

Person as Classic: Questions, Limits, and Religious Motivations

Ethics covers those areas of life where our basic human questions meet our limits. Ethics is commonly understood as a form of critical discourse concerned with morality (that is, with the mores – the customs, values, laws, and other social standards – of various human communities).¹ Moralities emerge from many places: families, cultural groups, religious communities, academic debates, and so on. Critical discourse can also come from many of the same places. In each case, we see individuals and communities asking questions such as: How should I live? How are we to live together? How are we to live with people who do not share our values and standards? When we offer answers to these questions, or offer further questions to challenge the prevailing answers, we are involved (even if sometimes implicitly) in the work of ethics.

In a very basic sense, we ask and answer these questions in a world characterized by limits. Clearly, we live in a world of physical limits, marked above all by our bodies and the geographical range of our personal interactions and relationships. We also live in a world of social limits. Our communities impose limits, as we are born into families, structures of authority, and cultures we do not choose. Many people are also raised in religious traditions, the influence of which often develops so gradually that we often do not realize the extent of their formative power on us. Religious communities too exist within historical and cultural limits, even as they offer forms of discourse and model forms of life that challenge their members, to a certain degree, to pass beyond those same limits.

Yet we also live in a world of moral limits expressed in terms of a basic human problem: we do not seem to be able to live in accordance with our own best moral counsel, standards which may or may not be those advocated by the communities of which we are a part. We come to realize these moral limits when, for example, we start to examine our own self-destructive and other-destroying habits in new ways, or by reflecting on our culturally influenced patterns of moral rationalization, or our own blindness to the needs of those who are outside the daily course of our personal relationships and social obligations.

To admit that we live in a world characterized by the need to return constantly to our own most profound questions, questions that arise within a world of limits, does not mean living in a constant state of doubt and confusion. Nor does it mean that we are caught in a vicious relativism. Rather, it means that we seek to deepen our understanding by posing questions to ourselves and others about our personal histories and the histories of our communities. How communities carry on these conversations (what is sometimes referred to as the “logic” or “implicitly normative” dimension of “discursive practices”), while an important and necessary dimension in understanding what it means to pose questions about moral matters across different culturally specific moral “vocabularies,” does not necessarily capture the depth, motivations, or complexity of asking such questions.²

Indeed, when we consider these same questions and limits from the perspectives of religious communities, we have moved into somewhat different terrain. Certainly discourse about religious ethics is characterized not only by different sources for moral reflection, culturally specific concepts, and endemic patterns for thinking, but also by a distinctively complex way of construing basic human problems. Religious communities carry on their own internal debates, not only about the meaning of basic human problems but also about which sources and modes of discourse are even appropriate to describe the problems at hand. While these debates can certainly devolve into violent sectarian conflicts, they can also over time help communities gain perspective on their own histories, their beliefs, and their moral standards. Put differently, behind each religious debate about moral norms is an equally difficult debate about mediating the community’s past and present, its texts and practices, and its own way of balancing what is possible for human life and the vision of moral excellence for which the community strives.

There are many approaches to religious ethics, the variety of which reflects a legitimate array of prudent scholarly judgments (and disagreements) about what methods are most appropriate for the topics and traditions under consideration. This book develops one possible approach, a comparative theological ethics, grounded in the discourse, motivations, and methods of one religious tradition (Roman Catholic Christianity), in dialogue with the discourse, motivations, and methods of another religious tradition (Theravāda Buddhism). The comparison focuses on the phenomenon of persons in religious communities struggling with the meaning and implications of their own communities’ claims: about what ought to be regarded as the tradition’s central ideas, material and discursive practices, and the complex role of moral exemplars in traditions. For although questions about the nature of religious traditions, identities, and authorities are distinctly modern preoccupations, the negotiation of what is true and compelling within traditions, amidst the internal plurality of their activities, is a deep and longstanding religious puzzle.

In what follows, I argue for a strategy of engaging in inter-religious conversations about moral matters based in a renewed notion of human persons as classics calling for moral interpretation. The notions (if not the precise terms) “person” and “personhood” have a long history in Greek and Roman philosophy, as well as South and Southeast Asian philosophy, in Christian theological debates, as well as in contemporary sociological, anthropological, and legal discourse. While I will refer to these debates occasionally, my contribution to the discussion about the place of persons in

ethics will be confined to a particular topic: namely how persons can be understood as places for the interpretation and integration of the sometimes overlapping, sometimes mutually critical, questions and practices in the moral life. I use the term person to denote a distinctive kind of space where moral thinking occurs, where questions are posed and meaning is constructed and discerned, as individual human beings converse about their own ideals and experiences of moral frailty and struggle.

Such conversations might be realized conversations, as when two persons from different religious communities speak together, or hypothetical conversations, as when scholars select two or more thinkers for sustained examination around a particular issue. While this book engages in the latter kind of conversation by selecting classic figures from Catholic Christianity and Theravāda Buddhism (the thirteenth-century Franciscan priest Bonaventure, and the fifth-century Theravāda monk Buddhaghosa), it does so with an eye toward understanding the dynamics of the religious lives of believers that are frequently both more open-ended, and more complex and self-critical, than surface judgments about the ideological uniformity of religious traditions sometimes assume.³

Two assumptions guide my approach to this study. First, I assume that people who spend their lives associated, to varying degrees, with religious traditions try to live ever more closely by what they judge to be the best moral insights their traditions provide, even if they might be involved in a lifelong process of examining the truth claims of the tradition to which they have committed themselves. There may sometimes be disagreement about what is the preeminent value for an individual or community to realize at any particular time, or a particular course of action that ought or ought not to be taken, given current circumstances. There may also be long periods of time in which people live comfortably and without much sustained critical thought about the truth of their religious traditions. However, once such judgments have been formed, we are likely to find a strong level of agreement among people, religious and secular alike, that people ought to follow their own best judgments about what course of action will result in realizing those values that give life purpose and coherence. In other words, as philosophers from ancient to modern times have questioned, can we really imagine that a person can go through life with the singular ambition of becoming morally worse? Such attempts certainly take different forms in present-day religious communities than in pre-modern traditions, but some desire for reflectiveness and moral consistency are common features of any attempt to live a moral life.

