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Kenneth Shockley
University at Buffalo

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Internal Motivations, External Coercion, and Educating for Happiness

KENNETH SHOCKLEY†

I. CHARACTER AND INSTITUTIONS

The overarching theme of the recent three-day visit of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet to the campus of the University at Buffalo was “Promoting Peace across Borders through Education.” While the value of education is obvious, I believe for His Holiness there is an important theoretical reason why education, properly construed, is the only way one can affect change. The values His Holiness expresses, both as a Buddhist and as an advocate of a universal ethic, commit him to bringing about social change not through modifying behavior, but through encouraging the reform of individual motivation.

We should start by looking at the way in which His Holiness responded to questions about law and institutions during the final session of his visit to Buffalo, the conference on Law, Buddhism, and Social Change. He tended to answer by appealing to individuals—their character and their happiness—and not, in general, to particular social structures that would bring about that happiness. One exception to this tendency involved education: during the conference he appealed to the law faculty to reform their curriculum to infuse compassion in their students; during his public address he appealed to educators to instill compassion in their students. But there was little otherwise in terms of ways we should modify our behavior. Rather he tended to appeal to the value of compassionate nature, the alleviation of suffering, and, crucially, the reformation of our motivations. Motivation

† University at Buffalo, Assistant Professor of Philosophy. kes25@buffalo.edu. I am grateful for the invaluable advice provided by members of this symposium, especially Rebecca French.
reform is essential to the alleviation of suffering and right action.

Intuitively, the connection between education and the reform of motivation is clear. With increased education, of certain forms, one would expect individuals to be more sensitive to the suffering of others. But there is an important point of moral psychology that underlies this seeming platitude that carries a philosophically significant lesson, a point that might easily be overlooked because of the intuitive clarity of his general theme: peace through education.

The point of moral psychology is found in a potential tension between diverse motivations: those found in common construals of law, and those found in Buddhist notions of personal development. More particularly, the motivation elements of the pursuit of happiness seem at tension with the motivation elements tied to law. Law motivates right action through external constraint, Buddhism through the universal drive for the alleviation of suffering. Put another way, law operates by means of external norms; Buddhism (and any religious traditions focused on perfection of character) operates by means of internal norms.

In His Holiness's response to questions about law and institutional design we can see a way of dealing with this incongruity: education. But, again, the appeal to education is not a mere platitude; there is a profound conceptual matter which underlies education as a way of dealing with this tension. Education of a particular form provides the best way to resolve this tension—and this mode of resolution does not depend on the particular appeals His Holiness made to education, but rather on the way someone who advocates an ethic of personal perfection must treat norms that operate through social reinforcement. The tension between law and internal norms has an effect on the nature and purpose of what I suggest would be characteristically Buddhist law.

II. INTERNAL MOTIVATION AND LEGAL COERCION

To draw out this tension let me expand on some rudimentary points about Buddhism (about which I claim no expertise) and law. It is clear that Buddhist teaching
focuses on individual development—and we can see that in His Holiness's recurring focus on motivation in answer to the widest range of questions. The concern should be with our own character, the foundation for our motivation. Recall the story of the monk concerned that he could lose his sense of compassion for his jailers because of their abuse. The concern was not with a wrong done, but with his own capacity for compassion, the motivation with which the monk thought, acted, and lived. The point, in summary, is this: motivation emphasized in Buddhist teaching is an internal motivation. Right motivation is something that moves one to act appropriately from within one's own character.

We can see the tie to happiness as a motivator. Happiness moves us to act, as should the release of suffering—and both move us to act from within; we do not need external social, legal, or political pressures to move us to act in accordance with our own happiness. Happiness and cessation of happiness are thought by many to be universal values (as John Stuart Mill pointed out in *Utilitarianism*, with a slightly different conception of happiness in mind1), even if they are not universally instantiated in every act of every human. At least His Holiness referred to these as universal human values,2 and not values particular to those with a Buddhist viewpoint. The lesson we will conclude with then holds as long as these values require internal motivation, and are not specific to a Buddhist viewpoint. However I think the difficulty of characterizing Buddhist law makes this requirement particular salient.

