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Finals Paper

Bodhicaryāvatāra (BCA)

Introduction

The primary aim of this essay is to investigate an apparent incoherency in Śāntideva's argument in Bodhicāryāvatāra, specifically the tension between the deterministic framework underlying his argument against anger, and the assumptions of free will that are necessary for the transformation and ethical conduct he advocates for. The text, Bodhicāryāvatāra, served as a comprehensive guide for those who have taken the Bodhisattva vow, a commitment towards the path of compassion and enlightenment. Among The various teachings offered throughout the text, chapter 6 - the practice of patience, particularly in the face of anger, will be the main focal point in which the argument in this essay expands. Śāntideva's case against anger is based on an empty buddhist view of dependency and causality, wherein all actions and events are conditioned by a network of causes and conditions beyond individual control. However, his instructions on how one ought to live - how one should meditate, control their thoughts, and develop compassion - all seem to presuppose the existence of free will. I will explore whether these teachings can coherently hold together given this tension, and will consider two possible resolutions or objections to these apparent contradictions.

Before beginning the examination, in order to frame the discussion, I will clarify the concepts of determinism, free will and dependency that will be used throughout the essay. Determinism, in this context, refers to causal determinism rather than fatalism. THis means that all events, including human actions, are ultimately dependent and are determined by causes

external to will, and outside of one's control. Free will, on the other hand, refers to the capacity and ability of agents or humans to freely choose between various options, in a way that is not completely determined by past events or external circumstances. These two concepts will serve as the foundation for my argument for the internal inconsistency of Śāntideva's text. The third concept, dependency, refers to the idea that things, rather than existing independently of other things, are in dependence on multiple causes and conditions. These can come in the form of causal dependence, something being the effect of various causes and conditions, mereological dependence, wholes/entities being dependent on its parts, and conceptual dependence, interpretation shaped by conceptual frameworks and perspectives.

Part 1. The Deterministic Argument Against Anger

I will begin by showing that Śāntideva's line of reasoning against anger in chapter 6 of the text is deeply rooted in a deterministic understanding of the world. In the chapter, he introduces the concept of dharmic patience, a form of patience informed by a metaphysical insight into the nature of reality - that all phenomena, including humans actions are conditioned by an intricate network of causes and conditions that lie beyond the control of the individual. Thus, he tries to show that anger is irrational because it is based on the incorrect belief that agents can be blamed and held morally responsible for their actions, formed by incorrect metaphysical insight.

Śāntideva's line of reasonings against anger can be simplified into the following:

1. One is not angry at insentient objects despite the suffering it induces
2. One is not angry at insentient objects because insentient objects are dependent on other conditions

3. Similarly, sentient objects are also dependent upon causes and conditions
4. One cannot say that there exists an uncaused primal substance
5. One cannot say that there exists a real and permanent self that underlies actions
6. As such, no suffering is a result of volition of an entity
7. So it follows that one should not be angry

As can be seen above, Śāntideva begins by drawing an analogy between sentient and insentient objects. He notices that people do not become angry at insentient objects, even when they cause them a great deal of suffering, which he attributes to the fact that insentient objects are dependent on other factors that are outside of their control (Śāntideva). For instance, we do not harbor anger towards a falling tree that causes injury, as it is caused by external factors such as the weather conditions, the soil quality, nor would we get angry at illnesses as they are caused externally by the environmental condition, interaction between humans. Śāntideva extends this logic to sentient beings, arguing that they, too, are dependent on causal conditions (Śāntideva). For instance, when a person mugs you on the street, it may be a combination of uncontrollable factors such as genetics and life experiences that resulted in their action.

Śāntideva anticipates potential objections to this deterministic view. One such objection might posit the existence of an uncaused primal substance that could serve as the source of volition. However, Śāntideva counters this by arguing that something uncaused, or not dependent on something else, would not function within the realm of dependency that underlie the middle way Buddhist framework, and therefore could not be the cause of our sufferings. Similarly, he addresses the possibility of a real and permanent self that underlies actions. He argues that a permanent self, by definition, would be unchanging and thus unable to interact with other factors

in the causal and dependency chain (Santideva). Consequently, it cannot bring about changes or be the source of suffering.