The second assumption is that we have not yet begun to think deeply enough about the capacity possessed by what has sometimes been called the religious “alien” or religious “other” to inspire reflectiveness and moral consistency within a given religious community or discourse. Although this hypothesis cannot, strictly speaking, be tested in this study, I offer this study in part to suggest how such inter-religious engagement, even at the level of reading classic authors of another tradition, might shed light on a community’s own struggle with moral consistency and deeper levels of self-awareness and reflectiveness. Efforts at inter-religious conversation about moral matters often proceed from the assumption that once one has decided what one ought to do in dialogue with other people who are concerned about the same or similar moral problems, the motivation or inspiration to live according to that judgment will come *exclusively* from one’s own religious or cultural tradition. In other words, the

assumption is that the real problem in inter-religious conversation about moral matters is to agree on what meaning a particular religious discourse assigns to key moral terms and then to understand how people in that tradition employ these terms in their moral reasoning.⁴

On the contrary, as I argue in this chapter and throughout the remainder of this book, we might helpfully expand our thinking about our own traditions and the nature and purpose of comparative engagements if we hold as a preliminary hypothesis nearly the opposite assumption from the one most frequently made in cross-cultural discussions about ethics. Rather than focusing only on how moral ideas are embedded in particular cultural-linguistic or religious frameworks,⁵ or on the patterns of moral reasoning that provide particular justifications for moral actions commended or condemned in varied religious discourse,⁶ we ought first to look at what is involved in trying to interpret individuals as moral works-in-progress, as broken, incomplete, morally blind persons trying to understand and live with other broken, incomplete, morally blind persons. Such efforts will not sidestep the important questions of differing world views or justifications of truth claims, but they will rather embed these questions within the broader trajectory of moral agents struggling to know themselves, what they care about, and what they ought to do.

Put most sharply, if the struggle to understand oneself and one's moral existence (however this is expressed) is taken to be reducible in the final analysis to some other single mode of discourse, then the notion of struggle itself vanishes and the moral life will soon and easily be ceded to those who prize comfort and certainty above all else. Moreover, without some notion of intellectual and moral struggle at play in the work of interpreting other religious traditions, it becomes difficult to envision what if any rationale there could be for undertaking deliberate comparative engagements in the first place. For consciously theological comparative engagements, there must be some way of envisioning the unity between *how* we approach traditions other than our own and *why* we approach them.

While each religious interpreter of moral discourse draws her or his primary interpretive framework from one particular tradition, one must rely on analogues of moral and intellectual struggle in other traditions, precisely to keep particular elements of one's own tradition intellectually vibrant and morally compelling in one's own mind. What Jacques Maritain called "practical atheism," if not taken dismissively but as an honest expression of intellectual and moral struggle, may provide an important point of contact among people of different religious views and those who hold no such views.⁷ It is for this reason that I want to suggest that final motivations for acting are not bound exclusively to the framework of one's own religious tradition, precisely because one's own religious tradition can become too comfortable, too familiar – at best, a dull goad requiring the moral whetstone of comparison. To understand one's self and one's tradition deeply and clearly, one needs comparative engagement.

Drawing on these assumptions, and illustrated though a comparison of two classic religious thinkers, Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, this book proposes that persons can be understood as classics in the sense of being *temporary coordinations or carriers of tradition-rooted questions and partially exemplified answers, which call for interpretation and critique precisely insofar as their expressions of epistemological humility relate to their moral limitedness*. In other words, every person exists in the world as

an unfinished project, as an attempt to come to terms with their own community's most profound questions by testing in their lives the community's answers to these questions.

To set the stage for the comparison I shall undertake, this chapter has two principal aims. First, I introduce the notion of person as classic by examining the idea of the religious classic as it appears in the work of the Catholic theologian David Tracy, attending also to the theories of religion and interpretation from which this idea draws inspiration. Second, I introduce the two figures – Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa – whose writings will be the primary subject matter of this comparison, noting how each holds the place of a classic figure in the respective histories of each tradition's moral thought. Each thinker works with the classic ideas and practices of their respective communities, sometimes in innovative and integrative ways, in ways that highlight the struggle of persons to know the nature of the moral world they confront and the practices that facilitate this knowledge. Moreover, each figure helps us to advance our own thinking about what might be termed a "classic human question," namely the problem of moral struggle.

Persons, Limits, and Religious Classics

Classics are ambivalent cultural phenomena because they traverse the best and worst of the past, calling our attention to the best and worst of our present. It is easy to dismiss the importance of classics because they would seem to bind us too strongly to the past, to an over-determined view of history that constrains our future choices, as they link us in various ways to what has gone before us. Yet it is precisely this linking to the past that signals their initial appeal. Classic books, paintings, films, music, automobiles all roughly fit this understanding of classic. Debates surrounding the place of literary classics in primary, secondary, and college education persist to this day, as does the question of what qualifies as a classic and whether the criteria used to establish certain artifacts of human creativity as classics are inevitably bound to particular expressions of cultural power wielded by the social groups that produced them.⁸ This debate about what constitutes the proper "canon" for liberal education has become even more complicated as teachers, students, and administrators think through what, if any, place classic texts (especially religious texts) ought to have in a liberal arts curriculum.

Related to these debates are two important questions that inspire the use of the term "classic" as it is employed here. First, are there general features of classics that help us to understand how particular cultures single out and elevate for sustained critical attention certain transformative elements of that culture, whether literary, musical, or visual? Second, what moral functions do classics serve and is it proper to draw an analogy between how people interpret classics and how people interpret themselves (or, put differently, how people are themselves classics)? To answer these questions, I want to examine several aspects of the notion of the classic developed by David Tracy and then extend Tracy's idea (in a suggestion he makes only briefly and does not develop) that it might be possible to think about persons as classics worthy of sustained interpretation.

Classics: questions and limits in thought and action

At the beginning of his discussion of the “nonclassicist notion of the classic”⁹ in his 1981 book, *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy provides the following summary statement on the importance of examining the theory and practice of interpretation for contemporary Christian theology, as well as for the religious thought of other communities: “The heart of any hermeneutical position,” he says, “is the recognition that all interpretation is a mediation of past and present, a translation carried on within the effective history of a tradition to retrieve its sometimes strange, sometimes familiar meanings.”¹⁰ The goal of such interpretation is a particular kind of understanding. The understanding that arises in a conversation that addresses a particular question or area of common concern (what Tracy calls the “subject matter”) is something that happens as the result of the event of conversation rather than something one wills as the outcome of a conversation or a single pre-determined result that one wants to achieve. What is the nature of this happening? As Tracy puts it, “every event of understanding, in order to produce a new interpretation, mediates between our past experience and the understanding embodied in our linguistic tradition and the present event of understanding occasioned by a fidelity to the logic of the question in the back-and-forth movement of the conversation.”¹¹

While the tradition of theological and philosophical hermeneutics on which Tracy draws is too long to summarize here, there are certain elements of this line of thinking that ground Tracy’s views on conversation, interpretation, and understanding which are necessary in order to make sense of his notion of the classic, as well as the moral implications I draw from it. For Tracy, a close connection exists between the phenomenon of reading a text and the phenomenon of entering into a conversation with another person. Drawing on the account of language and discourse in the generation of meaning in Paul Ricoeur’s *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Tracy reviews three options available to readers approaching a text in the moment when we judge the text to be relevant to our questions and concerns, that is to say as a text that might be meaningful to us: in terms of the “author’s original intention,” in terms of the “original discourse situation,” and in terms of the “first historical addressee of the text.”¹²

All three of these interpretive options presuppose, as Tracy states following Ricoeur, “the process of linguistic ‘distanciation’” whereby “a written text, precisely as written, is distanced both from the original intention of the author and from the original reception by its first addressees.”¹³ For Ricoeur, the process of distanciation was not only an interpretive problem for readers but more profoundly a problem of the struggle to understand oneself. Distanciation is “a dialectical trait, the principle of a struggle between the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which all understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding... [it is] the dynamic counterpart of our need, our interest, and our effort to overcome cultural estrangement.”¹⁴ Recognizing distanciation invites us to consider how we prioritize and balance what we can know of the author’s horizon with what we can know of our own.¹⁵

