech – and the sixth – abstaining from harsh speech – seem to relate to social values such as friendship, peace and harmony. These social values can be protected by virtues such as loving-kindness, truthfulness, compassion, non-violence, and even calmness and patience. The seventh wholesome action – abstaining from frivolous speech or idle chatter – demonstrates the Buddhist concern for what is practical in the sense of being directly related to ethical and spiritual development. This focus on what is practical can be related to many virtues, primarily wisdom and diligence.

The eighth wholesome action – abstaining from covetous thoughts – expresses the values of mental health, simplicity, self-control and moderation, undermining negative mental states such as envy, avarice, greed. The ninth wholesome action – abstaining from ill-will – connects to the value of mental health, peace, and harmony, protected through virtues such as loving-kindness and compassion. Finally, the tenth wholesome action – abstaining from wrong views – concerns the values of mental health, seeking truth and seeing things as they are, which can be preserved by the virtues of mindfulness, investigation of things, and wisdom.

The moral exhortations that appear in the three sections on ethical conduct of the *Brahmajāla Suttanta* overlap to a great extent with the aforementioned sets of precepts. Here I will discuss briefly the exhortations that differ from those already discussed. For instance, respect for seeds and plants shows concern for the values of life and the environment. Several virtues including love, compassion, and wisdom may help to guard these values. Abstaining from accepting uncooked grain, raw meat, slaves, animals, and fields, like the former precept, applies to monks and nuns, and relate to the values of right livelihood and fulfilling role-dependent duties, both preserved by the virtue of renunciation. Similarly, abstaining from certain activities such as running messages, buying and selling, dealing with false weights, bribery, cheating, predicting the future by different methods, and reciting charms and incantations to benefit or harm others, embodies the value of right livelihood, though in this case it is less clear that the precept is intended exclusively for monks and nuns. Trading with false weights, bribery, and cheating are also prohibited for lay people.

Although many early Buddhist values are linked to moral exhortations and precepts, not all of them are. The second strategy to infer early Buddhist values is to analyze what the Pāli Nikāyas considered benefits, that is something worthy, valuable or good. The number of texts that could be used to infer values from spiritual and non-spiritual benefits is endless. Here, I provide just a few representative examples.

Among the texts that connect non-spiritual benefits and virtuous conduct, I will here focus on two: AN IV.197 and DN III.180–193.

In AN IV.197, the Buddha tells queen Mallikā that material benefits such as wealth, influence, and beauty result from not displaying anger, hatred, resentment, generosity to holy people, and from not being envious of others' achievements, honor, and respect.

In the *Sigālaka Suttanta* (DN III.180–193), the Buddha explains the dangers of taking intoxicants, haunting the streets at night, attending fairs, gambling, keeping bad company, and idleness. By avoiding this type of conduct, one avoids many negative consequences and achieves many positive ones. Specifically, by not taking intoxicant one avoids “present waste of money, increased quarreling, liability to sickness, loss of good name, indecent exposure of one’s person, and weakening of the intellect” (DN III.182–183). From these diverse benefits, we may infer values such as prosperity, peace, health, beauty, repute, and mental health.

The *Sigālaka Suttanta* is also useful in that it allows us to identify social values such as friendship, respect for status, and fulfillment of role-dependent duties, i.e. fulfillment of the duties of parents toward children, teachers toward students, husbands toward wives, friends toward friends, employers toward employees, holy people toward followers, and vice versa.

Among the texts that connect virtuous conduct to both spiritual and non-spiritual benefits, I discuss two: MN III.202–206 and MN I.32ff.. In MN III.202–206, the Buddha explains that killing leads to a bad rebirth, or in case a killer is born as a human being, to a short-life. Conversely, abstaining from killing leads to a happy rebirth, or if born as a human being, to a long life. Injuring beings leads to an unhappy rebirth or if one is reborn as human, to being sick frequently. Conversely, respecting life leads to a good rebirth, or to a healthy life if one is born as human. Being angry and irritable, displaying hate and bitterness makes one ugly; doing the opposite makes one beautiful.

Envy of others' achievements and honors leads to being powerless, doing the opposite makes one influential. Being stingy with holy people leads to poverty and giving to wealth. Obstinance and arrogance and failure to respect those worthy of respect leads to a low-birth; the opposite leads to being high-born. Finally, failure to ask wise and holy people about what is wholesome and unwhole-

some, about what someone should and should not cultivate, and about the actions conducive to harm and suffering, versus welfare and happiness, leads to stupidity in a next life; the opposite leads to wisdom.

The foundation of the lists of benefits found in MN III.202–206, appears to be a hierarchy of values: first, biological values such as life and health; second, worldly values such as beauty, influence, prosperity, and social status; third, spiritual values such as wisdom and discernment.

