

## **Democracy and Difference: Going beyond Liberal Freedoms and Illiberal Order**

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The globalisation of democracy is among the most important historical developments of the past century. This said, much as the globalisation of markets has not brought about anything like global economic homogeneity, but rather a complex and uneven interplay of both integrating and fragmenting dynamics, the globalisation of democracy should not be confused with the worldwide prevalence of a single political system. While there may be family resemblances among the political systems of, for example, the U.S., South Africa, India and Thailand, these resemblances pale in comparison to their differences.

As globalisation and modernisation processes have become increasingly complex and reflexive, critical tensions have become manifest among distinct constellations of democratic values and principles as well as among their varying translations into practice. These tensions have taken the general form of contrasting theoretical dispositions toward liberalism and communitarianism, and more specifically as a practical antagonisms between, for example, the naturalist, universalist, and freedom-promoting democracies of the liberal Euro-American West and the culturalist, particularist, and order-promoting democracies of illiberal East and Southeast Asia (Bell, 1995; Parekh, 2000). At the basis of these tensions and challenges are a complex set of issues regarding difference itself.

It is now quite apparent that along any number of dimensions, contemporary globalisation processes are not only bringing about greater integration and commonality, they are also functioning as complex and often unpredictable magnifiers and multipliers of social, economic, political, and cultural differences. Making use Buddhist of conceptual resources, I want to examine the relationship between such differences and the tensions within and among contemporary constructions of democracy, particularly in light of the globally resurging political salience of religion and morality. More specifically, I

want to explore the merits of moving obliquely to the spectrum of liberal and illiberal constructions of democracy in the direction of seeing democracy as an equity-enhancing global culture of political diversification.

### **The Global Context**

One of the generative insights of Buddhism is that our conflicts, troubles and suffering can only be positively and sustainably addressed on the basis of things 'as they have come to be' (*yathabhutam*), and not simply as they are at present. In short, histories matter. With this in mind, let me first trace out some features in the historical trajectories of modernisation, globalisation and democratisation that critically inform the distinctive tensions animating contemporary discourses on democracy.

### **Modernity and the Politics of Difference**

Modernity has been widely acknowledged as emerging in association with a "cosmopolitan agenda" shaped by the values of universality, equality, autonomy, sovereignty and control (Toulmin, 1990). What has not been sufficiently appreciated, perhaps, is that the powerful appeal of this agenda and its core values rested on their utility as a response to deep and significant difference<sup>1</sup>.

The intimate connection between modernity and difference is, perhaps, most clearly manifest in the global spread of the geographically bounded, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation-state—a political institution that since its origins as a "battlefield emergency" amid cataclysmic social, economic and political circumstances has insured that modern societies have remained, at the very least, socially, culturally and religiously plural. But no less importantly, a key feature of the process of modernisation more generally has been the dissolution

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is misleading to speak of modernity in the singular. While some social and cultural differences were successfully submerged by the spread of modern ideals and institutions, they clearly were not entirely subsumed by these ideals and institutions, and the Western European cultural program of modernity and its core institutional constellations have *not* been definitive for all forms of modernity. In short, modernity has always been multiple. (Eisenstadt, 2000)

of traditional communities and their replacement by readily reconfigured collectives of individuals organised around shifting arrays of shared interests.

This “emancipatory” transformation of traditional communities into equality- and rights-demanding collectives of freely associating individuals has long been regarded a key factor in the rise of civil society and the emergence of Western democracies,<sup>2</sup> and has played a crucial legitimising role for classical liberalism and its assertion of the autonomous, rational individual as the basic unit of both ethical and political analysis. But modern individuation processes have also been inseparable from the rise of “disciplinary” societies aimed at consolidating new power structures and producing new kinds of populations suited to furthering the interlinked dynamics of nationalisation, marketisation and industrialisation (Foucault, 1995).

Modernisation and its central political institution, the nation-state, have thus always been characterised by a joint and often tense valorisation of both freedom and control (Wagner, 1994). And, not surprisingly, their utopian projects of opening new ways for being human based on new patterns of affiliation and aspiration have begged further questions about the direction of change connoted by progress—questions that have served to articulate further, ongoing tensions between universalist and particularist conceptions of the good life and human flourishing; between moral monism and moral pluralism; and between schemes for evaluating ideals and institutions on the basis of either an individualism rooted in the pre-supposition of an essentially common human nature or a culturalism that insists on the fundamental uniqueness of human communities.

Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, these tensions came to be articulated with particular force. In part because of persistent structural inequalities aligned with such markers of difference as gender, ethnicity and race, and in part because of the ever more evident complicity of both capitalist and communist universalisms in the production of an

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<sup>2</sup> This was a crucial part of Alexis de Tocqueville’s 19<sup>th</sup> century thesis regarding the rise of American democracy and has continued to be invoked to the present, most prominently perhaps in Moore (1966) and Rueschemeyer et.al. (1992).

“underdeveloped” Third World, the imagination of either modernity or the nation-state and citizenship in it as in any relevant dimensions homogeneous became critically untenable. Alongside postmodern and post-colonial oppositions to the hegemony of sameness, there emerged a politics of identity around the convictions that we are differentially embedded—socially, economically, politically, culturally and technologically—in local, national, regional and global dynamics, and that the disparities of opportunity and outcome resulting from such differences cannot (by those most adversely affected) and should not (by those more fortunate) be imagined away. Attention—and, indeed, compensation—is due those living lives of diminished vitality and possibility because of structurally ingrained patterns of exclusion.

Legal attention alone, of course, is not enough to redress past and ongoing injustices. If national community is to be more than something imagined, in addition to rights and recognition, respect is due to individuals and groups whose differences set them ‘apart.’ And to be fully effective, this respect cannot be given in spite of differences that mark certain groups and individuals—a matter, ultimately, of looking beyond their differences. Rather respect must be given to them as different.<sup>3</sup> The resulting politics of recognition and respect (Taylor, 1994) thus demands more than the tolerance of differences. It demands in addition understanding and acceptance, at least in the degree required to include in a community of mutual respect all those who differ—whether because of their ethnicity, race, gender or religion, their sexual orientation, age, or disability, or even because of such seemingly elective categories of difference as lifestyle and affective citizenship (Mookherjee, 2005).