For Tracy, to answer the question of horizons requires that we examine a fourth and more dynamic option for interpretation. “[T]he contemporary interpreter,” he says,

must distinguish clearly between the “sense” and the “referents” of the text and hence between the methods needed to explicate each. The “sense” of the text means the internal structure and meaning of the text as that structure can be determined through the ordinary methods of semantic and literary-critical inquiries. The “referents” of the text do not pertain to the meaning “behind” the text (e.g. the author’s *real* intention or socio-cultural situation of the text). Rather, to shift metaphors, “referent” basically manifests the meaning “in front of the text,” i.e., that way of perceiving reality, that mode of being-in-the-world which the text opens up for the intelligent reader. Although this understanding of “referent” is not divorced from either prior historical or semantic investigations, still “referent” here is clearly distinct from those prior factors. Further, the referents of the text, on this understanding, are *the* factors demanding a properly hermeneutical as distinct from either an historical or a semantic exercise.¹⁶

So for Tracy, whenever one is interpreting a text, especially one that has demonstrated a long history of transformative influence on a community, one needs to be aware of both what the text is suggesting might be a different vision of the world or a new way of living (whether or not the author is explicit about such moral alternatives) and also how and why one embraces (or rejects) the challenge the text puts forward. In other words, reading a text requires us to examine both how the writer views the world and what questions and concerns she or he brings before us and also how we view the world, an exercise that is never complete, even if we remain mostly content with our own prior judgments about how properly to interpret our world, our current situation, and our responsibilities therein.

Tracy contends that there exists a certain kind of text, by merit of its perennial appeal within a culture *as well as* its appeal outside its culture of origin, that demands attention to the questions carried forward through its written form. By the term “classic,” Tracy means primarily a creative work of literature or visual art that speaks to succeeding generations of people within a culture, yet also has the potential (once one expends the requisite effort to begin collecting the basic linguistic skills and patterns of thinking at work in a new cultural-linguistic framework) to communicate with people outside of the culture and historical time in which it was created.

When a text is a classic, I am also recognizing that its “excess of meaning” both demands constant interpretation and bears a certain kind of timelessness – namely, the timeliness of a classic expression, radically rooted in its own historical time and calling to my own historicity. That is, the classical text is not in some timeless moment which needs mere repetition. Rather, its kind of timelessness as permanent timeliness is the only one proper to any expression of the finite, temporal, historical beings we are. The classic text’s real disclosure is its claim to attention on the ground that an event of understanding proper to finite human beings has here found expression.¹⁷

A classic achieves its status as such not merely because it has been around for a long time, or because one or another person or group of people revere it as culturally significant. Rather, for Tracy, a classic holds such status because of its unique way of

engaging the questions of human life that arise when people contemplate their own limitedness in the limits of their historical and cultural situations.

Try as we might, we are not able to escape our own personal histories, the prejudgments embedded in our own cultures' institutions and priorities, or the limits imposed on us by our gradually developing and decaying bodies and minds. For Tracy, the classic is important because it meets us where we live – in our own moral and cultural limits, in our best (sometimes heroic) attempts to live well and also in our most scandalous instances of human viciousness. The reason the classic has what Tracy describes as a “permanent timeliness” is that its questions are anchored in, rather than freed from, its own confines. It speaks from a position of limitedness. The classic is bound by the limits of being created in a specific historical, cultural, and linguistic situation and communicates something about our own limits to knowledge and to our own moral perfectibility. In this way, the classic is a form of discourse that nonetheless resists interpretive reduction of its claim to truth to a particular justified claim about the way the world is or how we should act in particular situations, even if the classic carries on questions that probe the nature of truth and morality.

One important trait of classics that Tracy emphasizes is that they intend a wide public reception, that their meanings arise in public questioning, discussion, and disputation. In other words, classics are responses to the basic human questions, “What is true?” and “How shall I live my life?” As Tracy says, “We all find ourselves compelled both to recognize and on occasion to articulate our reasons for the recognition that certain expressions of the human spirit so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status. Thus do we name these expressions, and these alone, ‘classics.’”¹⁸ One reason why, for Tracy, classics call for public interpretation is that they express a common human struggle to understand the meaning of our existence, especially at those times when we are led to reflect on the particularity or uniqueness of our experience.

Tracy contends that any longstanding tradition of thought, especially a religious tradition, examines these moments of personal alienation, of eventual self-discovery and insight, and that it is precisely the classics of that tradition that link a person's sense of irreducible uniqueness to questions and answers that *are* shared by others struggling to find their place in that tradition. “Any person's intensification of particularity via a struggle with the fundamental questions of existence in a particular tradition, if that struggle is somehow united to the logos of appropriate expression, will yield a form of authentically sharable, public discourse.”¹⁹ To put the issue differently, each tradition of thought exhibits a pattern of reasoning about what Tracy calls the “fundamental questions of existence.” By engaging with the classics of a particular tradition, one makes a value judgment that mediates between each person's unique experience of confronting the world in her or his individuality – a perspective not identical in all respects with any other individual perspective – while at the same time acknowledging that others, in the tradition that person knows best and in other traditions not as well known, have asked themselves the same or similar questions. This is what Tracy means by the “intensification of particularity,” wherein one is brought further into oneself as one confronts the realization that one is both unquestionably unique and nonetheless continuous with the rest of the human community. The status of the classic depends on those all too rare instances of “appropriate expression”

(Tracy uses “logos” although his list of candidates for classic status seems to imply any creation crafted with the precision of deliberate word selection) where we glimpse both our individuality and our continuity through the momentary phrase, plot, or picture presented to us.

Religious ethics: interpreting limited persons

Tracy’s fondness for the model of the classic prompts another important question. Does a classic have some special status relative to questions human beings have understood as basically religious or moral questions? To approach this question productively, it is important to keep in mind how contested the term “religion” is both in scholarly discourse and popular culture. Neither Tracy, nor his ideas about the classic presented later in this book, assume that it is possible to give an exhaustive definition of religion. However, I follow Tracy in suggesting that one important (although not the only) quality of distinctly religious discourse, or of what Tracy calls the “religious dimension” of common human experience and language, is that it probes the *limits* of human thought and of possible human actions.