This hierarchy of values, demonstrates that spiritual values such as wisdom and discernment are superior to non-spiritual values. However, the fact that biological values appear before worldly values does not seem to suggest that life and health are less important than worldly values. Instead, they seem to come first because they are the preconditions of achieving the other values. That is, without life and health, worldly values cannot be enjoyed.

The conclusion of MN III.202–206 expresses two central values of early Buddhism: self-reliance and personal responsibility: “Beings are owners of their actions, student, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.”<sup>7</sup>

A slightly different hierarchy of Buddhist values can be inferred from MN I.32ff. In this text, the Buddha exhorts his monks to practice the precepts, serenity of mind, meditation, and insight in order to achieve diverse benefits. The first set of benefits is being dear to fellow monks and respected by them, which I interpret as expressing the social values of friendship and respect for spiritual status. Although the Buddha is addressing monks in this text, it can be inferred that the values of friendship and respect for spiritual status are relevant not only for monks and nuns, but also for lay practitioners.

The second set of benefits is obtaining the four material requirements of monks and nuns: robes, alms, resting place, and medicine.

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<sup>7</sup> *kammasakkā māṇava, sattā kammadāyādā kammayoni kammabandhu kammapaṭisaraṇā. kammaṃ satte vibhajati yadidaṃ hīnappaṇītātāyāti.*



These benefits presuppose concern for basic material values such as clothing, food, shelter, and health care. Although the text refers to the four requirements of monks and nuns, the values underlying the text might be extrapolated to lay practitioners as well.

The third set of benefits is spiritual in nature: achieving great consequences and benefit for those who provide the four material requirements, which reflect to the value of giving and the virtue of generosity. Generosity is generally a virtue to be cultivated by lay people. However, as Gregory Schopen has shown, historically, it has been cultivated by many monks as well. Achieving great consequences and benefits for dead kinsmen and relatives who remember the qualities of holy people, reflect the value of faith, both in monastics and lay people. Conquering the emotional ups and downs, fear and dread, demonstrate the value of self-control and a variety of virtues, primarily temperance. Obtaining the pleasant states of the four *jhānas* and the four immaterial *jhānas*, here described as “the peaceful liberations that transcend form and are immaterial,”<sup>8</sup> can be related to the value of calm meditation and virtuous mental factors conducive to concentration (*samādhi*), including bliss and equanimity.

The fourth set of benefits, also spiritual in nature, consists in becoming one of the four particular types of persons: a stream-enterer (*sotāpatti*), a once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*), a non-returner (*anāgāmi*), or an enlightened being or *arahant*. The enlightened being is described as someone who acquires nirvanic knowledge and powers: the divine ear, the ability to know the minds of others, recollect former lives, perceive with the divine eye the passing away and reappearance of beings, and liberation of the mind through wisdom and the destruction of taints. One becomes a stream-enterer by destroying the three lower fetters (identity views, doubt, and attachment to rules and observances); a once-returner by attenuating lust (*rāga*), hate, and delusion; a non-returner by destroying the five lower fetters (the former three plus sensual desire and ill will); and an enlightened being by eradicating the remaining fetters (desire for fine-material existence, desire for immaterial existence, conceit,

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<sup>8</sup> *santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā.*

restlessness, and ignorance). All these spiritual benefits point to the values of insight meditation and spiritual powers, yet overall to the value of character cultivation, which is protected and developed by many virtuous mental factors.

The fact that the development of values culminates in becoming a certain type of person suggests that the development of character traits characteristic of enlightened beings is the supreme early Buddhist value. The fact that social values appear before material values does not seem to show a particular ranking of non-spiritual values. Both social and material values can be interpreted as favorable conditions for the cultivation of spiritual values.

## 2. The complex nature of early Buddhist values

In order to better understand the nature of early Buddhist values, we need to apply to the Pāli Nikāyas the proper set of hermeneutical categories. The objective is not to interpret Buddhist values in terms of non-Buddhist concepts but rather to determine what concepts are most helpful to interpret Buddhist values on their own terms.

The most common axiological distinction in western philosophical ethics is that between intrinsic and instrumental values. Intrinsic values are those things valued for their own sake, and instrumental values are those valued for the sake of something else. This distinction – although not in cognate terminology – appears explicitly in the Pāli Nikāyas. For instance, in SN III.189, the monk Rādhā asks for the purpose or goal (*attha*) of seeing correctly (*sammā dassanaṃ*), and the Buddha replies that it is disenchantment (*nibbidā*). Next, Rādhā asks for the purpose of disenchantment, and the Buddha responds that it is dispassion (*virāgo*). Rādhā asks for the purpose of dispassion, and the Buddha replies that it is liberation (*vimutti*), which in this context refers to the meditative absorptions called immaterial *jhānas*. Once again, Rādhā asks for the purpose of liberation, and the Buddha replies that it is *nibbāna* (English nirvana). Finally, when Rādhā asks for the purpose of nirvana the Buddha replies “You have gone beyond the range of questioning, Rādhā. You weren’t able to grasp the limit of your

questioning. For, Rādha, the holy life is lived with nirvana as its ground, nirvana as its destination, nirvana as its final goal.” Thus, the value of seeing things as they are, the value of spiritual renunciation, and the value of calm meditation would be instrumental, whereas nirvana would be the only intrinsic value.