If we characterize a Buddhist as someone who maintains the elimination of suffering as their motivation, it follows that one is only a Buddhist if one is motivated in the right way. And so, it would seem, one cannot be forced to have this motivation; of course one can be forced to behave in a certain way, and, perhaps eventually become habitualized to a certain way of behaving (and perhaps even come to take on a motivation of some form—I will address this below). But one cannot be forced to have a motivation unless one accepts that motivation as one's

own—even if this is under some level of duress (but recall the story of the monk and his jailors). The point might be put this way: you cannot be forced to be a Buddhist, although you can be forced to behave like one; if motivation matters, one cannot be compelled. Right motivation, motivation for the alleviation of suffering, cannot be impressed from without, unless one already adopts it as a value. Sloganistically: Right motivation can't be forced, it must be endorsed.

Now, shift to what we have referred to as the “King's Law” (as opposed to monastic law). We might haggle over whether the king's law is to be understood as essentially coercive, or even that it's function involves the modification of behavior (for it might be that law is the justification of the use of force, for example), but it is the case that it is an external source of behavior guidance. And this is the feature of law relevant for my point.

Whether they take the form of prohibitions, injunctions, or permissions, they are externally sourced. Laws coordinate by sanctioning cooperative behavior—internal motivation is a secondary concern. In short, legal norms are external: they commonly operate by providing incentives to refrain from performing certain actions. The point, as Mill pointed out, is that the sanction of law is social, that is, its motivational force is external.

III. BALANCING INTERNAL MOTIVATION AND EXTERNAL NORMS

So what would be the focus of law (as a set of norms) if it is to reflect the appropriately internal motivation so central to Buddhism? It must be designed so as to promote individual happiness—but that is too easy and too quick. It must be designed so as to operate on one’s dispositional states, such that one is disposed to be motivated properly. It must be designed to change hearts and minds, not merely behavior.

So, if a law (let us refer to that law as a norm for now to avoid complexities surrounding the contrast between law in action and law as codified) is to be designed in such a way, a way appropriate to the internalist norms of personal development and motivation reformation, it must be internally endorsed, not externally enforced. Importantly,
this norm will not work to promote the values it is supposed to instill unless one endorses it.

In the case of external norms, one need not care about the norm or be motivated appropriately for the scope of that norm to apply; while I might not care about social sanction, the norms of social behavior will still be applied to me. But how can we formulate norms that will encourage this, that is, facilitate right motivation in the right way, rather than enforce behavior that leads to happiness in a manner entirely inconsistent with the internal focus of Buddhist norms? More simply, how can we formulate norms that capture the essentially internal motivation of Buddhist norms? Notice how odd it would be to say “to make people strive for their own happiness” rather than, more appropriately, “to encourage happiness.”

This form of encouragement looks like the justification for a social institution or policy, not a justification for coercively restricting or condoning behavior. And if laws are to manifest the internalist norms so central to an ethic of personal perfection, they should not operate by focusing on behavior. This contrast foreshadows the sort of law capable of manifesting the right sort of norm.

What remains, I suppose, is to consider how one might internalize these happiness-norms, how we might overcome this internal/external norms divide. How might we institutionalize norms encouraging happiness such that we use external norms, in some fashion, to promote a certain form of motivation.

This might seem a bit silly: clearly we internalize external norms all the time—this method is as old as parents “training” children to behave, as old as the carrot-and-the-stick model of encouragement. Social programming is one form; learning conventions is another. Once we come to adopt certain values as “the way things ought to be done,” these norms motivate internally. Social pressures are powerful mechanisms in this transference, but social pressures operate in (at least) two very different ways.