[T]he concept “limit” can be used as a key (but not exhaustive) category for describing certain signal characteristics peculiar to any language or experience with a properly religious dimension. Whether that dimension be explicit or implicit is not, in fact, the central issue ... all significant explicitly religious language and experience (the “religions”) and all significant implicitly religious characteristics of our common experience (the “religious dimension”) will bear at least the “family resemblance” of articulating or implying a limit-experience, a limit-language, or a limit-dimension.²⁰

According to Tracy, limit-language comes in two basic kinds: “limit-to” and “limit-of.”²¹ Some limit-language is used to communicate the limits to our own actions, given that we are free to act (in the common sense of this phrase) only within the confines of social groups, their patterns of obligation and institutions, and within our own range of naturally occurring physical and intellectual capacities. As Tracy points out, we experience bodily finitude (we cannot do all the things we would like to do, even if these goods pass uncontested in our communities, if for no other reason than that we cannot be in two places at once), contingency (we cannot predict or prepare for all the things that will happen to us and so we cannot plot with absolute certainty the course of our social interactions), and “radical transience” (we are limited by our natural life spans and the death and decay that pervade even the most laudable public and private efforts to lead a morally exemplary life).²² These conditions are “limits-to” our action in the sense that they impose boundaries, physical or near-physical barriers, that constrain our actual efforts or what we envision to be possible for our future.

However, for Tracy, the experience of these limits demands a second level of limit discourse, namely “limit-of.” On this reading, when we confront the experience of having such limits, it prompts us to ask the conditions or grounding or horizon for experiencing these conditions of life *as limits* and not just as uninterpretable givens. This forces, Tracy thinks, a basic evaluative judgment about the “limit-to” condition, a judgment that we do not find easy to express in language, which nonetheless calls us

to provide some opinion on the ultimate worth or worthlessness of our predicament and on what could make such a predicament possible.

What is important for this study, and what Tracy leaves tantalizingly unresolved, is how the experience of human limitedness that he identifies (both in the processes of writing and reading, as well as in experiencing the limits of life in community) unites what he calls the “religious dimension” of human experience and its linguistic attempts to render such experience meaningful with the aspirations and failures attendant upon all such moral striving. And it is here, I believe, that we begin to discern the moral dimension of Tracy’s understanding of the classic. We also can begin to see how we might understand persons as classics for the purposes of inter-religious conversation about moral matters.

Tracy’s discussion of ethics is actually quite limited and centers on the problem of how to differentiate characteristically religious language from characteristically moral language. He is aware of the charge leveled frequently against “classical liberal and modernist theologians” that they have reduced religion to morality, a transgression committed even by some members of his own Christian community for whom Jesus has become no more than a moral exemplar, a sage guide to the practical problems of this world. This same view of religion, he thinks, permeates secular attempts to discern a useful function for religion, such that he notes, “For the conventional wisdom in the secularist culture at large, it seems fair to observe, religion is widely considered a reasonably useful if somewhat primitive way of being moral.”²³ In order to sort out in his own mind the difference between the moral and the religious, Tracy examines two aspects of how the moral is connected to the religious, both centering on the nature of religious language: the meta-ethical (what he calls “limit-questions in morality”) and the existential (what he calls “limit-situations in the world of the everyday”).

For Tracy, the moral domain of life is, as indicated earlier, the realm of limits to action. In other words, the moral is that area of life where we experience being obliged to do this or that; we experience the sense of what we *ought* to do, as a limit to the fully autonomous exercise of freedom. This moral domain is linked to the religious domain because both pertain to human limits, in the sense that for the former, we are limited by the constraints of social life as well as our own inability through body, intellect, or some other set of factors to carry through our highest ideals, while for the latter, we are limited by our ability to cognize and express our experiences of limits to thought and action.²⁴

It is unfortunate that Tracy appears to confine his explicit discussion of the moral to what has come to be termed the meta-ethical aspect of moral thinking, that is the grounds we have for arguing about the specific goods we ought to pursue or the specific obligations we must discharge (an indication, perhaps, that Tracy’s description of the moral domain has strong Kantian roots). On this account, the “limit-questions of morality” are those that cannot be answered on strictly moral grounds but demand a reason extrinsic to properly moral considerations (he gives the example of promise-keeping, noting that to ask the question of why one should keep one’s promise, one cannot answer it convincingly based on criteria internal to the activity), namely on religious grounds. A religious answer to the limit-question of morality is required, Tracy thinks, just as a religious dimension to human experience and language is required at the edge of everyday life, that is at those moments when

momentous events such as love and death, ecstasy and alienation open us up to questioning the ultimate grounding, if any, that we feel is necessary to make sense of our lives.

Yet I think there is more to Tracy's discussion of limits and its relation to his discussion of classics than Tracy himself acknowledges. What I want to suggest in the next section is that there is an element of moral thinking, namely the human confrontation with the phenomenon of moral struggle (which accounts for but is not limited to a Kantian account of autonomy), both in failure and in triumph, that is the proper counterpart to what Tracy describes as the religious dimension to human experience and language. The real limit-question of morality, I suggest, is not the meta-ethical (the defensibility of moral claims) that Tracy supposes, but rather the motivational (the "livability" of moral claims) or the realm of moral psychology.

The model of person as classic

This brings us to a final question about classics that also returns us to the central problem of this chapter: *Can persons rightly be understood as classics and, if so, how?* My suggestion is that persons have the capacity to serve as moral classics for each other throughout their intellectual and moral struggles. They do this not only by serving as moral exemplars, that is as paragons of virtue or models for prudential decision-making, but also and more importantly as instantiations of moral struggle that highlight the particular interactions between ideas and practices. This is the correlate in the area of the moral life to what Tracy suggested about the relation between the writer of a text and its interpreter. It is only through the experience of reading in our own situation that we can discern the place where the questions of author meet the questions of our time. Yet it is of primary importance that the author of a text passes on the questions as well as the tentative formulations of the answers. So too we might say of the moral life that it is important that moral struggle as question is passed along with the answer provided by the moral life of the person. For the answer, of the text and of a life, highlights only one aspect or temporary illustration of a life. The person serves as the lived correlate to the literary classic when she or he passes on in their particular form of life the question that prompts their lived response.

As I suggested above, what has sometimes hampered contemporary appreciation of classics for moral instruction is nearly the same problem that prevents us from realizing the ways that real struggling, striving, imperfectly educated, imperfectly moral, unevenly religious people can serve as our classics in our own time. It is all too easy to assume that it is the ideas of the good, or the models of right behavior, that are the only useful ones. Yet Tracy's notion of the classic as opening up an interpretive space that discloses for the reader new possibilities for her or his life in community must assume that persons find, in their activities of reading and interpreting, a resonant dynamic, a trace of what they are in the transformative processes of what they undergo. Put differently, just as the processes of thinking, reading, experiencing, and questioning are essentially incomplete at any moment in a person's life, so too is the extent to which any one person exhibits her or his character in any one decision.

Tracy hints that the option I have just suggested might be a legitimate development of his understanding of classics, especially religious classics, although he seems to have in mind most especially persons who live ideals or lofty exemplifications of virtue.

