

DISCUSSION

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE SO-CALLED 'BUDDHIST PROCESS-ETHICS'

In his long and rambling article¹ of the above title Peerenboom has attempted to show that all the problems in Indian philosophy engendered by the essentialist views regarding the nature of self and moral responsibility can be 'dissolved' by Buddhism if it is taken to favour what Peerenboom calls 'the process-ethics'. The problems arise according to Peerenboom as he says in more than one place in his article, (see for example the remark on p. 261, I. P. Q. Vol. XVII July '89, 'Only they could be worried about stringent identity requirements...because they alone, by construing the flow of experience in terms of discrete ontological particulars, sabotage continuity') because the flow of experience is construed by essentialists in terms of discontinuous and discrete ontological particulars; and such a construal makes it very difficult to give a satisfactory account of the ethical and spiritual phenomena like moral responsibility, transmigration of self, etc. One may ask here, 'what is essentialist (or based on essentialist metaphysics) in such a momentarist construal of experience? Is it not diametrically opposed to the essentialist viewpoint to hold that flux of experience is composed of utterly discrete, self-defined (*svalakṣṇa*) momentary units?' All the philosophies like those of *Nyāya*, *Vedānta*, etc., which advocate the substantialist view of reality have strongly criticised the momentarist doctrine in no uncertain terms. It is Buddhism and Buddhism alone which has very vehemently maintained the

momentarist doctrine (otherwise known as the no-self or 'Pudgala-Nairātmya' view in regard to the subjective sphere, and no-substance or 'Dharma-Nairātmya' view in regard to the objective sphere) commonly known in Indian philosophical literature as 'Kṣaṇa-bhaṅga vāda'. If Peerenboom needs any proof of this he may refer to the monograph of Ratnakīrti on *Kṣaṇa-bhaṅga* which is full of subtle polemics against the substantialist view of reality. This monograph is included in the collection of Ratnakīrti's works known as '*Ratnakīrti Nibandhāvali*'. A similar polemical work on *Kṣaṇabhaṅga* by another redoubtable champion of the momentarist doctrine, the great Buddhist scholar Jñānasrīmitra, is available in a collection known as '*Jñānasrīmitra-Nibandhāvali*'. The great eleventh-century logician Udayana had to compose his well known treatise *Ātmatattvaviveka* mainly with the avowed purpose of demolishing the Buddhist doctrine of universal momentariness. A noted modern scholar of Buddhism, Theodore Stcherbatsky used in his *Buddhist Logic* the significant term 'staccato' for aptly characterising the Buddhist conception of the discontinuously-and-discreetly-flowing nature of the real. For the *Sāṃkhyan* conception of the real as contrasted with that of Buddhism, Stcherbatsky has used the term 'legato'. Against all this evidence it may not be open to Peerenboom to argue that only a section of Buddhist philosophy adheres to the momentarist doctrine. It is wellknown that every school of Buddhism excluding that of the *Mādhyamika*-which does not advocate any view of its own-upholds the doctrine of momentariness. Not only the *Vaiśiṣṭika* and the *Sautrāntika*, even the *Yogācāra*, whose main thrust is towards idealism, has maintained that the flow of consciousness which is the only real that is there, is composed only of momentary ideational units. From all this it is as clear as day light that the doctrine of momentariness is a pivotal doctrine for all Buddhist philosophy. It is therefore simply astounding that Peerenboom should blame the ethical difficulties of Buddhism on

'essentialist metaphysics'. The difficulties of Buddhism are self-created and it stands to the great credit of traditional Buddhist scholars that they have grappled with these difficulties without compromising their basic doctrine of universal momentariness. Peerenboom in his misplaced enthusiasm to defend Buddhist ethics has doubly falsified it, first by disowning on behalf of Buddhism the very doctrine that is a central feature of it and next by foisting upon it the process view of reality which is totally alien to its basic outlook. But, as the following discussion will show, even with his distorted view of Buddhist ethics Peerenboom does not succeed in the least in 'dissolving' what he regards as 'essentialist dilemmas' about moral responsibility. If Peerenboom had taken the trouble to analyse carefully the concept of 'process', it would have been evident to him that under its usual interpretation the process-conception fares no better than the momentarist conception in giving a satisfactory account of the 'phenomenological self'. We shall however explain towards the end of this short paper how the 'process' view of reality can be so interpreted as to make it compatible with all common ethical notions. But by this we would not like to suggest that the process view is acceptable to any school of Buddhism.

What is then a 'process' which Peerenboom makes so much of? The common view of the nature of a process as well as the view that philosophers like Bertrand Russell have taken of it is, that a process is a continuous and uninterrupted succession of terms which is so compact that between any two terms of it a third term can always be conceived to be interpolatable. This means that in the strict sense there is no term which can be conceived to be immediately next to any term in the continuum (of the process). However, the fact that the continuum is constituted by terms *different* from and in uninterrupted succession to each other, (of which there may be any number conceivable) will not

