

2000

Book Review: *Ethics for the New Millennium*

Rory J. Conces

University of Nebraska at Omaha, rconces@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/philfacpub>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Conces, Rory J., "Book Review: *Ethics for the New Millennium*" (2000). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 5.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/philfacpub/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Book Review: Ethics for the New Millennium

Rory J. Conces

Department of Philosophy and Religion, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182-0265

Dalai Lama. *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999. 237pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

Ethics for the New Millennium is a book written by the Dalai Lama that came to my attention at the request of a few of my students who wanted to start a reading group. Although the book remained in my office, I took the Dalai Lama's ideas about ethics with me when I visited China, a country that bears Buddhism's mark. Whether you agree with his views or not, you cannot help but admire him; nor do you have to be a Buddhist to enjoy this readable and interesting book, a quick and easy read intended for the general reader.

Ethics for the New Millennium captures much of what Buddhism has to say about ethics in a way that meshes theory and practice. Although the Dalai Lama states in the Preface that this is neither a religious book nor a book about Buddhism, he uses some of the major tenets of Buddhism to create an appealing ethical framework "based on universal rather than religious principles." Many Americans have adopted the view that morality and religion are inseparable, and that spirituality has less to do with seeking happiness and more to do with being a "good" Christian or Jew, for example. What we find within the pages of *Ethics for the New Millennium* is something very different.

In Part I, "The Foundation of Ethics," the Dalai Lama acquaints us with a cornerstone of Buddhism: the belief that the constitution of human beings is such that we all strive to avoid suffering and to be happy. This is a natural disposition of all sentient beings. Much of the suffering and unhappiness we endure is self-inflicted. It is the self-origination of much of our suffering that gives us hope for a happier life because we can reorient our thought, emotions, and actions, and then may be able to prevent much future suffering and cope with what suffering we do experience. This is a very optimistic and hopeful view of the human condition. Contrary to the Western emphasis on increasing personal autonomy and self-reliance (so admired by the likes of Kant and Robert Paul Wolff), the Dalai Lama writes that an emphasis on independence minimizes the importance of "the other" in our striving for happiness as well as makes insignificant the happiness of "the other." Perhaps "The Lama Principle" would read as follows: An increase in personal alienation is the inevitable outcome of increasing autonomy. To make matters worse, the sort of society that Americans live in, one that stresses growth and economic development, reinforces both competitiveness and envy, qualities which only work against happiness. Improving our

material well-being does not lead to lasting happiness. What is needed is a balance between material well-being and spiritual harmony, a spiritual revolution, which is not the same as a religious revolution. Although religions are capable of promoting lasting happiness, they also divide people through their dogma and rituals. Spirituality is concerned with love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness, qualities that promote the happiness of all persons. It is this link to the happiness of human beings that makes spirituality an appropriate channel to morality. Religious faith demands spiritual practice. The latter is not dependent upon the former; spirituality is free from the problems associated with the dogma and rituals of religions. It is through spiritual practice, a transformation of ourselves into persons who are disposed to act for another's well-being and who seek a strong sense of serving the community, that the spiritual revolution comes alive, a revolution to transform a person's character.

The Dalai Lama writes that right actions increase not only our happiness, but also the happiness of others. At one point, he states that "an ethical act is one which does not harm others' experience or expectation of happiness." An act is not right simply because it produces happiness as a consequence. The Dalai Lama is less of a utilitarian than one might think. Other factors to be evaluated include the intent, the nature of the act itself, and the individual's *kunlong* (motivation or disposition). The perfection of a person's *skunlong* is key to this transformation; with an improved disposition comes a willingness to think, act, and feel in more compassionate ways, thereby perfecting the "humanness" of our being. "A spiritual revolution entails an ethical revolution."

The causal efficacy of this revolution does not merely pertain to persons as individuals, but rather is universal insofar as individual improvement is not an isolated event, but an event that can have far-reaching consequences in a world of interconnected relationships. This same idea is made plausible-sounding in the latter half of *Ethics for the New Millennium*:

I also take comfort in the fact that as the world economy evolves, the more explicitly interdependent it becomes. As a result, every nation is to a greater extent dependent on every other nation. The modern economy, like the environment, knows no boundaries. Even those countries openly hostile to one another must cooperate in their use of the world's resources. Often, for example, they will be dependent on the same rivers. And the more

interdependent our economic relationships, the more interdependent must our political relationships become.