Similarly, in MN I.149–150 the simile of the seven relay chariots seems to suggest that different types of purification are instrumental in leading gradually toward nirvana. The seven are the purifications of 1) virtue, 2) mind, 3) view, 4) overcoming doubt, 5) knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path, 6) knowledge and vision of the way, and 7) knowledge and vision, which is said to be for the sake of reaching final nirvana (*parinibbāna*) without clinging.

However, while these two texts indicate that nirvana is the only thing valued for its own sake, it would be inaccurate to conclude that what is valuable for the sake of nirvana is simply valued as an instrument or means to attain nirvana. That would be simplistic and inconsistent with the Pāli Nikāyas. Damien Keown has conclusively demonstrated that ethical practice is not only instrumental but also constitutive of nirvana.<sup>9</sup> Ethical practice is valuable for the sake of attaining nirvana as well as for its own sake. Furthermore, mental qualities constitutive of nirvana can be both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable. For instance, wisdom and compassion are intrinsically valuable and at the same time instrumentally valuable in the sense that they contribute to the achievement, spread, or implementation of other values.

To claim that something can be at the same time both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable is neither problematic nor at odds with practice in contemporary philosophical ethics. For instance, Thomas Hurka acknowledges that something intrinsically good or evil can also have instrumental qualities.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Christine Korsgaard speaks about things “that human beings might choose partly for their own sake under the condition of their

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<sup>9</sup> Keown 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Hurka 2001: 21.

instrumentality.”<sup>11</sup> Nor is this a new development in the West. Plato speaks of the value of justice as desired for its own sake,<sup>12</sup> as well as for the sake of something else, namely, for its consequences in this life and the next.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Aristotle speaks of friendship as instrumentally good,<sup>14</sup> as well as a good for its own sake whatever other benefits it may yield.<sup>15</sup>

The Pāli Nikāyas refer to goods that are both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. But in order to understand the full diversity of early Buddhist values, we need something more than the dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental values. Christine Korsgaard has expanded the classical distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values, introducing two new distinctions: intrinsic-extrinsic and instrumental-final. The intrinsic-extrinsic distinction concerns the source of a value: intrinsic goods are those that have value in themselves, that is, in virtue of its intrinsic, non-relational properties; extrinsic goods derive their value from something else, that is, they have value in virtue of its extrinsic, relational properties. The final-instrumental distinction, on the other hand, concerns not to the *source* of value, but to the *reasons* for valuing something: final goods are valued for their own sake as ends, whereas instrumental goods are valued for the sake of something else as means.<sup>16</sup> (Other philosophers have further challenged the distinction between final and instrumental values, arguing that collapses, and proposing instead a distinction between two types of final values, final intrinsic and final extrinsic values.)<sup>17</sup>

These conceptual elaborations are philosophically interesting; however, in my view, they are often misleading when applied to early Buddhist values. The final-instrumental distinction faces the same difficulty as the intrinsic-instrumental distinction. From the

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<sup>11</sup> Korsgaard 1996: 264.

<sup>12</sup> Plato. *Republic*, Books II–IV.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Book X.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a31–b6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1155a29–32, 1159a27.

<sup>16</sup> Korsgaard 1996: 111. See also Korsgaard 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Rønnow-Rasmussen 2002.

fact that nirvana is valued as the final good, it does not follow that all other goods must be valued as mere instruments or means to attain the values constitutive of nirvana. Moreover, from the fact that something is instrumentally valued by someone, it does not follow that it cannot be at the same time valued for its own sake by someone else. Likewise, something can be final with respect to X but instrumental with respect to Y. For instance, seeing correctly is instrumental with respect to disenchantment, which is a final good with respect to seeing correctly, yet disenchantment is also instrumentally valuable with respect to dispassion.

Furthermore, the application of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic values to the Pāli Nikāyas is not helpful in understanding early Buddhist values in their own terms. Given the non-substantial, relational ontology of early Buddhism, it would be awkward to say that some things are valuable by virtue of their intrinsic, non-relational properties, as if they were inherently valuable independently of everything else. Even the ethical and spiritual dimension of nirvana, that is, the mental qualities that constitute the state of nirvana, are conditioned in the sense of being dependently originated. Therefore, if all values including the ethical-spiritual qualities of nirvana are dependently originated, does not it follow that, at least to some extent, they all get their value from the multiplicity of factors that condition and contribute to their existence? In other words, strictly speaking, the distinction between what possesses value in virtue of intrinsic, non-relational properties versus what possesses value by virtue of extrinsic, relational properties does not apply to early Buddhist values.

