

COMMENT ON KALUPAHANA: AN OPEN-ENDED REALITY AND MORALITY

by

R. David Gunaratne
Department of Philosophy
University of Peradeniya
Peradeniya, SRI LANKA

DISCUSSION PAPER

on

David Kalupahana's

THE BUDDHA'S CONCEPTIONS OF REALITY AND MORALITY

The Sixteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Atlanta, Georgia November 26-29, 1987

© 1987, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

AN OPEN-ENDED REALITY AND MORALITY

Response to Professor Kalupahana's "The Buddha's Conceptions of Reality and Morality"

R.D. GUNARATNE

We are prone to think of the world in terms of dichotomies, and one such "fundamental" dichotomy is between the subject and the object or the subjective experience and the objective experience. The attempt to get objectivity in subjective experience makes men search for an ultimate reality in the person. This, says Professor Kalupahana, leads to substance theories of the self like the ātman of the Upanisads or the cartesian "ghost in the machine" with the difference that the Upanisadic ātman extended itself to the ultimate reality of the whole universe, whereas the Western soul theories restricted it to the person.

The move to rid the subject of mental substance by the modern positivists or the Indian materialists led to the conception of a person with a reality purged of the psychological and moral experience.

Kalupahana goes on to say that the Buddha realized that it was futile to search for an ultimate reality, in subjective or objective experience. The doctrine of anatta removed the ultimate reality of the subject. Buddha considered the subject to be the psycho-physical person constituted by the five

aggregates, Vedanā, Sannā, Saṅkhāra, Vinnāna and Rūpa. The physical body had objective (material) features as well as subjective features (e.g., "being affected"). The physical body as well as saṅkhāra or the dispositions individuate the person. Dispositionally conditioned physicality objectifies the subjective self. The identity of a person depends on both his physical body and the subjective reidentification in the "stream of consciousness". Here again the saṅkhāra are the conditioning factors as well as the "mirror through which the objectivity of the stream is reflected." It is in this manner that the Buddha did away with the soul while keeping the subjectivity and consciousness intact. Next Kalupahana makes the point that the Buddha "de-solidified" the object as well as is seen by utterances like "... thus you must train yourself. In the seen there will be just the seen" and so on. One must not search for "things" behind the phenomena or the experience. The identity or the continuity of the object (and the subject) is given in terms of the paṭicca-samuppāda-dependent origination. He also thinks that the Buddha viewed conception as a means of stepping out of ^{the} metaphysical subject and object (puṅgala and dharmā nairāthmāya). Even if some of these points could be considered debatable by others, and although he seems to use 'objective' to mean "an unchanging substratum" and "commonly observable" at different times, I find Professor Kalupahana convincing thus far. But he now links all this with the notions of knowledge (and skepticism) and truth value (and

existence). He is of the view that the Buddha did not accept two-valued (true/false) logic, which he calls the absolutistic conception of truth. I think that Kalupahana's analysis of this aspect of the problem should lead us to conclusions slightly different from his.

I take it that Professor Kalupahana is using 'absolutistic' in the epistemological sense that absolute and hence not only relative and human truth is knowable. But I find it difficult to see why a two-valued truth (or logic) is absolutist when say, a three valued truth is not. A true statement in a three-valued system also remains true. A statement is true, of course, depending on the context. But given one sense (unlike in the Jaina *Syādvāda*), I think the Buddha considered a statement to be either true or false (ekam hi saccam). I have myself shown that the catuskoti statements, of which the example that Kalupahana gives as "I know p, I do not know p" and so on, is an instance, could be very consistently symbolized using standard (class) logic.¹

It is also difficult to agree with either of the (symbolic) formulations that Kalupahana gives of this example. The statement "I know what has been seen, heard, thought..." cannot be put as "I know p", for p is (usually taken as) a proposition, but "what has been seen, heard...." is only a phrase or a term. I would put it as "I know S" where S is a term. Next, Kalupahana symbolizes the four alternative statements again as p, \bar{p} , $(p \cdot \bar{p})$ and $(p \cdot p)$ where, I believe, p is "I know what has been seen" and so on. The fourth formula, $(p \cdot \bar{p})$ as it is a theorem in two valued logic, is a necessary truth and this creates

complications. But Kalupahana is not committed to accepting two valued logic. But even if $\neg p$ is the contrary of p ($p \cdot \neg p$) is logically true, as two contraries cannot be true together. A much simpler objection is that $(p \cdot \neg p)$ does not give in symbols the meaning of "I neither know it nor do not know it", which simply and straight forwardly means $(p \cdot \neg p)$.