Although dependent origination may be uncomfortable for Westerners, it is part of the fabric of Buddhist metaphysics and ethics. The importance of this causal nexus should not be taken lightly. We acknowledge that our perceptions and experiences arise from an indefinite series of interrelated causes and conditions; our world view undergoes radical change. The world becomes less like a machine and more like an organism that displays harmony and balance as long as the parts work together. From this, the Dalai Lama concludes that "our individual well-being is intimately connected both with that of all others and with the environment within which we live." Since things exist interdependently, it is easy to understand how ethics can be understood as "the indispensable interface between my desire to be happy and yours."

"Redefining the Goal" is a very important chapter in *Ethics for the New Millennium*; here the Dalai Lama examines the nature of happiness in great detail. Although he admits that the happiness associated with material things and sensory experiences is important for human life, he indicates that things and experiences are also sources of suffering and should not be the sole focus of our attention. We, as human beings, do have the capacity to experience happiness at a much deeper level. He quotes an ancient Indian writer: "Indulging our senses and drinking salt water are alike: the more we partake, the more our desire and thirst grow." Genuine happiness has inner peace as its principal characteristic, a peace that is rooted in a concern for others. Our approach, then, should be to avoid those factors that serve to prevent us from experiencing inner peace and to identify the causes of inner peace so that we can cultivate them in order to promote that peace. Our attitudes toward others, as well as our surroundings, are important determiners of inner peace. Moreover, actions that show a concern for others and that make positive contributions are also important in whether we achieve this peace. Empathy and altruism, even to the point of sacrificing our short-term benefits in order to promote the long-term happiness of others, are at the heart of genuine happiness. But if empathy is so important, how do we enhance our sensitivity toward others? One way is by thinking about feelings of empathy, which transform them into love and compassion. Such concern for others, the Dalai Lama contends, will bring peace to all.

In Part II, "Ethics and the Individual," the Dalai Lama continues this discussion of how we can develop the compassion (*nying je*) that is needed for happiness by reiterating the two-pronged approach of restraining inhibiting factors and cultivating growth factors. Restraining our response to negative thoughts and emotions and cultivating the habit of inner discipline is acquired by voluntary and deliberate effort. To engage in ethical conduct, a person must discipline his/her mind (*lo*). It is how we respond to events and experiences that determines the moral conduct of our acts.

Positive acts are those that retain the interests of other people. When unreasonable fears or affective emotions (e.g., hatred, anger, and lust) are the basis for our conduct, suffering cannot be avoided. Remembering the causal nexus that we find ourselves in, the Dalai Lama suggests that to counteract negative thoughts and emotions we should "avoid those situations and activities that normally give rise to them" and "avoid the actual conditions which lead to these strong thoughts and emotions."

More than inner discipline or restraint is needed for inner peace. One must transform his/her dispositions, to cultivate positive or spiritual qualities like compassion and patience (*sö pa*) and become virtuous. *Sö pa* is extremely important because it denotes not only forbearance and fortitude, but also composure in the face of adversity. This is what makes it such a difficult quality to possess. It denotes a "sense of being unperturbed" in the face of adversity. At the heart of *sö pa* is the realization of the causal interrelatedness of events and experiences. It is thought that recognizing this will lead to *sö pa* counteracting difficult times. Because patience is a virtue, we should familiarize ourselves with it. One important way is "to think of adversity not so much as a threat to our peace of mind but rather as the very means by which patience is attained. From this perspective we see that those who would harm us are, in a sense, teachers of patience."