It might seem that from a less ontological level of discourse, one may apply the distinction intrinsic-extrinsic to the Pāli Nikāyas. Thus, at a conventional, common sense level of discourse, one may say that if the value of something does not derive from something else, then it has intrinsic value. On the other hand, if the value of something does derive from the value of something else, then it has extrinsic value. Accordingly, all Buddhist values except nirvanic values would be instances of extrinsic values: their value derives from their contribution to the achievement of nirvana. For instance, friendship would not be intrinsically valuable but rather extrinsi-

cally valuable, because of its relationship to nirvana, that is, because it contributes to the attainment of nirvana.

The problem with this application of the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction is that the Pāli Nikāyas do not seem to derive the value of non-nirvanic goods exclusively from their relationship or contribution to nirvana. Some early Buddhist goods appear to be valuable independently of nirvana. For instance, life is valuable regardless of its relationship or contribution to nirvana. The precept abstaining from taking life protects the value of life even in the case of non-human animals, which in early Buddhism are understood as incapable of volitional action (*kamma*), and therefore, as unable to progress toward nirvana. Similarly, the values of respect for spiritual status and fulfilling role-dependent duties do not appear to be dependent on their relationship or contribution to nirvana. I am not saying that these values cannot contribute to the attainment of nirvana. What I am suggesting is that in early Buddhism the values of life, respect for spiritual status, and fulfilling role-dependent duties do not derive only from their conduciveness to or even from other relationships to nirvana.

If it is plausible to claim that at least some non-nirvanic values do not derive all their value from their contribution or relationship to nirvana, then they cannot be considered extrinsically valuable alone. In other words, some non-nirvanic values are intrinsically and extrinsically valuable simultaneously. Since some early Buddhist values can be both intrinsically and extrinsically valuable, we cannot apply to early Buddhism the dichotomy intrinsic-extrinsic values.

Despite their failure to illuminate the domain of Buddhist ethics fully, these distinctions are useful, in that they help us realize that early Buddhist values are complex, at least complex enough to be irreducible to the dichotomies intrinsic-instrumental, final-instrumental, intrinsic-extrinsic. Even though this might be the wrong set of distinctions to apply to the Pāli Nikāyas, they do suggest a model for approaching this rich axiological terrain. Following their lead, I propose an alternative distinction, that between ultimate and penultimate values.

Ultimate values are the highest. Strictly speaking, for the Pāli Nikāyas only nirvana is ultimate, the end or final destination for the sake of which the entire spiritual path is cultivated (SN III.189; MN I.149–150). However, here by ultimate value I do not mean nirvana in its broadest sense but specifically the mental qualities and character traits constitutive of nirvana. For the sake of simplicity, I call these qualities and traits “nirvanic values.” I break the concept of nirvanic values into two umbrella terms, “nirvanic knowledge” and “nirvanic virtues.”

Another possibility would be to explain nirvanic values in terms of more traditional Buddhist concepts such as mental factors (*cetasika*), perfections (*pāramitā*), or requisites for enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya-dhamma*). However, I prefer the terms “knowledge” and “virtue” to facilitate the understanding of early Buddhist values by non-Buddhists, as well as comparisons of Buddhists and non-Buddhist values. I qualify the terms “knowledge” and “virtue” with the adjective “nirvanic” because not all types of knowledge and not all possible virtues are necessarily constitutive of or conducive to nirvana.<sup>18</sup>

All values except nirvanic values are penultimate. By penultimate values, I simply mean values not constitutive of nirvana: non-nirvanic pleasures, non-nirvanic knowledge, non-nirvanic virtues, friendship, fulfillment of role-dependent duties, life, health, repute, prosperity, and so on.

Given that not all penultimate values are necessarily means toward nirvanic values, and since many intrinsically valuable virtues have also instrumental value, my distinction between ultimate and penultimate values should not be confused with the classical distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values. For instance, health is a penultimate value, and yet it cannot be reduced to a mere means for the attainment of nirvana. Likewise, the virtue of

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<sup>18</sup> The distinction between nirvana and nirvanic values might be seen by some as unnecessary. However, I would like to leave open the question of whether nirvana is something more than mental qualities and character traits. In fact, some texts of the Pāli Nikāyas seem to justify an interpretation of nirvana as more than just ethical and spiritual flourishing, that is, as the unconditioned *dhamma*, a transcendent base or sphere of reality (*āyatana*).

love can both contribute and constitute many other ends other than Buddhist flourishing. For instance, love contributes and constitutes a good relationship; however, that does not make love a mere instrument for human relationships either.