[W]hat we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols, and persons “classics” is that here we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth... here we find something valuable, something “important”; some disclosure of reality in a moment that must be called one of “recognition” which surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us; an experience that upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible; indeed a realized experience of that which is essential, that which endures.²⁵

In other words, classics have three characteristics: (1) they are somehow disclosive of truth (whether personal, social, or ultimate, but in all cases something that is beyond what is immediately observable); (2) they focus our attention on interpreting something that is important or meaningful to us even if we are often too distracted to notice it; and (3) they are emotionally or morally unsettling, calling us to a deeper examination of what we are and how we live. To reorder these elements slightly, the classic presents itself to the interpreter in the form of certain basic *questions* (the classic’s claim to our attention, which shocks us out of our habits and mental complacencies); the classic challenges us with the truthfulness of its *ideas* (even if the ideas proposed require substantial effort on our part to interpret in light of our own cultural context, and even if those ideas are imperfectly exemplified by those who first claimed our attention); and the classic suggests that even its own claims to truth are imperfectly understood if they remain at the level of thought without an equally important dimension of *practice* (an emphasis, we shall see, that is central to both the Buddhist and Christian thinkers that will be examined).

I want to end this section of the chapter by suggesting that these three dimensions of the classic – *question*, *idea*, and *practice* – if interpreted correctly, provide substantial evidence for linking the idea of the classic text with the notion of person as classic. Now certainly, the language of “person” or “personhood” cuts across disciplines of thought without losing any of its ability to inspire or provoke. In contemporary philosophy, the category of person has been linked to questions about the status of individual bodily entities and their capacities for socialization, self-reflection, and valuation, with no universal assent to the proposition that “person” (or any possible linguistic near-equivalent) is a universal and necessary category of human thought.²⁶ In Christian theology, the effects of Boethius’ definition of the person as “an individual substance of a rational nature” became a touchstone for medieval moral theology, even as the language of “person” also figured prominently in the meaning of earlier dogmatic formulations of Trinitarian doctrine in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. In Buddhist philosophy, the relationship of the conventional sense of individual personhood persisted in the face of denials about any ultimate notion of a self apart from the coordination of certain causal factors arising and passing away. (I shall return to Christian and Buddhist ideas of individual persons in much greater detail in later chapters.) Indeed, the possibility that “person” might serve as a “bridge concept” for comparative religious ethics has already been initiated.²⁷

While cognizant of these debates, I suggest that it is still helpful to approach individual persons in light of the basic *questions* that call them to attention, the basic *ideas* that help them to make sense of the world and to provide them with a vision of the good life, and the basic *practices* through which those ideas come to realization, even as the practices themselves communicate the limits to the expression of those ideas.²⁸ Another way to express this same set of categories is in the language of tradition. To think of persons as classics is to ask the question of how individual people struggle to appropriate the moral teachings of their traditions, especially when they come to realize their tradition's own historical contingency as well as its noble but frequently imperfect attempts to advance our life together.

In the next section of this chapter, I offer a brief sketch of two classic religious figures, Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, as thinkers who confront basic human problems, drawing on their own traditions' moral ideas and practices to make sense of the classic question of moral struggle. As we shall see, these two figures ponder this classic question insofar as they uphold their respective traditions' most puzzling ideas – for Bonaventure, the doctrine of the Trinity, and for Buddhaghosa, the mode of analysis known as Abhidhamma – to practical testing and refinement. It is proper to place them alongside others who view moral agents as participating in the lifelong process of discerning the truth of their own traditions precisely because these two central ideas do not appear to have immediate moral applicability, even if in the end these same ideas turn out to be the heart of each thinker's moral reflection. It will remain the work of the rest of the book to illustrate how they might serve as illustrators of classic religious ideas and practices of moral struggle for us.

Classic Persons: Ideas, Practices, and Questions

The reason for choosing these two individuals is really one of initial, apparent comparability in basic spheres of activity. Both thinkers took seriously the need to relate the more theoretical issues about the nature of knowledge and its relationship to action with practical concerns to locate the kinds of activity most conducive to moral transformation. In other words, both Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa were concerned with how basic moral ideas and practices interact in the life of practitioners in their communities. Moreover, each thinker worked at a time when his community was involved in some kind of internal evaluation and renewal and each made contributions that would have profound effects on the future of those communities. In other words, both Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa were concerned with understanding the processes of personal moral formation but were also interested in how their communities interpreted stories about exemplary moral behavior that were both definitive of and challenging to community identity.

It is also significant that the figures selected express certain ambiguities about the transformative power of their own traditions and their exposition of the teachings passed down through these traditions. For example, it is possible to look at Buddhaghosa's treatment of meditation instruction as an elaboration of the Buddha's teachings as preserved in his discourses, or as an attempt to render more explicit through the work of commentary the specific elements of meditation as they pertain

to different personality types, social situations, and stages of achievement in practice. While practitioners in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition take its teachings to be relevant across time and culture, they still require interpretation to demonstrate their relevance to new times, places, and communities. This is most pointedly expressed in Buddhaghosa's style of integrating the technical terminology of the Abhidhamma (the philosophical systematization of the Buddha's teachings) with detailed directives for taking meditation subjects and practicing meditation.

In a similar way, it is possible to view Bonaventure as emphasizing a certain way of interpreting the Christian Gospels through the heritage of Francis of Assisi and his community. While he takes the relevance of Jesus of Nazareth to pertain to all people at all times, he remains ambiguous about exactly how that example should be understood at different times in history and in the context of different styles of life and personal commitments. The ambiguities expressed in these examples are constructive precisely because they illustrate how each thinker encodes indeterminacy and debate in the very traditions they are often taken to present. Even so, both thinkers are concerned with how their particular interpretations are linked with the truth of the traditions they study and in which they have found normative visions of the purpose and meaning of life. I will now offer a brief sketch of each thinker in order to lay out how some of the basic moral ideas, or classic notions, arose in each thinker's historical context and how these ideas point to the classic question of moral struggle.

Bonaventure as mediator of classic ideas and practices

Bonaventure, whose given name was Giovanni di Fidanza, was born in 1217 CE in Bagnoregio, central Italy, somewhere between the present-day towns of Orvieto in the region of Umbria and Viterbo in Tuscany (the original town was destroyed in an earthquake in 1695).²⁹ The only surviving information about his childhood is the legend that Bonaventure himself recounts in the *Legenda minor* of Francis of Assisi that he was a very sick child who was saved from an early death by the miraculous intercession of Francis.³⁰

Modern scholarship on Bonaventure's professional biography has tended to divide it into three periods marked by his significant institutional transitions and responsibilities.³¹ Some have correlated these three periods with a classification of Bonaventure's writings based on differences in style and audience.³² The first period (roughly 1235–1257 CE) spans the time from the beginning of his studies at the University of Paris in the newly established Franciscan school to the beginning of his service as minister general of the Franciscan order. During this period, most of his time was spent in schools, initially as a student and later as a teacher, and his writings were suitably directed to his responsibilities in this area. Among these writings are his biblical commentaries on the books of Ecclesiastes and Wisdom and on the Gospels of John and Luke (1248–1254 CE), his Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard (1250–1254 CE), as well as a series of disputed questions which examined the topics of Christ, the Trinity, and evangelical perfection (1254–56 CE).³³ While he entered the Franciscan order in 1243/4, he was not ordained a priest until 1253, which means that, although the vast majority of this portion of his writings occurred within the theological trajectory of the Franciscan order's university community, it occurred prior

to Bonaventure's institution as an official member of the class of Catholic clerics. Bonaventure's intellectual concerns were, therefore, mostly similar to the prevailing academic concerns of his institution and his religious community. Among these concerns were discussions about the proper place of members of the mendicant religious orders (the Franciscans and the Dominicans) and the secular teachers who were not affiliated with those orders at the University of Paris. This period coincided with the transition from the papacy of Innocent IV (1243–1254 CE), who sided against the mendicants for the reason that their strong imitation of the poverty of Christ was considered an improper interpretation of Christian discipleship and a threat to ecclesiastical authority, to the more supportive papacy of Alexander IV (1254–1261 CE).³⁴