This transformation of the heart and mind is an ongoing process, one that requires acting virtuously throughout our daily lives. A Tibetan saying captures how difficult a task this really is: "The practice of virtue is as hard as driving a donkey uphill, whereas engaging in destructive activities is as easy as rolling boulders downhill." For Americans to engage in the constant practice of generosity and humility is a difficult proposition at best, but it is part of what it means to be a virtuous person who conducts himself/herself in an ethical manner. The outcome that is sought from a familiarity with and a practice of virtue is an ethic of virtue that is spontaneous. The cultivation of compassion transcends empathy and grows into an intimacy with others and a responsibility to them. At this point the reader might be reminded of Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher who railed against the once-popular "lifeboat ethics," when the Dalai Lama contends that there are no grounds for discriminating in favor of some groups. One should not focus solely on members of one's immediate family, but should extend that circle of responsibility to include strangers. One powerful reason for this is because if love and patience are what happiness is all about, and if compassion is the source of these, then the more compassionate we become, the more we produce our own happiness. There is also a dim reminder of another philosopher, the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, which emerges in the Dalai Lama's discussion of *karma* or "action," denoting an active force that can influence future events in terms of what we think, say, and do. Since happiness is what all sentient beings want and is also the flip-side of suffering, there is much that we can do to change our experience of suffering. Although suffering may

be impossible to eliminate, what we can do is to choose how we respond to the occurrence of suffering. This is similar to Sartre's discussion of the inescapable features of our existence or facticity.

In Part III, "Ethics and Society," the Dalai Lama begins by addressing the cultivation of universal responsibility (*chi sem*) to the wider community, a responsibility that needs to be realized because of the interconnectedness of peoples around the world. Although Singer argues that members of an affluent society (perhaps only affluent members) have a moral obligation to provide assistance to starving people in Third World countries to the point of marginal utility, the Dalai Lama does not suggest that individuals (affluent or otherwise) have a "direct responsibility" for the existence of events like wars and famines in other parts of the world. Wars and famines are beyond the scope of individuals. Rather than claiming an admission of guilt by reference to universal responsibility, he is calling for something more profound:

a reorientation of our heart and mind away from self and toward others. To develop a sense of universal responsibility...is to develop an attitude of mind whereby, when we see an opportunity to benefit others, we will take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests.

The Dalai Lama does not argue for extreme sacrifice on our part, but simply "doing what we can."

This attitude is important because it helps us to become sensitized to others and our membership in the human family. Although differences in religion, ideology, nationality, work to shatter this unity, we must remember that we are part of a greater whole, of humanity and be diligent about cultivating contentment. Lacking contentment leads to acquisitiveness and greed which lead to human suffering. The Dalai Lama believes that the "culture of perpetual economic growth" needs to be questioned and that with universal responsibility comes a commitment to honesty and justice. The former results in a reduction of misunderstanding and doubt in the world, which helps to create the conditions for a happier world. The latter entails a requirement that we remain vigilant about recognizing injustices in the world, taking risks, speaking out, and rectifying these injustices. This sense of compassion, commitment, and responsibility

extends to the political arena. The Dalai Lama is so insistent upon this "that unless this wider sense of compassion...inspires our politics, our policies are likely to harm instead of serve humanity as a whole." Not only must we work on the individual level, but we must also work on the societal level in a number of areas including education. For the Dalai Lama, the mind is not only the source of our problems, it is also the solution. This is why he believes that education is much more than simply imparting knowledge and skills to people:

It is also about opening the child's eyes that their actions have a universal dimension. And we must find a way to build on their natural feelings of empathy so that they come to have a sense of responsibility toward others. For it is this which stirs us into action. Indeed, if we had to choose between learning and virtue, the latter is definitely more valuable. The good heart which is the fruit of virtue is by itself a great benefit to humanity. Mere knowledge is not.

Ethics for the New Millennium is certainly one of the most interesting and thought-provoking books that deals with an ethics that has its roots in Buddhism. Although parts of each chapter are oversimplified, this book will be a welcome addition to the libraries of those interested in or willing to undergo this transformation but who have heretofore been intimidated by the religious jargon of Buddhism. The Dalai Lama's insights are deep and thought-provoking, but there is a caveat: an appealing ethic is much more difficult to live than to understand. The reader should not expect to experience the transformation overnight. It took Buddha six years to attain enlightenment. We live in a world of so much more distraction and obstacles that such a transformation can only be an ongoing process of incremental advances. Living this ethic is like learning to meditate—it takes tremendous patience and discipline to achieve significant results. Our optimism may even wain in the face of the brutalities like those suffered by Bosnians and Hutus in recent years. It is difficult to imagine how such an ethic would be looked upon by victims of atrocities. Yet I encourage readers to apply as much of the ethic as their circumstances will permit.