What we have seen over the past half century, then, is not only the philosophical and political ascent of difference, but in an important sense also a growing instability within and among the categories of politically relevant difference. That is, the categories of politically relevant differences are themselves undergoing significant differentiation at the same time that a shift has been occurring away

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<sup>3</sup> Critics from a range of perspectives have seen the politics of identity as erring in the tendency to essentialise differences rather than to understand them as arising in complexly dynamic ways.

from seeking the relationally thin accordance of recognition to seeking the relationally thick accordance of respect—a shift from laying claim to just compensation to commanding a voice.

As made evident by the degree to which differences have come to be articulated within and across national boundaries through media that foster the event-driven, adventitious formation of decentralised and yet potentially very large publics and affinity groups, this shift toward increasing differentiation, relational density and volatility is not an exclusively political phenomenon. On the contrary, it is characteristic of a multidimensional and potentially epochal transition taking place globally in the relationships among the social, economic, political, technological and cultural domains.

### **Complex Interdependence and Interpenetration**

It is now generally acknowledged that, over the course of the past three to four decades, a profound transformation has occurred in how societies are dynamically organised. This shift has been variously described as, for example, the advent of a postindustrial world (Bell, 1974), the onset of the knowledge society (Stehr, 1994), as a transition from industrial to mental capitalism (Franck, 1999), and as the rise of global informational capitalism (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998). Crucial to this transformation is a shift of dominance of “external” to “internal” or constitutive relations—the emergence of truly complex and global systems of economic, social, political and cultural interdependence and interpenetration.

A signal characteristic of this newly emerging global system of internal relations is that its constitutive flows are not primarily shaped by relatively stable natural and political geographies, but rather by the unpredictable curving of social, economic, cultural and political spaces as a global function of continually shifting attractors for and concentrations of attention (Franck, *ibid.*; Lanham, 2006; Hershock 1999 and 2006; Davenport and Beck, 2002). As in the past, maximising market reach and density requires the simultaneous production of both new kinds of goods and services and new populations in need of them. Now, however, as illustrated by the equivalent shares in the global economy of mass media and entertainment and the oil industry, economic growth is critically dependent on the fluid production of and

responsiveness to continuously differentiating flows of attention. In short, economic vitality, and by extension political legitimacy, has come to be a complex function of the unimpeded expression, recognition and respect of differing interests.

This should not be confused with the neo-liberal claim that free markets and liberal democracies necessarily go hand in hand and will best meet the interests of each and all—a that claim has been adequately disproven by the widening wealth and income gaps seen worldwide over the past quarter century, and by the market-enabled economic “miracle” of a recalcitrant, illiberal and techno-bureaucratic China. Rather, the point is that global economic vitality has come to be dependent on conditions that are conducive to voicings of the widest possible range of interests—conditions that depend in turn on the reflexive acceleration of the ambiguously emancipatory and disciplinary processes of differentiation and individualisation, the deepening interpenetration of the private and the public spheres, and the “democratic” realisation of a global communicative commons referenced by (but by no means limited to) the informational, commercial, financial, social, and cultural interchanges occurring via the Internet.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Network Society**

Manuel Castells’ identification of this shift with the rise of a global “network society” and “global informational capitalism”<sup>5</sup> is quite useful

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<sup>4</sup> The neoliberal position would be that this economically productive voicing of interests will prove conducive to the global dominance of democratic governments. Clearly, this need not be the case. Voices can be joined in deepening consensus or in sharpening dissenting views. A fully democratised communicative commons may result in politically productive conversations or in politically destructive Babel. This is clearly a concern in economically vibrant countries where there is a strong distrust of liberal nonchalance about political dissent. In such illiberal states, the Internet is seen ambiguously as economically indispensable and as opening a space that has the potential to support both populist nationalism and separatist opposition.

<sup>5</sup> See Manuel Castells *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. I. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); *The Power of Identity, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. II. (Cambridge,

in bringing this epochal shift in the interplay of economic vitality, political legitimacy, democracy and difference into critical focus. In contrast with hierarchies in which the value of any particular position is a function of its distance from the organisational center/top, the value of membership in a network is a function of the total number of agents or nodes involved—a value that grows equivalently and exponentially for all as new agents or nodes are added. Moreover, the direction of network growth is not centrally determined, but rather emerges as a function of the informational contributions made by/through all of its nodes. This can take the form of either negative feedback that stabilises the network's system of relations or positive feedback that accelerates certain types of interactions and amplifies differentiations occurring within that system. Networks grow—and evolve—through realising virtuous (not vicious) circles of interaction.<sup>6</sup>

Not without reason, many early theorists of the social implications of information and communications networks identified the advent and exponential expansion of the Internet with the opening of a new civil space suited to supporting the emergence of entirely new and truly global expressions of democracy. The now well known role played by the Internet in planning, carrying out, funding and gaining popular support for global terror forces a more nuanced appreciation of the political possibilities of networks. What can be said with confidence is: first, that beyond certain thresholds of interactive scale and scope, networked systems of global interaction begin serving as complex multipliers and magnifiers of difference; and secondly, that the non-linear logic of network growth means that these systems will be prone to accelerating and structuring the constitutive flows of globalisation in ways that unpredictably intensify and amplify both integrating and fragmenting potentials. That is, complex network systems are not only self-organising, they are novelty-generating. Networks both accelerate differentiation and accentuate uncertainty.

A critical implication of this is that the severe inequalities, conflicts and volatilities characterising contemporary globalisation processes cannot

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MA: Blackwell, 1997); and *End of Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. III. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Castells (1996), p.17.

be viewed as primarily caused by external factors, but by internal factors recursively amplifying in accord with values embedded in the attention-fueled structurations of negative and positive feedback through which global networks are now expanding and evolving.<sup>7</sup> And so, while the overall trajectory of global dynamics over the last half-century has been toward increasing interdependence and complexity, these dynamics have been anything but continuous, exhibiting an ever heightening volatility and instability that ironically “comes from within rather than without.” (Taylor, 2004: 300)

### **Reflexive Modernisation and World Risk Society**

Recent work on “reflexive modernisation” (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994) and the advent of a “world risk society” (Beck, 1992; 1999) are particularly useful in drawing out the implications of the heightened differentiation and volatility that characterise a complexly networked world. Reflexive modernisation occurs when the increasing scale, scope and complexity of modernisation, industrialisation and marketisation processes prohibit the externalisation of the environmental, health, social, economic and cultural costs of sustained growth. From this point, economic growth comes increasingly to depend on the ironic production of threats, risks and volatilities as a function of the successes, not the failures, of modernisation, marketisation and industrialisation, and in the face of which responsible decisions must nevertheless be undertaken.<sup>8</sup>

Under reflexive modernisation, the constitutive modern tensions between freedom and control come to have ever more highly individuated and differentiated impacts, as the threats and risks of

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of “structuration” had been forward by Anthony Giddens (19xx) as a way of signaling the interfusion of structure and agency in a world of complex change.