One mode by which social pressures enact the adoption of social norms is through simple behaviorism: behavioral conditioning. But that looks very much like taking people as mere means to a social end. While this might be acceptable on occasion, His Holiness pointed out the importance of respect during both his opening comments to this
conference and during his public address. The individual coerced is not treated in a manner befitting of an agent worthy of respect, or in a manner consistent with an ethic of personal perfection. This sort of unmitigated social engineering operates on a very different mode than what would seem appropriate for Buddhist (or any other) quest for personal development, development from within. Fortunately, there is an alternative mode. Education, as exploration, investigation, and the elimination of ignorance constitutes a means of internalizing happiness norms, norms of personal perfection that seem less problematic. And this will bring us back to the central theme of His Holiness's visit.

IV. EDUCATION

If we educate (inculcate rather than indoctrinate) people to seek happiness—and indeed here we should think in terms of Aristotle's eudaimonia\(^3\) rather than the happiness of the hedonists—then they will likely come to hold these happiness norms on their own.\(^4\) Mistakes will still be made, due to our ignorance, and so there will still be a need for some form of law. But inculcating the drive for happiness is one way of internalizing these laws, and thereby making them bind.

Values might be inculcated not by enforcement and coercion, but through encouraging discussion, exploration, and open discourse. If individuals are encouraged to come of their own accord to embrace norms of happiness then we avoid the problems of external norms and coercion.

This may sound a little idealistic, but this seems the way we instill norms into people when we are at our best, and when they are at their best. Ideally, one does not refrain from murder because one is concerned about the punishment (at least generally), but because one sees the law as reflecting the general moral norm (shared, from within) that murder is simply wrong.

Now we can see the importance of education, conceptually, in the idea of social change. Education,

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understood quite broadly, provides the only real avenue by which we can encourage individuals to pursue an ethic of personal perfection without running afoul of that very ethic. Education, understood as the free and open investigation of subjects of interest (that is, free of dogmatism and ideological constraint) is nothing more than a means of individuals coming to adopt (i.e., internalize) certain views. When those views constitute norms of right conduct, in internalizing those norms individuals adopt right motivation. Education, then, properly construed, allows for the inculcation of an ethic of personal perfection without running afoul of the norms of that very ethic.

So how does this connect with the questions motivating this discussion? In particular, how does a Buddhist point of view add to current debates over the role of law in society? And how should the government try to make society better through law?

The answer is in seeing law, or at least the part of law capable of instantiating the sort of norms appropriate for an ethic of personal perfection, as a means of developing institutional structures, not generating prohibitions, injunctions, and permissions. By developing structures which encourage individuals to investigate and deliberate with one another about their shared values and concerns, that is, by developing educational structures, law is capable of encouraging individuals to pursue personal perfection. And it is capable of doing so without running afoul of concerns about external motivation or coercion. By developing the right sort of institutional structures, we educate for happiness.

More law of the encouraging sort may well lead to less law of the prohibition/permission sort, if we are fortunate. At least this is a reasonable hope. And here we see a lesson, perhaps, that our own legal system might take from an ethics of personal perfection. If we focus our efforts on the development of institutions, educational and otherwise, we would do well to foster opportunities for deliberative exploration.

Even with this change of focus there will still need to be law of the more coercive variety, of course. Not everyone will pursue a life of right motivation, and even those who do may need guidance in the coordination of their pursuits with the pursuits of others. But I would expect a change of
focus from coercion to encouragement would have a profound effect on the law.

V. THE CATCH

However, there is a catch. While anyone, regardless of their personal values and convictions, can see the value of coordination, the value of personal perfection of the kind we are considering may not be so universal. While the justification for the coercive power of law can be made (arguably, at least) for the sake of coordination and social well-being, it is not so clear how a parallel argument might take place for an ethic of personal perfection. Coordination provides a value-neutral justification for the value of law. If law is to promote a substantive set of values, like those associated with an ethic of personal perfection, it does not seem at all clear that individuals would endorse that law unless they already endorsed the value that law would encourage. One might take the institutional structures designed to encourage others to pursue an ethic of personal perfection to be in the best interest of those being subjected to those laws. But in being subjected against the values they have, such laws flirt with a dubious form of coercion. In the particular case of Buddhist Law, the endorsement of educational policies would not be easily justified unless the populace already endorsed Buddhistic ideals.