Whereas final values in Korsgaard's sense are valued for their own sake, ultimate values can also be valued for the sake of something else. For instance, nirvanic virtues can be valuable also because they contribute to the well-being of other living beings. Similarly, while Korsgaard's instrumental values are valuable for the sake of something else, penultimate values do not need to be always valued for the sake of something else. In fact, many penultimate values such as non-nirvanic knowledge and friendship can also be valued for their own sake.

Besides understanding early Buddhist values through the concepts of ultimate and penultimate, I propose a critical appropriation of Jonathan Dancy's distinction between favoring, enabling, and intensifying conditions.<sup>19</sup> Unlike Dancy, I use the distinction to explain the functions performed by values. Values function as enablers if they make other values possible; as favorers if they increase the chances of achieving or implementing other values; and as intensifiers if they improve or supplement the value of other goods, for instance, by making them more attractive or enticing.

I interpret the functions of enabling, favoring, and intensifying as cutting across ultimate and penultimate values. That is, the functions of favoring, enabling and intensifying can be performed by both achievements valued ultimately or penultimately. The three functions cannot be confused with a mere instrumental function, that is, the function of being a means to an end. As I said, the dichotomies intrinsic-instrumental and final-instrumental might be

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<sup>19</sup> Dancy 2004. Despite the fact that Dancy's distinction belongs to his theory of reasons, I think it possible to apply them to the realm of values. In fact, Dancy himself admits the possibility of applying his concept of enabling to his theory of value, though not his concept of favoring. By using the terms enabling, favoring, and intensifying to clarify the lexical order of early Buddhist values, one does not have to share the meaning that Dancy gives to such terms, nor endorse his holistic theory of reasons, nor agree with his moral particularism.



misleading and unhelpful in appreciating the complexity of some Buddhist values. Accordingly, instead of speaking of instrumental function<sup>20</sup> or “being a means to an end,” I prefer to speak more specifically of enabling, favoring, and intensifying functions, which are not the monopoly of either ultimate or penultimate values.

When I assign one of these three functions to something we value – a trait or an achievement – I do not want to insinuate that it is the only function that such value can perform. For instance, mental health primarily performs an enabling function but it can also perform a favoring function. Similarly, spiritual pleasures primarily performs an intensifying function, but it can also perform a favoring function in that it may encourage further spiritual practice. Moreover, such valuable traits as repute and influence primarily perform an intensifying function, but they can also perform a favoring function, facilitating the practice of certain virtues. For instance, the fame and the spiritual influence of a holy person can facilitate the practice of generosity and compassion among her/his disciples.

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<sup>20</sup> Although the application of the concept of instrumental value to the Pāli Nikāyas is problematic, I do advocate a distinction between “teleological” and “instrumental” actions, which correlates to some extent to the early Buddhist distinction between *kusala* and *puñña*, and, in a different way, to W.D. Ross’ distinction between the goodness and the rightness of actions. Whereas teleological actions are necessarily performed with a wholesome motivation, instrumental actions do not necessarily presuppose a wholesome motivation, though they are nevertheless morally acceptable and karmically fruitful. From a Buddhist perspective, instrumental actions are right actions, stepping stones toward the eventual performance of teleological actions. I do not deny that actions may be simultaneously good and right, teleological and instrumental, at least in ideal types of ethical practice. However, the goodness and rightness of actions do not always overlap, and therefore, we cannot always reduce teleological and instrumental actions to two different aspects of a single action; at least this is not the case in actions where goodness and rightness do not coincide. For instance, in less ideal types of ethical practice it is possible to do the right thing without a wholesome motivation, or to do what is wrong with a wholesome motivation. Thus, I neither conflate nor fracture the rightness and goodness of actions, and accordingly, I neither identify nor totally separate teleological and instrumental actions.

Life and health primarily perform an enabling function. Values that primarily favor the achievement or implementation of other values can be divided into at least three groups: material, social, and ethical-spiritual. The four requirements of clothing, shelter, food, and medicine or health care, are material values that facilitate other values, for instance, the cultivation of spiritual values. The social values that primarily facilitate other values are right livelihood, friendship, respect for spiritual and social status, and fulfillment of role-dependent duties. Social values may also perform an intensifying function in that they make life in society more enjoyable. Ethical-spiritual values favor the development of material values and enhance the value of social goods.

Pleasure, supernatural powers, and worldly benefits such as wealth, corporeal beauty, influence, honors, and repute primarily perform an intensifying function. In early Buddhism, pleasure, supernatural powers, and worldly benefits are valued because they enhance the value of other values. For instance, by saying that generosity leads to future prosperity, one intensifies the value of giving. Similarly, the pleasure of nirvana – the highest kind of pleasure (Dhp 203; MN I.508) – intensifies the value of mental qualities constitutive of nirvana. Furthermore, the values of wisdom and certain meditative attainments are intensified by the supernatural abilities they may generate.