<sup>8</sup> Human-induced climate change and variability resulting from fossil fuel powered industrialisation and transportation is, of course, the most prominent and “global” example of the scale of risks associated with reflexive modernisation, but mention also can be made of the threat of chemical and nuclear disasters like those that occurred at Bopal and Chernobyl, the potential impacts of the uncontrolled spread of bio-engineered organisms, or the economic ramifications of global financial crises like those in 1997 and fall of 2008.

continued growth percolate into virtually every aspect of life, along with ever expanding responsibilities for decision-making. This means that emancipatory freedoms of choice are vastly expanded. The construction of identity comes to be seen as complex function of both voluntary and hereditary affiliations, community comes to be seen increasingly as elective, and the optimal becomes ever more closely identified with the optional—all of which foster the emergence of difference-centered politics of recognition and respect. At the same time, however, there is also a disciplinary edge to expanding the range of individual agency and responsibility—a deepening of pressures for each individual to define the terms of his/her life, to challenge existing social forms (especially those related to work, family and gender), and to construct his/her own identities and life narratives under conditions of continuously heightening ambiguity, uncertainty and risk (Giddens, 1992). And, because the resources for making timely and apt decisions under conditions of complex change are not evenly distributed, this compulsion to choose easily leads to and sharpens the divisions between individuals and groups who are differentially affected by the risks and threats produced as a function of the “successes” of contemporary globalisation and industrialisation. That is, reflexive modernisation is inseparable from the production of both “reflexivity winners” and “reflexivity losers” (Lash, 1994: 127-135), raising new and politically potent kinds of equity issues.

### **Problems, Predicaments and the Aporia of Difference**

Viewed through the critical lenses of global networks and reflexive modernisation, a disturbing picture comes into focus. A common set of conditions is now fostering both intensified differentiation among agents and interests, and the multiplication and amplification of risks and hazards that are increasingly global in scope and can only be successfully engaged through globally coordinated collective action. Engaging the dynamics of contemporary global interdependence and interpenetration is, then, to engage an aporia. On one hand, we are being faced with intensifying imperatives to more fully recognise and respect differences, going beyond merely tolerating difference and otherness to enabling them to matter more—not less—than ever before. On the other hand, we are being compelled to confront equivalently intensifying needs to join in ever more robust and sustainable forms of

global common cause, subsuming our differences within shared and deepening commitments.

Confrontation with this aporia marks an epochal transition. The severe inequalities, discontinuities and volatilities associated with increasingly complex networks of global interdependence and interpenetration, and the expanding hazards and risks produced by the successes of reflexive modernisation do not present us with problems to be solved, but with predicaments. Problems indicate failures of existing strategies and techniques to bring about desired ends. Solutions consist in the realisation of new means of furthering abiding patterns of aims and interests. In contrast, predicaments occur with competition and conflict among our own values, aims and interests. Predicaments must be resolved through realising both enhanced clarity and more thoroughly and deeply coordinated commitments. Predicament resolution entails a significant revision or reconfiguration of relevant values, aims and practices. The signal challenges of reflexive modernity and the rise of world risk society pose—in the most global and potent way—needs for an ethicisation of the public sphere.

This has not gone unnoticed. One of the most striking features of the last quarter century has been the resurgent political salience of religion and explicitly moral discourse, not in spite of, but rather as a function of contemporary globalisation processes and the pace and unpredictability of the changes associated with them (Taylor, 2004). This reunion of politics, faith and morals responds to a values vacuum—an absence in the public sphere of those qualities of commitment and ultimate concern that are expressed in a coherently integrated vision of the good. But, while religion and morality do afford substantial resources for making decisions and organising society in ways that express considerable depth and consistency of values, they do so in ways that are unique, even if ostensibly universal. Religions and moralities provide members of a given community with a common set of beliefs, practices and principles for decision-making that define organically singular ways of being in the world—ways that “we” do things. And while there are those who would will the world to be religiously and morally singular, it is not. Religion and morality can provide answers to the kinds of issues with which we are being globally confronted by

reflexive modernisation and the risk society, treating them essentially as problems, but individually they do not afford means to resolving them. The modern separation of religion and politics acknowledges the need for a difference-respecting approach to engaging the challenges facing pluralistic societies. As governments “by and for the people,” democracies are procedurally and substantively committed to addressing the “fact of plurality” characterising modern societies (Rawls, 1971), balancing multiple values, interests and needs. And as such, they are in principle well suited to the evaluative work of responding to contemporary, predicament-rich realities. In actuality, however, the effectiveness of contemporary democracies—whether liberal or illiberal—in addressing these realities in equity-enhancing ways is very much in question. This can be attributed in part to the links that now obtain between economic vitality and political legitimacy and the practical constraints they place on the democratic imagination. From a Buddhist perspective, however, the deficiency of contemporary democracies is not primarily a function of their responses to the “fact” of plurality, but rather their failures in articulating the value of difference as such.

### **A Buddhist Response**

Among the core teachings of Buddhism are that, for the purpose of realising liberation from trouble and suffering, all things should be seen as arising interdependently, as changing, and thus as empty of any abiding essence. Put somewhat differently, relationality is more basic than ‘things’ that ‘are related’ and is irreducibly dynamic. Seeing this is to see that there are ultimately no intractable situations. Change is not only possible, it is already ongoing, and all that is in question are the extent and direction of change. Indeed, according to the Buddhist teaching of karma, there are no non-arbitrary limits to our own implication in how change dynamics are oriented. With sufficiently close and sustained attention, it becomes apparent that a continuously and finely tuned consonance obtains between our own values, intentions and actions and the patterns of outcome and opportunity we experience. Responsibility, in other words, is inseparable from possibilities for responsive redirection. Or more simply stated, all experienced realities imply responsibility.

Taken together, the teachings of interdependence, emptiness and karma disallow seeing the interdependence among economic growth, hazard proliferation and increasing volatility that characterises reflexive modernisation and world risk society simply as a problematic fact—a function of either historical accident or causal necessity. On the contrary, this distinctive inflection of global interdependencies is most effectively seen as a predicament-manifesting function of the complexion of norms and values inflecting contemporary processes of modernisation, industrialisation and marketisation.