Therefore, he concludes that there is no such thing, including both sentient and insentient beings, that have the power of self-will generation or intentionality:

'Everything is dependent on something else, and even that on which something is dependent is not autonomous...' (Santideva)

They are all conditioned by external factors, leading to the view that individuals should not be seen as blameworthy or responsible for their actions. Here, Śāntideva even views everything as akin to a magical illusion, all dependent on other causes and conditions, without any intentionality; a person would simply be a ghost, conditioned by external factors (Santideva). It is through establishing this idea, that he argues that anger is irrational and thus one should not be angry. Therefore, using the definition of determinism (see reference in introduction), the underpinning of determinism is established, through Śāntideva's appeal to dependency in his argument against anger.

Part 2. The Assumptions of Free Will

While Śāntideva's argument against anger rests on a deterministic worldview, his ethical prescriptions and guidance on spiritual practice seem to presuppose the existence of free will. Namely, his ethical guidance is grounded in the distinction between rational and irrational actions, appropriate or inappropriate actions, where rational and appropriate action is acting in accordance with reason. However, implicit in this guidance is the assumption that individuals have the capacity to choose between rational and irrational actions. For instance, Śāntideva encourages practitioners and followers to act in a certain way, which will be shown below,

implying that they possess the freedom to either follow or resist such ethical guidance outlined below.

Firstly, this can be seen through Śāntideva's specific instruction for physical actions. In Chapter 5, Verse 2, he advises practitioners to engage in introspective meditation to examine the mind and apply antidotes to afflictive emotions (Śāntideva). Similarly, in Chapter 8, Verse 104, he recommends the practices of shamatha and vipashyana meditation (Śāntideva). These practices require the practitioner to make a conscious choice to meditate and cultivate certain mental states, suggesting the exercise of free will.

In addition to guiding actions, Śāntideva also provides guidance on how one should cultivate specific attitudes and ways of thinking. Namely, in the previously discussed chapter 6, Śāntideva's argument that we shall remain serene in the face of wrongdoing, and that anger is an inappropriate response, assumes that one can choose how to respond emotionally (Śāntideva). Furthermore, in Chapter 8, he argues that all suffering should be viewed as a motive for compassionate action (Śāntideva). This perspective requires the individual to consciously adopt a particular mindset, which again presupposes the exercise of free will.

Therefore, the evidence highlights an implicit assumption in Śāntideva's ethical guidance: there is a degree of free will that allows individuals to have the capacity to choose between acting in accordance with or against reasons, for both physical action and ways of thinking. The very notion of personal change - central to the Bodhisattva path - relies on the ability to change one's thoughts, emotions, and actions through deliberate effort. Thus, Without this capacity for self-directed change, Śāntideva's exhortations to pursue a life of virtue and compassion would lack coherence, as they would demand from practitioners something they are not truly free to achieve.

Part 3. Incoherency

Now, having established both Śāntideva's appeal to determinism and the necessity of free will to the text, I can now show the central tension in the text. On the one hand, Śāntideva's deterministic framework suggests that individuals cannot be truly responsible for their actions, as all actions are determined by external causes and conditions. On the other hand, his ethical teachings—such as the Bodhisattva vow, which presupposes the capacity for self-directed action and change—require the existence of free will. To undertake the path of compassion and transformation, a Bodhisattva must actively choose to engage in virtuous actions. If all actions are determined, as Śāntideva's deterministic framework suggests, the very notion of choosing differently becomes illusory. Consequently, the ethical guidance Śāntideva provides loses its coherence, as it assumes the existence of free will that his deterministic worldview denies.

This contradiction undermines the internal consistency of Śāntideva's teachings, putting into question the validity of his ethical prescriptions. If all actions are causally determined, how can Śāntideva justify his emphasis on the importance of choosing virtuous actions and cultivating specific mental states?