The second period (roughly 1257–1268 CE) spans the time from the beginning of Bonaventure's service as leader of the Franciscans to the end of the papacy of Clement IV (1265–1268 CE) who had been a strong supporter of the Franciscans and their position in the medieval universities. Upon his election as minister general of the Franciscans, Bonaventure began a series of visits to Franciscan communities throughout Europe during which he became more concerned that the order was in need of serious reform in its commitment to evangelical poverty. This period also marks a shift from his more academic writings to his pastoral and liturgical writings. His well-known *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, his *De triplici via*, as well as his major and minor biographies of Francis, all date from this period. Here the historical record becomes important for this study, not so much because Bonaventure pushed the order to assess its adherence to Francis' example, but rather because he chose to write a combination of biographies and mystical treatises to accomplish this reformist goal. This distinguished him markedly from his predecessor as minister general, John of Parma, who found support for the Franciscans' efforts at self-reform in the apocalyptic writings of Joachim of Fiore.

The third period (roughly 1268–1274 CE) spans the time from the cessation of papal support for the Franciscans to Bonaventure's death just before the conclusion of the Second Council of Lyons. In his writings during this period, he returned to commenting on the Franciscan life of evangelical poverty and also began to engage more fervently with those who challenged the presence of the Franciscans in the universities, even though he was still occupied with administration of the order and its internal division between the Spiritual and Community factions which continued up to and after his death. While his *Apologia pauperum* dates from this period, most of his writings during this period survive in the form of transcriptions of his lectures, including some delivered at the University of Paris where he had previously taught. These *Collationes* exhibit his sustained response to the influence of Aristotle on medieval philosophy and theology and his highly nuanced theology of history, especially in the *Collationes in hexaemeron*. However, Pope Gregory X (1271–1276) put an end to his further engagement with these issues by elevating him to the rank of cardinal in the last year of his life.

We can identify three recurring themes in Bonaventure's life and times based on this short biographical sketch. First, he was a trained academic who seems to have spent much of his energy later in life as an institutional leader focused on internal reform. His travel schedule and his writing style both adapted to the needs of his ministry. Second, he was fortunate to be living at a time of deep personal and institutional coincidence.

By this I mean that his particular talents and institutional priorities were precisely coordinated to make the most of the political events of his time. The challenges to the papacy by the monarchies were played out through the symbols of territorial and monetary wealth, and it was precisely these symbols that Bonaventure employed in his exegetical and speculative mystical writings. Third, he valued the importance of personal examples for exploring both theological and institutional trajectories. As we will see later, much of Bonaventure's theology can be viewed as an act of balancing two emphases: the exemplary persons of Jesus of Nazareth and Francis of Assisi on the one hand, and the theological doctrine of the Trinity on the other. What is noteworthy is that Bonaventure valued a rereading of the personal examples of past lives, combined with rigorous argumentation, rather than doctrinal assertions (and occasionally violence) from authoritarian heights, as a remedy for religious disagreements.

Buddhaghosa as mediator of classic ideas and practices

The life and times of Buddhaghosa are not as easy to summarize as those of Bonaventure precisely because summary historical details and a good deal of legend are all modern scholars possess. Much more is known about his writings than about his life, and the effect of these writings on later Buddhist thought is enormous. Yet despite his demonstrable centrality in Theravāda Buddhist thought (that form of Buddhism still practiced in the Southeast Asian countries of Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), contemporary Buddhist scholarship in Europe and the United States has produced no sustained scholarly treatment of Buddhaghosa's writings, much less any treatment of his moral thought.³⁵

Contemporary scholarship still knows very little about the period in which he wrote or what brought him from a presumably comfortable upbringing as an Indian Brahmin to join the monks in Ceylon.³⁶ Because the works attributed to him are so voluminous, and for reasons of stylistic difference and commentarial structure, there is now substantial agreement that many of the writings associated with his name (though not the ones of central concern to this study) should be classified as pseudonymous. One such hypothesis about authorship suggests that Buddhaghosa was really the name of a committee of monks working under a single name, which perhaps was the name of a certain historical individual.³⁷

In addition to his *Visuddhimagga* (or "path of purification"), he is alleged to have written commentaries on the entire Pāli Tipiṭaka which includes the Suttas (or discourses of the Buddha), the Vinaya (the code regulating monastic life including stories surrounding the institution of its various rules), and the Abhidhamma (the detailed elaboration and systematization of Buddhist psychology). Many of these commentaries could be redactions of Sinhalese commentaries which Buddhaghosa then edited and translated into Pāli (the language in which the central texts of Theravāda Buddhism are preserved). In any case, the *Visuddhimagga* is the primary text by Buddhaghosa used in this study, although it is important to note that many other texts attributed to him which are commentarial in form would need to be consulted if one wished to give a comprehensive account of his moral philosophy.

The same kind of biographical sketch given for Bonaventure above is simply not possible for Buddhaghosa's life. An attempt to study this person known as "the

Buddha's voice"³⁸ is particularly difficult, especially since he says virtually nothing about himself in his writings, and even the postscripts to his writings say only that they were made by one "who bears the name Buddhaghosa conferred by the venerable ones, and who should be called 'of Moraṇḍacetaka.'"³⁹ He arrived in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) sometime during the reign of Mahānāma which spanned the period 412–434 CE, but beyond that the chronology of events breaks down. However, the legend of Buddhaghosa's arrival in Ceylon from Jambudīpa (India) is a story well worth relating, short though it is.⁴⁰

He was an educated youth of the Brahmin class, born in the late fourth or the early fifth century CE in a town said to have contained the tree under which the historical Buddha attained his enlightenment, and having mastered the Vedas by the age of 11, became renowned for his skill in argument. Though a neighbor to the famous Bodhi tree, he was not yet familiar with the teachings of its namesake. A wise man of the town, Revata, learning of the boy and aware of the arrogance lurking just beneath his fine arguments, commented "Who is this who is braying like an ass?" After speaking to him about the Dhamma ("teachings") of the Buddha, and rendering the boy silent in the process, he encouraged him to enter the order of monks to learn more about these teachings, to journey to the leading community of Sinhalese monks at the Mahāvihāra ("great monastery"), and to write a commentary on the Pāli Tipiṭaka ("three baskets"). Upon arriving at the monastery, the still headstrong young man was refused access to the monastic library until he could prove himself worthy of undertaking a commentary, at which point he would then be allowed to begin his monastic education. So he was commanded by the *thera* ("elder") of the community to comment on one verse of one book of the *Suttaṭṭakā*, and that effort, so the story goes, produced the 700-plus pages of the *Visuddhimagga*. Almost all of Buddhaghosa's career as a monk in the Mahāvihāra coincided with a significant dispute between that monastery and its rival, the more populous Abhayagiri (in northern Ceylon), and while that dispute was over what would appear to be relatively small matters (emphasizing certain passages over others in the Suttas, expressing preference for the Buddha's expression of the Dhamma in his long discourses rather than his shorter discourses, disagreement over the proper order in which meditation techniques should be approached), the payoff for the winner was enormous: the patronage of the winner's monastery by King Mahānāma.