Likewise, the heightening prominence of difference—exemplified, for example, by acute inequalities of wealth and power, and by the advent of the politics of recognition and respect—is not simply the latest factual expression of network-driven individuation processes; it evidences an ongoing collision among modern values, including those of autonomy, equality, individuality, universality and choice. Indeed, if relationality is ontologically basic, what we conventionally take to be differences are better understood and more aptly engaged as processes of value-inflected differentiation—processes in which we are unavoidably implicated and for which we are, in significant degree, responsible. We are, in other words, continuously in a position to respond to the troubling realities emerging with reflexive modernisation and global informational capitalism, and the aporia of difference with which they force ever-widening scales and scopes of confrontation.

### **Buddhism and Governance**

There is thus at least a measure of conceptual alignment between basic Buddhist teachings and participatory approaches to government. And, indeed, there are many instances in the discourses of the Buddha when good governance is described as emerging through consultative processes that insure that policy making is informed by the widest possible range of interests and insights. The early Buddhist community itself was open to all, regardless of caste, class, ethnicity, culture and gender, and its emancipatory aspirations excluded none—an historical fact on the basis of which some contemporary Buddhists assert the basic compatibility of Buddhism and the substantive principles of democracy. And, the internal dynamics of the monastic community—

revealed especially in the Vinaya—have also been seen as prefiguring procedural principles embodied in modern democratic institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Here, I want to suggest a more critical perspective. To be sure, modern democracy in its various political and broader societal incarnations can usefully be seen as the globally preeminent system for responsibly enabling differences to make a difference—a response to the plurality characterising modern societies that systematically recognises and respects differences. This resonates well with Buddhism’s inclusiveness. And, informed by both substantive and procedural principles, democratic institutions can be seen as sustaining processes compatible with Buddhist commitments to integrating values and practices in ways conducive to the realisation of liberating relational dynamics by each and for all.

At the same time, however, the modern democratic distinction between and attempts to balance the interests of individuals and collectives do not articulate well with Buddhist teachings of the interdependence and emptiness of all things. From the perspective of a rigorously relational ontology, neither individuals nor collectives exist as independent entities, and it is likely that taking either as the basis for ethical or political analysis will have significant liabilities. This sheds considerable doubt on democratic procedures that would balance the plural interests in and of society through, for example, either voting-mediated competitions that assume the individual, self-interested agent to be politically basic, or technocratic conferences that take the (typically national) collective to be foundational.

Understanding the democratic process in more fully relational Buddhist terms suggests a need to subordinate efforts to quantitatively balance disparate interests within a population to realising qualitatively improved co-ordination among distinctively inflected patterns of relational dynamics. Yet, given the ways in which the political legitimacy of modern democracies is linked with industrial and market processes that are at once accelerating the production of globally troubling threats, risks, and volatility, and fostering continuous, network-driven differentiations of interests, the increasing

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<sup>9</sup> For a representative view of this sort, see Ratnapala (1997).

identification of the optimal with the optional, and the ascent of the instantly transmitted and answered message as the dominant medium of communication, questions must also be raised about the prospects for existing democratic institutions to generate and sustain the kind and quality of deliberation needed for them to function as more than problem-solving mechanisms.

In sum, if the intensifying predicaments with which we find ourselves globally confronted are an emergent function of conflicts within the matrix of modern and market values—including universality, autonomy, equality, independence, sovereignty, competition, convenience, choice and control—the centrality of these values in contemporary democracies should give us critical pause, as should the effectiveness of both liberal and illiberal democracies in generating and sustaining robust economic growth and hence the very processes driving the unpredictable and accelerating proliferation of threats, risks and globally intensifying predicaments.

Ultimately, the core constituencies of both liberal and illiberal democracies—autonomous and rationally self-interested individual agents and equivalently autonomous and interest-focused collectives—are results of these same processes, and serving their interests is thus itself ironically troubling. The “inconvenient truth” is that neither individually- nor collectively-grounded governments “by and for the people” and their attempts to optimally balance disparate interests may be conducive to realising the kind and degree of co-ordination and resolve (both clarity and commitment) needed to address the predicaments with which we are being ever more profoundly confronted.

### **Going Beyond both Liberal and Illiberal Democracy**

In liberal democracies, interest-balancing is undertaken procedurally through insuring universal suffrage. Political offices are filled through “free and fair” elections, and the threat of a “tyranny of the majority” is met by institutionally-grounded and constitutionally-protected political, civil and legal rights aimed at safeguarding both private and public spaces for the expression of individual and minority interests. Liberal democracies assume that the individual is the basic unit of political analysis and that the autonomy of the individual is thus

sacrosanct. The primary responsibilities of the liberal state are to insure that all individuals can craft life plans in accord with values, aims and interests that they have freely chosen, and to insure that at least the possibility of a real plurality of voices is at all times guaranteed. In keeping with its core values of freedom of choice, equality, and a tolerance for difference, the liberal state is explicitly neutral with respect to the nature of the good life. Policies are determined (at least ideally) by constitutionally mandated processes of fair competition among contending views—a “market” approach to governance.

Within the West, this approach has come under considerable communitarian criticism that sees the liberal biases toward individualism, rationalism and proceduralism as politically deficient. The communitarian worry, expressed by both the political right (McIntyre, 1978) and left (C. Taylor, 1985 and 1989; Sandel, 1981) has been that stressing individual autonomy and equality threatens a reduction of democratic politics to a purely quantitative balancing act that results in policies bereft of any coherent and qualitatively rich vision of the common (e.g., national) good. In answer to what is experienced by many as a lamentable evacuation of values discourses from the public sphere and resulting political impotence when it comes to addressing many of the most confounding issues of the day, communitarianism calls for a passionate restoration of expressly republican civic virtues—the restoration of a relationally thick moral dimension to politics.

But outside of the arena of intellectual debate, passions often trump virtues. And as made evident in the populist rise of the religious right in the US and of Hindu communalism in India, political passions are often exclusively religious or communal. Real world politics are not only informed by rational deliberation and culturally neutral expressions of egalitarian values, but also by profoundly passionate conflict and contestation (Walzer, 2005). And as made obvious by the mobilisation of politicised forms of religious fundamentalism to fill the values vacuum afflicting many contemporary societies, communally addressing predicaments of increasingly global scale need not take either civil or non-violent form. Indeed, the political mobilisation of passion easily takes on an intolerant and totalising, if not totalitarian,

edge that is worryingly reminiscent of the kind of organic communalism that fueled Fascist Nazi aspirations for global dominance (Nancy, 1982)—a communalism that understood difference as a polluting potential for betrayal.