This criticism does not minimize the significance of the example that he has given and the support it could give to the general point that he makes. The example becomes significant when the emphasis is put on know, in "I know S". It is not a question so much of whether "I do not know S" is a contrary of "I know S" and it is not also a question as to whether we read musā as meaning "false" or "confused". If I know S, then when I say "I do not know S", I am confused in my knowledge or as to my knowledge. It is like being, say, uncertain about whether I know or do not know. The question is epistemological and not logical. Buddha is certainly making a distinction here between musā and kali. It is a difference in the degrees or levels of "falsity", the latter in the sense of epistemological possibility.

To explicate this point further consider the statement that 'Honolulu is in Hawaii' is true. Then, 'Honolulu is not in Hawaii', taken by itself is false. But when I say 'Honolulu is not in Hawaii' am I lying (musāvāda). Not necessarily, for I might not know that Honolulu is in Hawaii. Indeed this epistemological "confusion", perhaps has overtones of moral degree, in the idea of 'white lies'

for kamma is cetanā.

Kalupahana thus has brought out a hitherto unnoticed distinction by this analysis, and with much insight he has said that kali expresses "the heightened sense of epistemological sin." I think Kalupahana has also brought out here that the last alternative of the catuskoti under consideration, "I neither know nor do not know" amounts to a total negation of the (possibility of) both knowledge and description of a situation and, in the case of empirical situations, Buddha says this unambiguously. For the Buddha, all knowledge, all that is there, is experiential (empirical) and that, I think, is the significance of Buddha's answer to Janussoni, where he said that "all" (sabbam) means "the eye and material form,....mind and concept, that is, the six forms of sense experience", as Kalupahana himself points out. But I do not see that the use of the term all (sabbam) by itself has any absolutist connotation. Kalupahana's observations about statements using 'all' (universals) as being absolutistic and the fact that the Buddha used 'all this' to qualify his universals makes, again, a different point which supports Kalupahana's general position. It is that universal statements cannot be known to be true in the way particulars are. They can only be (known to be) probable. Again, I would have liked a little more elaboration of his points on the bearing of the use of counterfactuals on the formulation of the paticcasamuppāda, the causal chain in Buddhism. Perhaps the fact that Kalupahana has authored a book on Buddhist Causality² made him be unduly brief. But the material here, I believe, is new.

Kalupahana finds echoes of his understanding of Buddhism in William James, but I think, he would find the contemporary logician and philosopher of science, Hans Reichenbach equally interesting on the points that he wants to make. In his The Rise of Scientific Philosophy, Reichenbach writes, "...experience has made us wise enough to anticipate the breaking down of any system. It has not discouraged us though. The new physics has shown that we can have knowledge outside the Kantian principles, that the human mind is not a rigid system of categories into which it packs all experiences, but that principles of knowledge change with its content and can be adapted to a much more complicated world... We can do without certainty. But it was a long way to this more liberal attitude toward knowledge. The search for certainty had to burn itself out in the philosophical systems of the past before we were able to envisage a conception of knowledge which does away all claims to eternal truth".³

The futile search for certainty in knowledge is what leads to skepticism. If there is truth in skepticism it is only because it prevents us from undue grasping or clinging (upādāna).

Having brought out the non-absolutist epistemological basis of Buddhism which sees the world as a process of conditioned genesis, Kalupahana shows that morality in Buddhism consistently follows that non-absolutism. This, he says, is seen by Buddha's exhortation to "abandon the good". Dhamma means good, and good life is "the concrete life of human happiness". Ideal morality cannot override the good in a concrete situation. Neither extreme

selfishness, nor extreme self mortification and altruism (or heroism) leads to good. It is the middle path, which abandons the extremes-even of absolutist morality like the Kantian, which the Buddha advocates. By taking Thomas Nagel's thesis in The View from Nowhere as a take off point as well as a point of departure Kalupahana covers a massive area of contemporary concern in depth and gives the Buddhist answer to the problems therein in an admirably consistent way. It is a convincing account of what I would here call the "open-ended" nature of the Buddhist conception of reality and morality.

References

1. R.D. Gunaratne, The Logical form of Catuskoti: A new solution in Philosophy East and West, 30, No.2 (April 1980) pp. 212-239.
Also, Understanding Nāgārjuna's Catuskoti in Philosophy East and West 36, No.3 (July 1986) pp. 213-234.
2. D.J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii. 1975.
3. Hans Reichenbach, The Rise of Scientific Philosophy, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1958, p.49.