be denied by any one who admits the reality of the continuum. The terms of the continuum cannot be exactly alike, for then any kind of experiential change occurring in the self-in-process cannot be accounted for. Change must be gradual and equally distributed over the successive terms in the continuum. But it should be noted here that strictly speaking 'change' cannot *happen* to the terms or take place in them, as each of them is an integral entity not split up into two or more connected entities, as substance and attribute are (so that the substantive locus of the attributes could be described as the entity undergoing change or as that to which change happens when any one of its attributes fades away and is replaced by another). So the continual total supersession of one term in the succession by another following it is the only kind of change that may be supposed to take place in the process-self. Could such a changing entity, which cannot remain the same even for two moments (a moment here is to be understood as the smallest possible unit of time), sustain the weight of moral responsibility for actions which is sought to be imposed upon it? However dense and compact the series of selves constituting the process may be, the self which initiated an action cannot be identical with the self, coming long after its cessation and reaping the result of its action. There may be some connecting thread (if at all) running through all the selves (in the continuum) but it cannot be supposed to cause the merger of the separate identities of the different selves into each other. The erroneous notion that continuity and change could be combined in the concept of the 'process' (whose precise nature as explained above is not taken into account seems to have misled Peerenboom into the wrong belief that a changing self is a continuing self and therefore it is this self that retains its identity unaffected from moment throughout its career or phenomenological existence. Radical change in being and identity cannot go together.

There is however another interpretation of the concept of continuity or process which may enable us to explain moral phenomena quite satisfactorily. This interpretation results from a slight modification of the Whiteheadian concept of 'ingression'. In a slightly modified view of 'ingression', the *essences* of the different unit-selves of each moment [may be supposed to be carried over into the selves of the immediately-next moment so that the thread of identity is retained by all the selves in the series from moment to moment. There is no need to admit the ingression of the whole antecedent self into the consequent self in the continuum.

Another version of this 'ingression' is that each self in the series, while disappearing, leaves behind its impress on the immediately-next self and this process continues till the self-series becomes totally extinct. Any self in the series would carry within its being the accumulated impressions of all the previous selves. A slight variation of this very view would be to say that every succeeding self in the self-series emerges into being as an entity incorporating all the effects that the previous selves appear to have caused, but in reality the effects are intrinsic to the emergent self itself and not caused by anything outside preceding it. The mere prior and necessary occurrence of the earlier selves could however be equated with their causality in relation to the latter transformed self.

These accounts of the continuous self are only intended to show that it is possible to explain ethical phenomena quite satisfactorily on the process-view of self, provided the view is properly interpreted. But in no case should these accounts be taken as representative of the Buddhist standpoint. Buddhism as a whole is inalienably associated with the doctrine of momentarism.

It is not quite clear whether Peerenboom is aware of this patent fact or not. But what comes out very clearly from various remarks of his is the confusion he has made between the momentarist-view and the process-view which are poles apart from each other. If he had recognised the incompatibility of these views he would never have regarded momentarism interpretable as the process-view.

But conceding for argument's sake the validity of the process-view in Buddhism, one is simply astounded to see Peerenboom carrying the process-view of self to its absurd illogical extreme and maintaining that a self-in-process is continuous with its environment, and so it is also continuous with other selves constituting the environment. Why stop then with the environment? The self-in-process could as well be regarded as continuous with the whole universe. There would then be no need to admit more than one self in the universe to explain all moral and spiritual phenomena.

Instead of decrying the doctrine of momentarism and regarding it as the source of all problems for Buddhist ethics, Peerenboom should have carefully considered the account of moral and spiritual phenomena given by the Buddhist authors advocating momentarism. We may present briefly this account (with slight modification) in some such way. The phenomenological self called *jīva* is an illusory identity or a transcendental construct sustained by the flow of discrete momentary and self-contained experiential units. These units are held together, so to say, in their necessarily-sequential relationship (or existence) by the law of dependent origination. The law is not some controlling agency or principle but is just the nature of the necessary succession of the discrete experiential units, each of which emerges into being out of its own natural necessity. We have

thus a three-tier structure constituted by the phenomenological self at the top level and the discrete momentary experiences and the law of their necessarily-successive emergence into being at the middle and the lowest levels respectively. The changing mental states do not disrupt the identity of the self either at the phenomenological or at the transcendental level of the law of dependent origination. The former type of identity is an illusion pure and simple, as the experience of this identity incorporates diversity from moment to moment as part and parcel of itself. We are to ourselves both identical and different from moment to moment. Moral phenomena are not explicable at this level of (our illusory) identity. Only the underlying transcendental identity based upon the law of dependent origination can explain moral phenomena satisfactorily. No doubt there is no identity here in the strict sense of the word, but the necessity of the succession of the experiential units can do the duty for identity by holding together in a rigorous concatenated chain all the elements that go to make up a man's moral life. If it is felt that in this account the fact of the evolution of the self, through its past history influencing its present being is left out, as there is only succession but no connection whatsoever between the successive selves (or the experiences), we may slightly modify this account to provide for the phenomenon of evolution. This may, however, be done without importing the idea of continuity into the account. Since every moment a new self emerges into being, we may suppose that the self emerging at each moment is such that it embodies all the changes that the occurrence of the earlier selves would have wrought upon it. Not that the earlier selves influence the latter or that this influence, if it is produced, is carried over to the later selves. What may be supposed to be the case (according to the theory) is that the emergent self turns out to be, by its own nature, the evolved

self. Thus, every moment newer and more and more evolved selves come into being of themselves, not being influenced in the least by the selves preceding them in the series.

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NOTE

1. See "Buddhist Process Ethics", *IPQ* Vol. *XV*, No. 3, pp. 248-268.

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