In sharp contrast, illiberal democracies recognise both the validity of communitarian worries about liberalism and the dangers of passionately constituted communalism. Illiberal democracies assume responsibility for insuring collective good, as it has been positively determined by the state. Taking society itself as the unit of political analysis, illiberal democracies reserve the right to intervene in the lives of the people to insure the harmonious development of society as a whole—a process that is corporately managed by a rationally motivated techno-bureaucratic elite responsible for insuring stability and growth. The assumption in illiberal democracies is that balancing the disparate interests within their governed populations is not to be entrusted to the quantitatively biased proceduralism of electoral politics. Rather, it is to be responsibly undertaken by the government on behalf of those populations. Conflicting perspectives can be expressed within government, but not in political opposition to it. Whereas liberal democracies insure the possibility of a plurality of politically salient values and interests within the state, illiberal democracies are inclined to insist on the right to the plurality of interests and evaluations of the good among states. Rather than appealing to a market-like mechanism of competition among views and values, illiberal democracies insist that government properly plays a “managerial” role with respect to difference.

Illiberal approaches to democracy are, of course, also subject to considerable criticism. Their denial of intelligibility to the notion of a “loyal opposition” inclines illiberal states toward the suppression of dissent, often in the form of imposing limits on freedoms of expression that cast serious doubts on the ability of illiberal states to understand and act in the necessarily plural interests of the modern societies they govern. In addition, the technocratic approach to addressing the kinds of challenges facing contemporary societies is itself not above reproach. The complexity of contemporary realities produces pressures to make use of “expert systems” in shaping public policy, but these technocratic

systems of expertise are also profoundly implicated in the dynamics of reflexive modernisation and the “manufactured uncertainties” in the broken light of which “there are no longer any clear paths of development leading from one state of affairs to another.” (Giddens, 1994: 185) Illiberal expert systems—not unlike religions and moralities—are well suited to problem solution, operating within a pre-existing set of parameters and values, but not predicament resolution.

There are appealing features in both liberal-market and illiberal-managerial approaches to evaluating and balancing conflicts among values and interests. And it is tempting to try judiciously combining the two in a “third stream” democracy that flows from a position somewhere midway between their spectrum-defining extremes. Let me here made use of Buddhist conceptual resources to advocate a more difficult approach that would eschew location on the current spectrum of views delimited by liberal and illiberal constructions of democracy and that would instead generate movement perpendicular or oblique to it. Moving in this new direction will entail going beyond recognising and respecting differences within societies and among societies to activating these differences as the basis for meaningful and mutual contribution—the realisation of greater relational equity through enhanced diversity.

To begin with, neither illiberal democracy’s particularist and culturalist biases nor liberal democracy’s universalist and individualist biases are conducive to the kind of open deliberation among value systems that is necessitated by such global threats and risks as climate change and instability. In taking pluralities of views and interests into account, both liberal and illiberal democracies are inclined toward treating differences, not as evidence of relationally significant differentiations, but as expressions of the absence of consensus generating common ground. As such, difference has typically been regarded as something to be disarmed or overcome—whether through compromise, assimilation or special accommodation. When this proves impractical or impossible, and where exclusion is for whatever reasons not an option, difference is regarded as something to be tolerated—that is, as something that can and should be ignored.

Crucially, when this association of difference with dissent and opposition is carried into efforts to balance plural interests and undertake apt evaluations of differing systems of values or senses of the good, there is powerfully centripetal pull inward toward the same. In keeping with their disparate emphases on the individual and the collective or nation as the unit of moral consideration, this resort to inclusion—what postmodern thinkers have critiqued as an “ethics of the same”—disposes liberal states toward some version of “moral monadism” and illiberal states toward “moral monism.”<sup>10</sup> Neither is suited to realising the resolutely appreciative engagement with difference that is needed to address global predicaments—an engagement with differences and differentiation as practically crucial sources of value.

If predicament resolution involves reconciling conflicts among our own values, and if we live in increasingly differentiated societies, then all forms of exclusivity are ultimately counterproductive, as are any assumptions of uniformity, whether within or among societies. Ultimately, predicament resolution requires, not reassessing current practices, but undertaking more refined and critically resolute differentiation among values and how they are constellated and prioritised. This cannot be done if we insist liberally on the structural universality grounding moral monadism or illiberally on the substantial uniformity grounding moral monism. Either way, we effectively insist that there is something—structural or substantive—that is not provisional and cannot be changed. Especially in the context of the scales and scopes of predicament-resolution compelled by contemporary realities, and given the depths of the differences that

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<sup>10</sup> Moral monadism assumes the primacy of individually existing entities that nevertheless have a common moral/metaphysical structure—a “Leibnizian” view of the relationship between moralities. Every individual is likely to have distinct views and values, but having views and values is common to all and provides a procedural basis for bringing differences into accord. Moral monism assumes the primacy of independently existing cultural communities all the members of which have a common moral/metaphysical substance—a “Spinozistic” view of moral multiplicity. Morality is communally determined rather than individually, and while there may be significant differences between moral communities, there can/should not be any within them.

obtain among basic values and perspectives within and among contemporary societies, seeing difference as opposed to sameness is both ethically and politically crippling.

From a Buddhist perspective, the shortcomings of liberal/market and illiberal/managerial approaches to balancing interests within and among societies express a common failure to appreciate the ontological and ethical primacy of relationality. Each assumes the validity of moral and ethical responses to difference grounded on the ontological primacy of individual existents, seeing differences as essentially comparative facts, not as value-expressing relational qualities. In effect, this enforces an ethically and politically troubling distinction between facts and values, reiterating dualistic presumptions about the independence of means and ends, body and mind, matter and spirit, evil and good, and most fundamentally of difference and sameness.

The presumption of such dualisms is ultimately to assert the independence of reality and responsibility and to exclude from critical attention, in practice if not in principle, the dynamic, karmic interplay among values-intentions-actions and opportunities/outcomes.

In Buddhist terms, this is to dwell in *samsara*, the world of endlessly circulating trouble and suffering. In non-Buddhist terms, it is to deny implication in the threats, hazards and risks posed by contemporary realities—a denial through which these ironic consequences of our own “successes” will be further accelerated and amplified. Responding to the predicaments with which we are being globally confronted in ways that are conducive to realising liberating patterns of relationality can only be effectively undertaken non-dualistically.