While we know relatively little about the details of Buddhaghosa's life, we do know something (though still relatively little) about the political context in which his monastic career developed. The Buddhist history of Ceylon is helpful in isolating certain themes through which to read Buddhaghosa's text. This period in the island's history is known as the Anurādhapura period, from roughly the fourth century BCE to the ninth century CE, transitioning to the Polonnaruwa period which carries through to the beginning of the modern era with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505.⁴¹

The first "great monastery" on the island was the Mahāvihāra, said to be established by Mahinda, son of the famous Buddhist king, Aśoka,⁴² who was alleged to have been the driving force behind the spread of Buddhism from India to Ceylon. The monastery had benefited from exclusive royal patronage from the time of its founding during the reign of Devānaṃpiya Tissa (307–267 BCE), coming into greater prominence with the building of the Mahāthūpa ("great shrine") by the succeeding king, Duṭṭhagāmaṇi

(161–137 BCE), and the rooting of the Bo tree branch from the original enlightenment tree at Bodhi Gaya in India. Although the island was subject to foreign occupation for a good portion of the next 150 years, the Mahāvihāra remained the sole institution of Buddhist learning and ordination lineage.⁴³

During the reign of Vaṭṭagāmaṇi (104–88 BCE), two important events occurred. First, the Pāli Tipiṭaka was committed to writing for the first time (by traditional dating, and current scholarship judges that at least some portions of it were probably this early). The monks of the Mahāvihāra prioritized the care and preaching of these texts and became resistant to the innovations offered by alternative accounts of the Buddha's teaching coming to the monastery from other communities.⁴⁴ Second, King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi founded the Abhayagiri monastery and soon afterwards disagreements erupted between the Abhayagiri and the Mahāvihāra. The Abhayagiri was itself home to its own Buddhist artifacts – the Buddha's tooth and his alms bowl – which lent it prestige and legitimacy.

The exact origins of the Abhayagiri are not clear. Gunawardana traces one possible interpretation to the violation of Vinaya rules by a specific monk: “Mahātissa, for whom Vaṭṭagāmaṇi built the Abhayagiri monastery, was accused by the monks of the Mahāvihāra of a breach of discipline and consequently was expelled from the order. It is not improbable that Mahātissa's popularity and the favored treatment he received from the king aroused jealousy in his fellow monks.”⁴⁵ While there is some chance that the Abhayagiri had a slightly different version of the Vinaya, the Pāli Vinaya as we have it today lists only four causes for expulsion: sexual misconduct, stealing, murder, and lying about meditative attainments, so presumably Mahātissa's breach of discipline was one of these four. Yet it is also possible that the split arose as a result of the relative weight given to new Sanskrit texts coming to the island from other countries. Since none of the Abhayagiri texts survive, the only evidence for their opinions on certain matters comes from texts of the Mahāvihāra Theravāda (Buddhaghosa's among them). Some of these views exhibit similarities to later Mahāyāna teachings (implying the coordinate hypothesis that new texts which would later be called Mahāyāna had made their way to Ceylon), but many appear to be matters of differing emphases based on alternate interpretations of the same Pāli texts. Among these differences were the ultimate profitability of ascetic practices, when a practitioner moves from one stage along the Buddhist path to the next, in what sense an object can be said to be present in consciousness, and other such problems.⁴⁶

In the nearly 500 years between the establishment of the Abhayagiri monastery and the arrival of Buddhaghosa in Ceylon, royal patronage alternated between one monastery and the other. The Abhayagiri leveled its own attacks against the Mahāvihāra. As Gunawardana again reports, only 150 years or so before Buddhaghosa, the Mahāvihāra was critiqued for “being undisciplined, citing their use of ivory fans, their practice of conferring the Ordination by messenger and their practice of reckoning the qualifying age for Ordination from the date of conception....[and] on their method of fixing ceremonial boundaries (*sīmā*) and the propriety of spitting on the ground during morning ablutions.”⁴⁷ Even at the time of Buddhaghosa himself, the Abhayagiri was still disputing “the propriety of using a stand (*ādhāraka*) to accept offerings of food,” asserting that “the use of a stand limited physical participation in the act of acceptance.”⁴⁸

The Mahāvihāra's need to reestablish its once unquestioned primacy, after periods of the Abhayagiri receiving royal patronage, lends an important element to our understanding of the events to which Buddhaghosa's writings were a response. Not only were his writings a response in terms of content, wherein he provided a manual for meditation as a way to reassert and clarify the practical implications of the Theravāda teachings of the Mahāvihāra, but they were also a response in style. As Nāṇamoli argues,

The Abhayagiri Monastery would naturally have been busy studying and advocating some of these weighty developments [in Sanskrit Buddhism] while the Great Monastery had nothing new to offer: the rival was thus able, at some risk, to appear go-ahead and up-to-date while the old institution perhaps began to fall behind for want of new material, new inspiration and international connections, because its studies being restricted to the orthodox presentation in the Sinhalese language, it had already done what it could in developing Tipiṭaka learning.⁴⁹

However, these very same contextual factors make it difficult to find a defensible starting point because we risk attributing too much to Buddhaghosa as a spokesperson for the community and not enough to his insights into the particularities and problems of Buddhist practice. Alternatively, we can say that it is important to appreciate his place as a distinctive voice in the Buddhist Abhidhamma tradition, as a commentator whose work on canonical literature was not necessarily coterminous with the position of his monastic community.

