A Comparison of Buddhist Philosophy With Western Codes of Ethics For Psychologists:
   Supporting A Universal Declaration – Letter of Intent

   By Mike Fedyniak

   Campus Alberta Applied Psychology

   Supervisor: Dr. Jean Pettifor
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Purpose and Goals

Current scholastic insight into ethics in psychology presents a calling to re-examine virtue and moral values as its “base for ethical behaviour, thinking, and being” (Pettifor, 1996, p. 1). Implications of this calling are that ethical thoughts, actions, and behaviors of psychologists are interwoven through their every professional interaction. Thus ethical responsibility is incorporated in our personal lives rather than consisting of only rule based ethical prescriptions for the office. The purpose of this study is to re-visit virtue and moral values as a basis for ethical practice through a comparison of Buddhist philosophy with Western codes of ethics for psychologists; for example, the code of ethics outlined by the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). The results will be relevant in considering the feasibility of a universal declaration of ethical principles for psychologists. In accordance with the above purpose, this research project is to promote awareness of aspirational standards of practice that are reflective of “the highest ethical ideals in their professional and scientific work” (International Union of Psychological Science Ad Hoc Joint Committee, 2005, p. 2). The Buddhist concept of compassion may be the primary link between Eastern and Western approaches to ethical thinking.

Virtue and moral values will be considered through achievement of the following research goals. The first goal is to compare ethical principles (Respect for the Dignity of Persons and Responsibility to Society) in the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (2000) with Eastern Buddhist philosophical frameworks on ethics. The second goal is to
explore the relevance of compassion as a vehicle for aspirational ethics. The third goal is
to examine whether common humanity seems to supersede cultural differences when
considering universal declaration of shared values. This third goal may provide insight
into consideration of the importance of cultural beliefs and ethics in the global arena
(Pettifor, 2006).

This letter of intent provides a rationale for this study along with its theoretical
foundational underpinnings. Discussion also considers methodology and procedures to be
used followed by the implications of the findings.

Rationale

Within the field of psychology we are seeing “the proliferation of scientific and
applied specialisation, regional revitalisation, the expansion of psychology in developing
countries, the feminisation of psychology, and the emergence of new paradigms that
accentuate contextual realities and challenges (e.g., multiculturalism and indigenization)”
(Stevens & Wedding, 2004, p. 457) on an international level. In light of these realities,
psychologists will benefit substantially from interconnectedness with other professionals
beyond their own national frames of reference. The endeavour of interconnection requires
awareness of cultural infusion and understanding (Arthur & Collins, 2006), which then
opens the door for global awareness of universal values and morality within the domain
of ethics. The current draft of the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for
Psychologists (International Union of Psychological Science Ad Hoc Joint Committee,
2005) addresses global awareness of universal values as it acknowledges that “the lives
and identities of human beings both individually and collectively are connected across
generations, and that there is a reciprocal relationship between human beings and their
natural and social environments.” (p. 2).

Over half of the current world population lives in a region where Buddhist
philosophy presently is, or has been, an influential or dominant cultural force (Harvey,
2000). Thus, when considering collaboration and offering services on a global level, in an
ethically sound and culturally infused manner, it stands to reason that awareness of what
a Buddhist philosophical outlook has to say is very relevant.

Theoretical Foundation

Prior to a look at Buddhist philosophy, relevant theoretical approaches to ethics
from the Western perspective will be examined followed by a brief discussion of
elements of the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (2000). The discussion then
turns towards relevant Eastern Buddhist philosophical considerations and the underlying
moral imperative of compassion which merits exploration in relation to virtue and
morality.

*Western Theoretical Approaches to Ethics*

Three of the most central theories of ethics influencing the Western world have
been deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics (Keown, 2005; Pettifor, 1996).
Deontological systems, rooted in philosophical thought of Kant, place emphasis on duty
and obligation and are characterised by retrospective insight for justification.
Furthermore, the unconditional regard for each individual takes precedence over the
collective group. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, is a philosophical perspective more
closely affiliated with Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873),
where justification is orientated towards the future through good consequences expected
to result from an act (Keown, 2005). Moreover, utilitarian ideology proposes that the ends justify the means with the salient consideration being the greatest good for the greatest number (Pettifor, 1996). Virtue ethics, underlying thoughts of Aristotle, present a middle ground between the aforementioned perspectives where awareness of past and future justification is considered (Keown, 2005). The essence of virtue ethics is “not simply to follow certain kinds of rules, nor seek pleasant consequences, but first and foremost to be or become a certain kind of [moral] person” (p. 23). This is in contrast to an obligation to conform to a set of rules solely in a professional context.

*The Canadian Code of Ethics and Culture*

The Canadian Code of Ethics for psychologists may be considered to be rooted in the deontological paradigm. Principles, such as respect for the dignity of persons, responsible caring, integrity in relationships reveal that human beings should be valued for their inherent worth and never be exploited as a means to an end. The Canadian Code of Ethics for psychologists may also be construed as utilitarian in considering the consequences of alternative courses of action in its ethical decision making steps. Adherence to the principle of responsibility to society reveals a focused awareness on the collective good of the community. Another perspective is that the aspirational focus of the four ethical principles of the Canadian code and the value base of the ethical decision making steps are implicitly virtue-based and depend on good character rather than rule based prescriptions for good behaviour.

The Canadian Code is aspirational in its moral framework, as it encourages sharing of ideas promoting deeper understanding of human relations, and it supports a moral dilemma approach which encourages collaborative relating between concerned
parties (Pettifor, Sinclair, & Strong 2005). With a seemingly all-encompassing code, why then would an alternate philosophical consideration be of value? Insight into this question may be derived through consideration of cultural awareness.