Intensifying values can also perform enabling or favoring functions. For instance, prosperity enables one to create Dharma centers and thus, favors the cultivation of spiritual practice in oneself and others. Similarly, the pleasure of the first *jhāna* is praised because it is the path leading to enlightenment, that is, because it facilitates the attainment of nirvana (MN I.247).

Someone might object that pleasure, supernatural powers, and worldly benefits are not genuine values but rather side-effects of ultimate values. For instance, health, wealth, beauty and influence are often described as karmic consequences of previous generosity and ethical conduct. Similarly, supernatural powers and spiritual pleasures usually derive from the development of wholesome mental states through meditation practice. Consequently, the objection goes, only ultimate values and not their side-effects should be seen

as true values. However, the fact that pleasure, supernatural powers, and worldly benefits are consequences of ultimate values does not imply that they possess no value at all, even less that their value is reducible to the value of nirvanic virtues and nirvanic knowledge.

The fact that the Pāli Nikāyas use pleasure, supernatural powers, and worldly benefits such as health, wealth, beauty, and influence to motivate ethical and spiritual practice indicates that they provide an incentive that ultimate values cannot provide by themselves, at least for certain kind of practitioners. Such an incentive might not be the best possible motivation, but it is nevertheless valuable for attracting some people to the spiritual path, people who otherwise might not be interested in ultimate values by themselves.

Another possible objection is that pleasure, supernatural powers, and worldly benefits are valuable only when they are handled well, that is, if they are enjoyed virtuously. For instance, the objection goes, many texts seem to demonstrate that pleasures associated with unwholesome mental states such as craving and grasping, are not valuable at all. Therefore, their value would be reducible to that of spiritual values.

This, however, is true of all Buddhist values except nirvana, not simply those that are primarily intensifying; they all lose worth when associated with unwholesome mental states. All values are more valuable when accompanied by wholesome mental states, but that does not mean that they have no value whatsoever without these states. Even the pleasure of sublime spiritual attainments can become counterproductive for spiritual progress if one develops clinging (*upādāna*) or ego-conceit (*asmimāna*) towards them (MN II.264–265; MN II.237). This does not imply that the pleasure of spiritual attainments lacks any value whatsoever when clinging and ego-conceit are present. In fact, MN II.265 speaks about someone who clings to the best object of clinging, namely the meditative base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. If the value of this pleasant meditative base were dependent exclusively on wholesome mental states, it would make no sense to consider it the best object of clinging (*upādānasetṭham*). If the objection were plausible, the text should say that the base has no value at all due to the presence of clinging. However, this is not what the text states.

From the early Buddhist perspective, any pleasures, especially sensual pleasures, can become counterproductive for spiritual progress. This misgiving, however, has nothing to do with their value as such, but rather with what early Buddhists call their danger (*ādīnava*). The Pāli Nikāyas are ambivalent about pleasures since they entail both value and danger. Spiritual pleasures are ranked higher than sensual pleasures, and, overall, they are considered extremely valuable: “the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared” (MN I.454).<sup>21</sup> Strictly speaking, any value, not just pleasures, may hold danger for the unenlightened mind, but this does not imply that their value is dependent on the presence of wholesome mental states and, therefore, that their value is reducible to nirvanic values.

Since the Pāli Nikāyas do not reduce all these different kinds of values to an overarching super-value or single good, early Buddhist ethics is pluralistic in terms of values. Moreover, since the Pāli Nikāyas presuppose a hierarchy of values (ultimate and penultimate, nirvanic and non-nirvanic), the evaluative pluralism of early Buddhist ethics is lexically ordered. It is to that lexical ordering that we now turn.

### 3. The lexical order of early Buddhist values

In order to clarify the lexical order of early Buddhist values, I would like to compare my account to Damien Keown’s list of three basic goods. So far, I have contended that in the Pāli Nikāyas spiritual values surpass non-spiritual values, that non-spiritual values are genuine values irreducible to spiritual ones, and that given the complexity of some early Buddhist values, they cannot be adequately categorized in terms of the dichotomies intrinsic-instrumental, final-instrumental, intrinsic-extrinsic. Instead, I have proposed the distinction between ultimate and penultimate values, and claimed

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<sup>21</sup> *nekkhammasukhaṃ pavivekasukhaṃ upasamasukhaṃ sambodhasukhaṃ āsevītabbaṃ bhāvetabbaṃ bahulīkātabbaṃ. Na bhāyītabbaṃ etassa sukhasāti vadāmi.*

that values may perform enabling, favoring and intensifying functions, which are not necessarily reducible to just being a means to an end.