### **Non-duality and the Politics of Variety and Diversity**

Among the most adept expositions of Buddhist non-duality is that offered by the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century Chinese thinker, Fazang. Arguing that the opposition of sameness and difference blocks understanding of the interdependence and interpenetration of all things, Fazang makes use of a set of skillfully constructed metaphors to elicit insight into how all things can be understood as the same, precisely insofar as they differ

meaningfully from one another. Or, in a more ethically and politically charged phrasing: all things are what they mean for one another.<sup>11</sup>

For Fazang, as for Mahayana Buddhists more generally, the realisation of non-duality is inseparable from the activation of unlimited skill (*upaya*) in expressing the liberating potential in any situation whatsoever—that is, skill in making a liberating difference. Buddhist practice is liberation from those habits of the heart, mind and body that lead us to differ from others in troubling ways and the realisation instead of capacities and commitments to begin differing in ways that initiate and sustain enlightening arcs of change. With significant implications for the politics of difference, this opens a space for realising that, far from being the simple and conceptually vacuous opposite of sameness, difference is itself significantly differentiated.

As a bridge toward the political rehabilitation of difference, we can distinguish between differentiation occurring as means-to (with the meaning-of) increasing variety and as means-to (with the meaning-of) enhanced diversity. Variety consists in the presence of multiple things, beings or processes: a qualitatively neutral fact of random, simple or complicated co-existence. Diversity consists in the emergence of a distinctive quality and direction of relational dynamics: a complex pattern of mutually reinforcing contributions to sustainably shared welfare. Variety occurs whenever we differ-from one another; diversity entails that in some significant degree, we are also differing-for one another. To use a concrete example: successful zoos exhibit great species variety; healthy ecosystems express vitally robust species diversity.

Liberal and illiberal democracies have in common a concern for protecting rights to differ-from one another—most fundamentally,

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<sup>11</sup> Fazang is building upon the Buddhist logics that developed first in India and then came to China as part of the teachings of the Madhyamaka school, most crucially those of Nagarjuna and his exposition of emptiness or interdependence as falling outside of the claims that something ‘is’, ‘is-not’, ‘both is and is-not’ or ‘neither is nor is-not’. This “tetralemma” might be seen as a logical metaphor of non-duality.

respectively, as individuals and as collectives or states. That is, they are concerned with the conservation of political variety.

A Buddhist approach would build on these rights, however they are being actualised, with an eye to realising how we might best differ-for one another, skillfully activating our differences as the basis of mutual contribution along meaningfully shared arcs of appreciative change. A non-dualistically realised democracy must go beyond conserving political variety to enhancing political diversity.<sup>12</sup>

When how much we differ-from one another is of primary concern, conflict-resolution is naturally seen as a function of balancing interests. Conducted under the auspices of modern democratic valourisations of universality, autonomy and equality, this typically involves negotiating a stable compromise among all stakeholders, from the individual to the state. Balancing various interests entails weighing and then differentially weighting disparate claims to power—disparate rights and abilities for taking advantage of situational opportunities and determining situational outcomes. The liberal democratic ideal (yet to be realised) is for this process to eventuate in power being as equally distributed as possible among all individuals and freely associating groups within society.<sup>13</sup> The illiberal democratic ideal (also yet to be realised) is for power to be distributed as equally as possible among all sovereign states and free associations thereof. Liberal and illiberal democracies—like universalist and relativist ethics—agree on the primacy of the value of equality and differ only in how they understand its proper scope. In both, “we” should all be treated the same, even though “we” liberally means “as individuals” and illiberally means “as communities/states.”

When how much we differ-for one another assumes priority, concerns about how to most fairly balance interests (an essentially quantitative endeavor) yield to those about how to best coordinate them (a

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<sup>12</sup> This is not something evident in most democracies, even in famously multi-party systems like that of the U.S., much less de facto single-party systems like that of Singapore.

<sup>13</sup> Constraints on what is possible, of course, come from many different directions, political, economic, social, cultural and technological.

resolutely qualitative one), and the pursuit of equality is subordinated to that of enhanced equity. Conceived, relationally, rather than comparatively, equity is not a measure of equality of opportunity, but rather an index of capacities-for and commitments-to acting in one's own interests, insofar as doing so is deemed valuable by others. That is, equity implies the presence of a certain quality and direction of relationships—a co-ordinative appreciation (both an adding-value to and valuing) of interdependence. Ultimately, there is no equity without diversity. Equity is not a relative function of the power to autonomously exercise freedoms of choice, but rather a relational function of strengths for relating freely.

Because diversity is an emergent relational quality, it cannot be either planned or imposed. Enhancing political diversity and realising greater equity are thus not easily reconciled with the kinds and qualities of agency and institutions consonant with playing the finite games of the politics of power—games that are played to be won, inevitably at the expense of those who lose. Realising heightened diversity and equity requires, instead, the kinds of agency and institutions expressed through a politics of strength, where strength is not the ability to determine or control how things are and will be (power), but rather that which is needed in order to play well the infinite game of according with one's situation and responding as needed to maintain and further the interests of all involved.<sup>14</sup> Strength is in this sense, the means-to and meaning-of appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

Granted the modern, secular state's origins as a mechanism for balancing the interests of contending, often profoundly opposed religious and ethnic factions, it is not surprising that it has insisted on the valorisation of political variety. And since political variety secures for all the promise of equal rights for acting autonomously and exercising maximal freedoms of choice, it is also not surprising that the modern era has been dominated by national and international politics of power centripetally focused on answering questions of who is in control and to what degree. Whether the answers have been biased liberally toward guaranteeing variety within a given state or illiberally

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<sup>14</sup> I am drawing here on the distinctions between finite/infinite games and power/strength forwarded by James Carse (19xx).

toward attaining variety among states, the result has been a relationally thin pluralism that “works” in proportion to the extent and depth of tolerance practiced.<sup>15</sup>

This, however, also works against the emergence of diversity, bringing about conditions in which equity becomes an ideal for which no one is responsible, and thus a yet-to-be-experienced reality. Whether realised in liberal or illiberal terms, relationally thin pluralisms and their joint valorisation of autonomy and equality establish the plausibility condition for what I have termed moral monadism and moral monism—the conviction that how “we” do things is fundamentally natural and right. This conviction can take the form of assuming that there can and should be nothing but contingent differences of values among societies (a universalism that requires everyone to be essentially ‘just like me’), or the form of assuming that there can and should be no significant differences within society (the particularism of regarding no other society as being ‘just like ours’). Either way, the effect is a refusal in practice to responsibly engage value differences as both ethically and politically productive.