Cultural awareness is necessary to maintain an interactive relationship and kinship with psychologists in other countries. In emic approaches, specific cultural knowledge is required about diverse cultural groups thus focusing on the uniqueness of each group (Arthur & Collins, 2006). Furthermore, research and practice from the emic viewpoint reflects familiarity with what is meaningful to members of a culture (Stevens & Wedding, 2004). In contrast, in the etic approach every encounter is perceived as multicultural in nature (Arthur & Collins), which is a perspective that emphasises universals “transcending cultural divides” (Stevens & Wedding, 2004, p. 467) rather than differences.

Emic and etic cultural consideration become essential when considering that Western psychology is often applied to the social problems in other countries in the absence of altered format. Western influence falls short in respecting the indigenous cultural and historical contexts which they are attempting to support (Stevens & Wedding, 2004).

*Eastern Buddhist Theoretical Approaches to Ethics*

In Buddhism “right view” is viewed as the foundation of moral development (Harvey, 2000, p. 11). The major traditional schools of thought in Buddhist philosophy are the Theravada and Mahayana disciplines (Tachibana, 1992). Mahayana philosophy is most closely related to the central focus in this project as Mahayana places special
emphasis serving others (Keown, 2005). Yet the theoretical underpinnings presented are reflective of Buddhist philosophy as a whole which is consistent with virtue based ethics.

In Mahayana philosophy three levels of ethical teachings are identified: moral discipline, cultivation of virtue, and altruistic conduct (Keown, 2005). Moral disciple consists of observance of the moral precepts (moral guidelines laid down by the Buddha); cultivation of virtue entails the accumulation of the good qualities necessary to attain nirvana, which is transcending of unpleasant realms (Harvey, 2000); altruistic conduct consists of directing moral action for the benefit of others.

Coinciding with traditional Buddhist ethics is the emergence of a movement known as engaged Buddhism (Keown, 2005; Queen, 2000). Engaged Buddhism, founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, “focuses on larger questions of public policy such as social justice, poverty, politics, and the environment” (Keown, 2005, p. 32). Engaged Buddhism emphasizes awareness in daily life, social service, and social activism as central ideas for consideration, and is a philosophical construct which applies to human rights issues.

Queen (2000), a modern philosopher on engaged Buddhism proposed four styles of Buddhist ethics: (a) The ethics of discipline, (b) the ethics of virtue, (c) the ethics of altruism, and (d) the ethics of engagement. The ethics of discipline reveal that conduct caused by mental impurities (greed, hatred, and delusion) may be combated by observing the precepts or moral guidelines (Keown, 2005). The ethics of virtue entails relationship coming to the forefront and constructs, such as compassion, kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, being salient themes. The ethics of altruism entails service to others as the predominant consideration. Ethics of engagement entails consideration of the aforementioned three ethical prescriptions directed towards concern for a better society.
The virtuous construct of compassion is considered to be both personal and social and has been described as the “finest expression of our relationship to self and others” (Glaser, 2005, p. 11) and is one of the most important virtues in Buddhist philosophy (Keown, 2005). Compassion may be a valuable concept in promoting global unity in the field of psychological ethics as it has been noted to foster willingness towards unconditional regard and presence towards the multitude of human experiences (Glaser, 2005). In essence, Buddhist philosophy has been noted to teach the “equality of mankind” (Tachibana, 1992, p. 5).

The exploration of the Buddhist philosophical underpinnings from Buddhist philosophy provides insight into the essence of virtue and morality, which in turn is supportive of a universal declaration of ethical principles for all psychologists. The Eastern Buddhist teachings appears to be philosophically compatible with virtue-based ethics and the CPA code. Methodology will now be outlined, providing practical procedures for conducting this project.

Research Methodology

A research strategy requires identification of preliminary sources, identification of primary search journals, and accessing personal networks (Mertens, 1998). The aforementioned strategy will guide this study.

Preliminary sources which will be targeted are databases and the University of Alberta NEOS consortium catalogue. Electronic databases accessed through the University of Calgary library (PsychINFO, Psychological and Behavioral Sciences, and Academic Search Premier) will also be included. Examination of particular journals will be considered, for example, the Journal of Buddhist Ethics. The “Ancestry approach”
(Mertens, 1998, p. 41) will be incorporated into searching, which entails examination of reference lists found at the end of applicable books or journal articles. Personal networking will consist of direct collaboration with the project supervisor who is a specialist in ethics in psychology and with academic professors in Buddhist philosophy from the University of Alberta or University of Calgary. The informal assessment of researcher bias, worldview, and personal and professional investments into the project will also be considered.

Project Implications

The results of this study may contribute to clarifying moral values in the practice of psychology. Similarities between Eastern philosophy and the moral values inherent in Western professional codes of ethics will support the feasibility of a Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists. Buddhist philosophy is expected to be consistent with Western virtue-based ethical practice. Thus a coming together of contributions from Western and Eastern philosophies may contribute to a dissolving of barriers between worldviews. The impact of union and integration of perspectives between scholars in psychology may result in the adoption of a universal declaration for psychologists.

Longstanding focus on the paradigm of objectivism in Western psychology (Glaser, 2005) and affiliated codes of ethics has resulted in guidelines that need to be balanced with the subjectivity of compassion-based virtues in every realm of interaction. Inclusion of subjective influence brings heart and passion into virtuous acts through cultivation of compassion, which is a central teaching of Buddhist philosophy (Glaser, 2005; Keown, 2005). Thus comparison of philosophies has the potential to incorporate
head and heart into current ethical codes for psychologists and may also assist in addressing social, political, and environmental issues that affect the lives of us all across the globe.
References