In *Buddhism and Bioethics*, Damien Keown speaks about three fundamental values or basic goods. These goods are life, knowledge, and friendship. By knowledge, Keown means wisdom (*pañña*, Skt. *prajña*), “which has as its object the truths of Buddhist doctrine.”<sup>22</sup> By friendship, he does not refer to spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamitta*) but rather to “a wider complex of ideas...the proper mode of relationship with others...the complex which in early Buddhism is labeled as Morality (*sīla*), and in the Mahāyāna as Compassion (*karuṇā*) or alternatively as Means (*upāya*).”<sup>23</sup> By life, he does not mean all kinds of life but specifically what he calls “karmic life.” That is, life that “possesses the capacity to attain nirvana.”<sup>24</sup>

Keown’s two basic goods of friendship and knowledge overlap to a great extent with what I call ultimate values: nirvanic virtues and nirvanic knowledge. Unlike Keown, I prefer to differentiate clearly between friendship, which in my account is a penultimate value, and friendliness or loving-kindness (*mettā*), which is an ultimate value or nirvanic virtue. Likewise, I would like to keep separated the value non-nirvanic knowledge, which is penultimate, and nirvanic knowledge, which is ultimate.

This distinction is grounded in the Pāli Nikāyas, which distinguish between diverse kinds of knowledge, not all of them equally valuable. Similarly, the Pāli Nikāyas value friendship but never identify it with a particular nirvanic virtue, let alone with morality in the sense of relationships with others. I do not deny that morality regulates our relationships with others, yet morality does much more than that. At least in the Pāli Nikāyas, morality also regulates internal behavior (mental states) and actions that do not necessarily relate to others. For instance, taking intoxicants and engaging in

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<sup>22</sup> Keown 1995: 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

sexual misconduct may take place without necessarily involving a relationship with others.

According to Keown, the three goods of life, knowledge, and friendship are basic in the sense of being irreducible to each other; they are also incommensurable: “it is impossible to quantify these things and trade them off against one another as if they could be related on a common scale.” Consequently, for Keown, these goods must be equally valuable: “None of these things can stand as ‘greater’ in relation to another which is ‘lesser’.”<sup>25</sup>

I agree with Keown’s claim about the irreducible nature of early Buddhist goods and values. I also concur with him when he says that Buddhist values are incommensurable. Nevertheless, from the fact that goods are incommensurable, it does not follow that they must be equally valuable. We must distinguish between commensurability and comparability. Early Buddhist goods are incommensurable but not necessarily incomparable. By saying that values are comparable, I do not mean that they are quantifiable or subject to utilitarian calculations. Rather, the point is that values can be lexically ordered to some extent, and, therefore, they must be somehow comparable. The lexical order of values in the Pāli Nikāyas is undeniable: ultimate values are superior to penultimate values. This hierarchy of values would not exist if values were not comparable. Yet early Buddhist values are incommensurable. For instance, no amount of prosperity equals any specific number of lives. Similarly, it does not make much sense to state that fostering non-nirvanic knowledge in 300 people equals the development of nirvanic wisdom in one person. This way of thinking is foreign to the Pāli Nikāyas. Nevertheless, the value of life seems to surpass the value of material benefits, and the value of nirvanic wisdom is higher than the value of non-nirvanic types of knowledge.

The lexical order of values found in the Pāli Nikāyas presupposes not only the comparability of values from different kinds but also of values that belong to the same kind. For instance, the value of spiritual pleasures is superior to the value of sensual pleasures, which are often negatively portrayed (MN I.132ff., MN I.173ff.,

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–56.

etc.). Similarly, human life is more valuable than other types of lives, and the life of holy beings is more worthy than the life of ordinary beings; that is why the karmic consequences of killing a buddha are far more negative than killing any other ordinary being. Even among wholesome mental states, it is possible to perceive some lexical order. For instance, wisdom seems to be the most valuable mental state, even more than loving-kindness and compassion, though according to Gombrich the Pāli Nikāyas are not always consistent in this regard.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, despite some tensions and minor variations, the Pāli Nikāyas presuppose a lexical order of values. Even if the ranking among values of the same kind is not beyond dispute, it is clear that ultimate values are more important than penultimate ones, and that spiritual benefits surpass non-spiritual benefits.

I do not claim that my discussion of early Buddhist values is comprehensive or that my list of values exhausts all things that early Buddhists considered valuable. Like Keown, I admit that there may be other ways of mapping the most important Buddhist values. It would be unfair to question Keown's list of three basic goods for not being long enough. However, I find some of Keown's ideas problematic from the early Buddhist perspective, specifically his understanding of friendship and life.

Keown's view of life as belonging to the same category of values as knowledge and friendship cannot be justified on the basis of any early Buddhist texts. Nowhere in the Pāli Nikāyas is the value of life considered similar to the spiritual values of nirvanic wisdom and nirvanic virtue. Similarly, the Pāli Nikāyas do not suggest anywhere that life is constitutive of nirvana beyond death. Keown's claim that life in nirvana "will take *some* form, since Buddhist doctrine condemns as heresy the view that nirvana is annihilation,"<sup>27</sup> is textually unjustified. I have argued somewhere else that the Pāli Nikāyas are silent about the *tathāgata* and nirvana beyond death.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gombrich 1996: 60ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Vélez de Cea 2004b.