The politics of power and variety manifesting across the liberal-to-illiberal spectrum are, because of their biases toward disarming differences, impotent with respect to slowing the engines of inequity that have “succeeded” in consigning half of humanity to surviving on less than one per cent of the planet’s wealth and resources. The global resurgence, over especially the last thirty years, of openly religious political aspirations can be seen in part as a response to the social and cultural disjunctions induced by global network capitalism and its constitutive processes of modernisation, industrialisation and marketisation processes, and in part as a response to the failure of purely secular politics of power to address the profound conflicts over the meaning of the good that so powerfully characterise predicament-

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<sup>15</sup> Tolerance is, of course, a key modern value. Yet while tolerance is clearly preferable to intolerance within and among societies, tolerance translates practically into seeing differences as not making a significant difference. In engineering, tolerance defines the degree of difference that can be ignored, and more august rhetoric aside, this remains central to the moral practice of toleration.

laden contemporary global realities. The recognition that phenomena like world hunger and climate change are not problems that can be solved within existing frames of critical reference and existing hierarchies of values, suggests to increasingly large numbers of people needs for a restoration to the public, political domain of moral and religious sensibilities that modern secular states have by design relegated to the realm of the private.

Granted the Buddhist insight into the ontological primacy of relationality, there is nothing inherently troubling about contemporary intuitions that the modern distinctions between the public and private spheres, and between politics and religion, may have outlived their usefulness. However reasonable their origins, these distinctions, like that between reason and emotion, are artifacts, and as such are certainly open to critical review. But given the ways in which appeals to traditional moralities often have been generationally and gender biased, and the ways in which religious convictions have often tended to be divisive and easily used as rationales for violent stances toward difference, it is not clear that the values vacuum in contemporary politics is best addressed by granting morality and religion explicit and direct political salience.

### **Religion and Politics Revisited**

From its inception, Buddhism has been sensitive to the relationship between the political and the religious. According to Buddhist lore, prior to the Buddha's birth as Siddhartha Gautama, it was predicted that he would become either a world-conquering political leader or a world-renouncing spiritual leader. That is, the complexion of factors that led to Siddhartha being born when, where and as he was opened paths for superlative achievements in either political or religious endeavors, but not both. Though intimately related, the priorities, purposes and practices of politics and religion are not identical.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Those familiar with the history of Buddhist societies will know that some – for example, in Tibet – did not maintain a clear distinction between religion and politics. And, in all cases, there has been a need to articulate a specific relationship between the state and Buddhism—a relationship that has taken many forms in the various cultural and political settings into which traditions

This is a surprisingly modern perspective for a tradition originating 2,500 years ago. But as evidenced in the Buddha's interactions with various political leaders over the course of his teaching career, the Buddhist separation of "church" and "state" does not turn on the promotion of the secular state in response to religious and ethnic conflict—a strategy, finally, for disarming differences. In these interactions, the Buddha at no point recommends that his interlocutors reject their natal traditions or even place them in abeyance.<sup>17</sup> Neither does he recommend regime change or argue on behalf of any particular form of government. Rather, his strategy is to guide political leaders toward seeing how existing political practices might be understood in new ways—that is, how existing practices might be enabled to mean something different.

Let me explore one such encounter in some detail to bring this strategy into clearer focus. In the *Kutadanta Sutta* (*Digha Nikāya* 5), the Buddha is invited to give counsel to a king who is planning to undertake a massive state-sponsored sacrifice, including hundreds of animals large and small—a ritual practice that was in clear violation of the basic Buddhist precept against killing. Yet, when he engages King Kutadanta, the Buddha does not condemn the planned state sacrifice, but rather skillfully conducts the king toward realising that the most effective and fruitful sacrifice is not that of offering the lives of other beings, or even replenishable fruits, fragrant oils or precious stones, but rather the letting go of ignorance and attachment to self.

The Buddha begins by invoking the analogous circumstances of a king in the distant past similarly intent on performing a great state sacrifice. This conversational gambit skillfully deflects Kutadanta from regarding the Buddha's perspective on sacrifice as directly contesting his own wishes and understanding of right rule. As the Buddha is noted as saying in the *Sutta Nipata*'s "Chapter of the Eights," a primary cause of

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have been transmitted. My point here is simply to draw out some of the implications of Buddhism for contemporary societies.

<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, the Buddha often advised that his interlocutors remain rooted in their natal cultural soil and the traditions of their forebears as a means to guarding against delusion and established a basis for achieving relationally excellent well-being (*kusala* eventualities).

conflicts and enmity is the belief that “this is true, all else is false.” By taking a stand on some view, tradition, knowledge, virtue or ritual as the ultimate basis of what is proper and good, one invariably creates the conditions for disputation and conflict. Framing his remarks as a story about the past enables the Buddha to speak freely while at the same time avoiding an oppositional encounter with Kutadanta.

The king of old, like Kutadanta, does not fully understand how to perform the state sacrifice properly and invites the counsel of a religious virtuoso who first observes that the king’s domain is beset with thieves and that taxing the people to support the sacrifice with goods and labor would be ill advised. Instead, the king should first remove the root conditions for the rise of crime by offering seed stock to those who are farmers, tools to those who are craftworkers, capital to those involved in business, and proper wages to those in government service, each according to what is most apt for improved livelihood. By so doing, poverty is alleviated, crime is brought to an end, and society flourishes through heightening the capacity of each to contribute to the benefit of all. This accomplished, the sage then suggests a representative widening of the king’s circle of consultation, followed by instituting a series of practices that lead, step by step, from offering food and shelter to those in need to caring for teachers and healers, and finally to the “offering” of the king’s own ignorance. The consummate meaning of sacrifice is finally revealed as the sustained realisation of wisdom and compassion, and the skilled dissolution of the conditions for trouble and suffering for all.