Part 4. First Objection: Realization

One possible defense of Śāntideva's position is to argue that the realization of dependency on causes and conditions does not require free will. Instead, it is an act of becoming aware of the true nature of reality, informed by metaphysical knowledge. This was addressed in the verse 32 of chapter 6 with regards to the anger example:

'Resisting [anger] is impossible, for who resists whom, we say it is possible. Because there is dependency.' (Śāntideva)

As seen from the above, the metaphysical knowledge regarding “dependency” causes one to realize that act of anger to be irrational and inappropriate (Śāntideva). For example, the analogy of a passive revelation, or a eureka moment can be used, which has both the characteristics of being passive, not exercising their will, and resulting in a change in the person. This view is perfectly compatible with determinism, because it emphasizes the importance of realizing the truth of dependent origination, instead of exercising based on free will.

However, I will provide two responses to this objection:

1. Firstly, though realization may be seen as a passive revelation or eureka moment, there still must remain a choice to accept or reject the realization. For example, given a choice of path, and one was asked to choose a path; even if one realizes which path to choose, they can always choose to go back. Given that there is still space for choice to be made, the incoherency still persists.
2. Secondly, even if there was no space for a choice to be made, the pursuit of knowledge, the cause of the revelation, is done so with will. In the case of the followers of Bodhisattva, the decision to engage with Śāntideva’s teachings still suggests an element of choice. Thus, the incoherency persists.

As can be seen above, although the differentiation between realization and free will may be a powerful tool used to reconcile with the incoherency between free will and determinism, such differentiations do not seem sufficient in explaining the above.

Part 5. Second Objection: Conventional Truths and Ultimate Truths

Another potential defense of Śāntideva’s position is the Buddhist distinction between conventional and ultimate truths, which is central to the explanation in middle way philosophy.

Conventional truths on one hand refer to everyday relative reality that we perceive on a daily basis, while ultimate truths on the other hand refer to truths that transcend our ordinary perception. Thus, conventionally, it might be argued that there is a form of free will that operates within the context of everyday moral decisions. From this level of truth, individuals are seen as having the freedom to make choices and are held morally responsible for their actions. However, from the standpoint of ultimate truth, all actions are determined by causes and conditions, and the concept of free will is revealed to be illusory. The above suggests that Śāntideva's teaching operates on both levels of truth - his appeal to ultimate truth in the argument against anger and appeal to conventional truth for overall guidance - allowing for the coexistence of free will and determinism. This duality, it is argued, allows him to maintain his ethical teachings while acknowledging the deterministic nature of reality.

However, I will respond to the above defense, and how such does not stand in the current case. The distinction between the two creates an inconsistency in how Śāntideva's teachings are applied. If one is expected to follow the ultimate truth when resisting anger: recognizing the deterministic and dependent nature of reality, why should one follow the conventional truth when choosing to resist anger to pursue a better life? This seems as though Śāntideva is simply appealing to whichever truth is convenient for the text and argument. Thus, the tension makes it difficult to understand why one should prioritize one truth over the other in different contexts.

Conclusion

The analysis of Śāntideva's Bodhicāryāvatāra above reveals a significant incoherency between the deterministic framework underlying his argument against anger, and the assumption of free will necessary for moral responsibility and ethical guidance. His line of reasoning does

not reach the desired or satisfactory conclusion it intends. This contradiction undermines the consistency of Śāntideva's teachings and raises questions about the validity of his ethical prescriptions, seeing as the dependency structure is not only central to his argument against anger, but also holistically as an ideological basis.

*(**Additional/Self Note: Perhaps this is why Buddhist are not rich in texts surrounding ethics, as there may simply be no room for ethics within a system of dependency and determinism; there may only be metaphysical insight, and thus metaphysical texts)*

Citations

Santideva. *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*. Translated by Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace, Snow Lion Publications. Accessed 12 Aug. 2024.