Keown's suggestion about some form of life in nirvana beyond death is also questionable on philosophical grounds. The Pāli Nikāyas consider eternalism an extreme doctrinal position; it is as extreme as annihilationism. Consequently, Keown's reasoning to infer the existence of some form of eternal life in nirvana from the rejection of annihilationism is unjustified. One could use exactly the same reasoning to argue that Buddhism is nihilistic because it rejects eternalism. This conclusion, however, would be equally inconsistent with the philosophy of the Pāli Nikāyas.<sup>29</sup>

Keown seems to be influenced in his interpretation of life and friendship by contemporary neo-Thomist thinkers such as John Finnis and Germain Grisez. For instance, John Finnis lists life and friendship as basic goods and consider them constitutive of the human good. Like Keown, Finnis considers all basic goods incommensurable and equally valuable. Finnis' concept of friendship is strikingly similar to that of Keown in that both convey the idea of relationships with others and concern for their well-being. In fact, Finnis uses the term sociability as a term equivalent to his understanding of friendship.<sup>30</sup>

Another possible reason for Keown's inclusion of life in his list of basic goods is his application to Buddhism of the classical dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental values, that is, the distinction between what is valued for its own sake as an end, and what is valued for the sake of something else as a means. For instance, Keown distinguishes between the intrinsically valuable life of humans and animals, and the instrumentally valuable life of tiny organisms, vegetables and plant life.<sup>31</sup>

Since the classical dichotomy intrinsic-instrumental only allows for two options, and since human life is not a mere means or instrument for something else, it is only natural for Keown to place life at the same level as other intrinsic values. However, I have demon-

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<sup>29</sup> Specifically, inconsistent with the limits that the Buddha of the Pāli Nikāyas puts to language and his teachings (Vélez de Cea 2004b). See also Vélez de Cea 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Finnis 1980: 86–88, 141–144.

<sup>31</sup> Keown 1995: 46–49.



strated the inappropriateness of applying the dichotomy intrinsic-instrumental to the Pāli Nikāyas. This distinction fails to capture the diversity of early Buddhist values. Once we shift to the alternative hermeneutical strategy of applying the distinction between ultimate and penultimate values, we gain far greater clarity, and this approach undermines the motivation for Keown's inclusion of life as a basic Buddhist good.

In my account, life in the Pāli Nikāyas is a penultimate value that primarily enables or makes possible other values. In the case of humans, life also favors the cultivation of spiritual values, thus intensifying the value of human rebirth. Keown would probably agree with my account because he says explicitly at one point that life is "both a good in itself and a precondition for the fulfillment of other goods."<sup>32</sup> This is precisely what I claim only with a different terminology: that the value of life is not reducible to the value of anything else, and that life performs primarily an enabling function. I prefer to avoid the expression "in itself" because it is usually associated to the concept of intrinsic value, which is ontologically misleading when applied to Buddhism.

Keown and I agree that life is not a mere instrument in the restricted sense of the term, that is, as being a mere means without value "in itself." Attributing irreducible and enabling value to life, does not render it a simple means whose value depends entirely on the performance of a particular function or on being a condition of possibility of other values. And denying that life is a mere means to an end or a mere instrument for the performance of a function, does not entail that the value of life is supreme, at the same level as nirvanic knowledge and nirvanic virtue. Either claim would be foreign to the Pāli Nikāyas.

Like the value of life, the value of nirvanic knowledge and virtue is irreducible to other values; they are also similar in that they all can perform enabling, favoring, and intensifying functions. However, unlike life, nirvanic values belong to a higher order of values. The profound respect for life found in the Pāli Nikāyas can

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

be explained without suggesting, as Keown does, that life is an ultimate value constitutive of nirvana.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Keown's account and mine is that unlike his, my account does not view nirvanic values as the only kind of value constitutive of Buddhist flourishing, which I do not identify with enlightenment or human fulfillment from a Buddhist perspective. On the contrary, for Keown: "To say that life, knowledge and friendship are good is to say that these are the things which make for a fulfilled life as a human being. They are fundamental aspects of human fulfillment or flourishing in that each makes a unique contribution to the nature of the being one wishes to become (a Buddha)."<sup>33</sup> Thus, Keown seems to identify human fulfillment with flourishing, and these two concepts with the values of life, knowledge and friendship.

My account, however, presupposes a difference between Buddhist flourishing and fulfillment: Buddhist flourishing can take place without being enlightened, and it can be spiritual and/or non-spiritual in nature; on the contrary, Buddhist fulfillment is the state of enlightenment, which is constituted only by nirvanic knowledge and virtues. Nevertheless, like Keown, I view spiritual flourishing and nirvanic qualities as the most important sources of value in Buddhism.

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