Now, to be sure, this is a didactic tale that, while interpretable on a number of levels, is by no means a treatise on good governance and the proper interplay of politics and religion. Nevertheless, there are embedded in it several useful insights. First, the Buddha’s response to Kutadanta’s plan does not take the form of discrediting either Kutadanta as a political authority or his reasons for wanting to conduct the state sacrifice. That is, the Buddha refuses to assume the standpoint of one who is arguing on behalf of an alternative understanding of good governance. As the Buddha remarks in the Sutta Nipata, those who dispute others do so on the basis of thinking of themselves as “equal,” “inferior,” or “superior” to others – that is, as existing on some common

scale or spectrum of comparative evaluation. The wise refrain from such claims, eschewing any fixed preferences and any assertions about “this” being a truth and “that” being a falsehood. Thus avoiding conflict, they respond freely to the present situation as it has come to be (yathabhutam), in whatever ways needed to dissolve the conditions of suffering.

This joint emphasis on consultative governance and a non-confrontational and flexible manner of engagement suggest substantial alignment with the core principles of deliberative democracy—commitments to the respectful exchange of ideas (reciprocity); to transparency (publicity); to a concern for enabling the interests of all to be represented, including future generations (accountability); and to understanding moral and political principles as provisional or open to revision (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). But whereas the aim of a deliberative approach to democracy is to insure a forum for debates about fundamental moral and political differences that result in mutually binding decisions grounded in mutually justifiable reasons, the Buddha’s modality of engagement is not oriented to realising consensus or informed consent.

As presently conceived deliberative approaches to democratic processes first bring into focus how much we differ-from one another in basic ways, and then go on to identify concrete prospects for compromise—the finite game of making of mutual concessions and promises. The Buddhist revision might be to suggest seeing political deliberation itself, not as a procedure for arriving at basic agreements, but rather as means-to strengthening creative capacities needed for each to contribute with greater distinction and virtuosity to the meaning-of benefits enjoyed by all. The true aim of deliberation is not to reify and find a position midway among all the interests and beliefs that happen to be constellated within a given situation—discovering a common point of reconciliation—but rather to point out away from the entire constellation, realising the emptiness (śūnyatā) of politics through what the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna terms a “relinquishing of all views.” The true meaning of deliberation, in other words, is not to arrive at mutually binding decisions, but to realise a liberating reorientation of relational dynamics.

The point here is not to redefine deliberation, but rather to engage deliberation as a metaphor in order to counter the reification of differences and the inequity-generating play of the politics of power. This is precisely the approach taken by the Buddha in his refusal to take up a position opposed to that of Kutadanta and his sighting instead along the king's line of interest in an unexpected direction, culminating in the conversion of animal sacrifice into a metaphor for sacrificing the sense of self as an independently existing entity and the desires and attachments through which such an entity defines and identifies itself in contrast with others. This use of metaphor is not simply a convenient rhetorical device. Rather, it exemplifies the distinctive epistemic character of Buddhist countercultural critique: the initiation of movement perpendicular or oblique from any point along a spectrum of currently contending views.

Metaphors function as conceptual cantilevers embedded in the familiar but extended into the unknown. That is, metaphors do not primarily function to refine (or fill in gaps and provide detail within) existing conceptual structures and experiential engagement. They establish points of departure into new dimensions of consideration and relationality. If, as contemporary cognitive science suggests, the conceptual systems through which we communicatively understand and engage the world and one another are ultimately metaphorical in origin (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; 1999), shifting from literal to metaphorical engagements with, for example, political practices and institutions is a particularly effective way of eliciting meaningfully innovative departures from existing conceptual structures and the constraints they place on relational dynamics.

In the Buddha's conversation with Kutadanta, as elsewhere, the metaphorical turn signals an exceptional arc of change—an arc of movement in the direction of realising capacities for relating freely in any circumstances whatsoever and expressing therein superlative means-to and meanings-of liberating relationality. In early Buddhism, movement of this kind is called *kusala*—a term often translated as “good” or “wholesome,” but which actually means excelling rather than achieving a fixed quality—and is deemed crucial to the elimination of conflict. As made explicit in the *Sakkapañña Sutta* (*Digha Nikāya* 21),

conflicts are not eliminated by balancing competing interests or competitively reconciling opposing views, but by desisting from habitual and obsessive patterns of thought and action (*papañcā*), increasing kusala conduct and eventualities, and decreasing those that are akusala. That is, conflicts are ultimately resolved only through realising superlative or virtuosic relational dynamics, while at the same time disabling those that are not.

Importantly, the kusala/akusala distinction is not a contrast of “good” and “bad” patterns of values, intentions, actions, outcomes and opportunities. If the kusala is what is superlative and virtuosic, the akusala includes all that is ‘good,’ ‘acceptable’ and ‘ill.’ In short, kusala conduct cannot be prescribed, and in this sense exceeds the reach of any existing morality. From a Buddhist perspective, eliminating conflict ultimately means going beyond ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in the ongoing demonstration of appreciative and contributory virtuosity—the embodied activation of strengths for relating freely, even in the context of limited options for the exercise of choice. Ending conflict is not a function of finding a universally acceptable alternative to existing points of view, but of relinquishing all points of view in the expression of liberating potentials in any situation whatsoever. In Mahayana Buddhist contexts, this marks the joint realisation of improvisational genius (*upaya*) and superlative directional clarity or strengths of vows (*pranidhāna*)—not the power to choose among and determine situational outcomes, but rather the strength needed to continuously evoke enlightening opportunities therein.

The modern, secular state originated as a mechanism for unifying and balancing power relations among contending, especially religious and ethnic factions. “Church” and “state” are separated in the modern polity in order to insure the survival of both and the possibility at least of sustained pluralities of each. As evidenced in the early teachings of the Buddha, the separation of religion and politics opens the space needed for religion to critically respond to and perhaps reorient political conventions in a way that does not constitute a form of political contention or opposition. The Buddhist critique of politics is thus not a political critique that would invert or reconfigure power dynamics, or speak “truth to power.” It is instead an evaluative critique

that is nevertheless not moral—a critique that goes beyond the opposition of good and evil to elicit non-dual movement in the direction of the politically exceptional (kusala).

Such a critique, as I understand it, would point out from existing political forms toward a relational democracy in which the central values are not autonomy and equality, but rather diversity and equity, and in which freedom is not understood as a function of choice, but of the strengths needed to relate freely in pursuit of kusala eventualities. Such a democracy must “grow out of, rather than replace, the values of different cultures” (Tan and Whalen-Bridge, 2008: 3) while at the same time inducing and sustaining cultural differentiation: a democracy of continuously strengthening the resolve—the clarity and commitment—with which we differ not just from but for one another.

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