For several reasons, then, it is difficult to discern a *pattern* in Buddhaghosa's moral thinking. First, because all of Buddhaghosa's writings (and those attributed to him) are in some sense commentarial, it is difficult to know where the authoritative text ends and the authoritative commentator begins. On many occasions, he refers to both the authoritative text under consideration and the commentaries to which he had access. While the Sinhalese commentaries Buddhaghosa was working with are no longer available in their entirety to modern scholars, sections of them can be reliably reconstructed through careful examination of passages cited by Buddhaghosa and other medieval monastic figures. Second, the written tradition of Abhidhamma literature, and its distinctive method for interpreting the other texts of the Pāli Tipiṭaka (to be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter), informs all aspects of Buddhaghosa's writing. Buddhaghosa's synthesis of Abhidhammic psychology and meditation instruction balances these equally important but stylistically diverse aspects of Theravāda teaching. Decoding what Buddhaghosa has to say about any particular topic requires at least some attempt to restate issues in the language of Abhidhammic psychology. Third, if Buddhaghosa were to have defined the English terms "morality" or "ethics," his definitions would likely have yielded a network of concepts that would not have any precise correlate in Western ethical theory.⁵⁰ The structure of *Visuddhimagga*, for example, weaves together a section detailing the precepts of socially acceptable behavior (reflecting also the content of the traditional Ten Precepts), considered necessary preparation for engaging in meditation, with a section on meditation practices, which is followed by an examination of the nature of insight wisdom.⁵¹ Finally, the audience and the literary form he invoked for its benefit

were probably exclusively monastic and his writing is focused on practical usefulness in facilitating meditation. However, despite the intended audience, there are several places in which Buddhaghosa is aware of the possibility that lay Buddhists will find certain techniques beneficial and, under proper supervision, should be encouraged to practice them.⁵²

Moral struggle as classic question

For both Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, approaching the classic question of moral struggle involves one in some construal of the way the world is and how it ought to be (what I describe in the next chapter with the language of symbolic religious cosmologies) as well as a particular set of practices through which one tests these construals as to their truthfulness and their ability to motivate and guide moral practice (what I describe in Chapter 3 as practices of material simplicity). In order for us to understand these thinkers as analyzing a similar moral problem, it will be necessary to establish guidelines for how to use these concepts comparatively. The method of conceptual expansion employed to analyze a moral problem (or what I am calling the classic question of moral struggle), acknowledges that there are many expressions of religious life and discourse and that it is not always easy to pick out those elements that most closely resemble ethical concerns that might be familiar to us. For that reason, this study is guided by a desire to provide an answer to those critics of comparative religious ethics who judge recent projects in the field as having developed insufficiently the distinctly religious dimension of their subject matter. The method I employ here presents Christian Trinitarian theology and Buddhist Abhidhammic psychology as distinctly religious comparative categories, indeed as symbolic religious cosmologies, in which particular concepts expressing moral struggle are situated and develop. While I am aware of the disputes that have arisen in calling Buddhist systems of thought “religious” cosmologies, I try to demonstrate in the next chapter and in the later chapters that Theravāda Buddhism’s comprehensive view of reality and the depth of analysis that it brings to human experience characterize it in a way that claims to answer many of the basic questions of human experience with which religious discourse is concerned. Focusing on practices of material simplicity is intended to limit the investigation into the broad range of materials that touch on moral struggle by focusing on those portions of the evidence that appear relevant to the question of moral struggle.⁵³ Although a comparison of institutional contexts will not dominate this comparison, the focus on material simplicity will give us an occasion to examine how these social practices were bound up with particular institutional concerns in the histories of these traditions.

As the foregoing accounts readily admit, Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa are by no means obvious choices for a project in the comparative study of religious ethics, but neither are they so disparate as to preclude an intelligible and fruitful conversation between them. There are, of course, many difficulties and potential incongruities in any comparative study, and I want to acknowledge three such difficulties at the outset: the incongruity of source material, the incongruity of religious traditions, and the incongruity of secondary scholarship.

The incongruity of source material comes in several varieties. One variety is literary genre and on this score we must quickly admit that Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa were writing for different audiences and therefore chose writing styles to meet the needs of their communities. Both thinkers were writing in ways they judged accessible to their audiences' very practical concerns, even if at times their styles are intended to challenge their readers to think differently and thereby to live in new ways. There is a correlative incongruity that arises from the scholar's selection of source material, an incongruity I have attempted to minimize in this study. For example, I draw evidence from roughly equivalent portions of each thinker's corpus. The texts I use from Bonaventure (for example selections from his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, the *Breviloquium*, the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, and certain writings on evangelical poverty in the Franciscan life) roughly parallel the amount of text in a single larger work of Buddhaghosa (*Visuddhimagga*). Another incongruity in source material has to do with the availability of counter positions to those of Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, and this problem is not so easily dismissed for this study. While we have, for example, a rich sense of the debate between the Franciscans and the secular masters at Paris, or between the Spiritual and Community groups within the Franciscans, or the different styles and positions of Bonaventure and his contemporary Thomas Aquinas, we have no record of such detailed debates for Buddhaghosa and his contemporaries. As mentioned previously, Buddhaghosa was probably involved in the disagreement between the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagiri, but we have no record of developed counter positions. Although some scholars have attempted to reconstruct the position of the Abhayagiri, including its similarities to some later Mahāyāna teachings, we are left only with Buddhaghosa's side comments about his opponents and with the writings of those who commented on his work.⁵⁴

A related problem affecting this study has to do with how one can speak about moral behaviors from written descriptions, or, put differently, whether it is possible to speak about what I am calling classic practices based on an analysis of texts rather than on ethnographic observations. This study is primarily an investigation into texts and has no observational component which means that, whatever its conclusions, its ultimate usefulness can only be measured if its theoretical contribution to the understanding of moral struggle and comparative ethics is supplemented by future investigations into the dynamics of moral struggle in communities of practice, especially as these might be discerned in first-person accounts of religious conversation (a topic I return to at the end of the book). Insofar as texts encode background questions to which the texts themselves are answers, as Gadamer noted, we are justified in using them to understand our own questions about moral struggle as these texts share a subject matter with our questions. Part of the burden of this study is to show that, in William Schweiker's description, we inhabit a shared moral space – that the questions to which Bonaventure's and Buddhaghosa's texts are answers are related in many ways to the questions that form our notions of moral struggle and our experiences of moral weakness. This is the force of suggesting that moral struggle is a classic question and that the perennial timeliness of the answers Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa give, through their examination of ideas and practices, renders them classics as well.

Incongruity in religious traditions poses a different kind of problem. Some scholars have argued that differences among religious communities in terms of both beliefs

and practices are so extreme that the term religion itself begins to lose its meaning. On this reading, then, most if not all comparisons peddle their artificiality by forcing dissimilar things into similar classifications. I do not intend to enter this general debate about what is and what is not a religion in any detail, but rather I only want to note that the term “religious” (whether or not it describes anything “essential” in what have historically come to be called the “religions”) is still a helpful place marker for that aspect of human activity that cannot be reduced to other more specific individual or social human phenomena. Even so, contemporary theorists are wise to point out the ease with which a scholar can assimilate disparate elements of actual religious thought and practice into a master theory that revels in the unity brought about by drawing cursory similarities at the expense of acknowledging deep differences.

A subspecies of this danger, equally problematic, is the tendency to take a particular strand of thought in a religious tradition as representative of the entire tradition. We are also faced with the problem of whether traditions are the sorts of things that can be represented at all. If traditions are, as some have argued, dynamic and always in a state of flux, then they cannot be represented by any single, static set of beliefs or codes of conduct; neither can they be fully or best interpreted by only one thinker. We cannot, on this reading, locate an essence to a religious tradition, whether this essence is to be found in the oldest expression of a tradition or its orthodox and authoritative teachings, from which we then might judge variations and deviations. Most contemporary scholars in religious studies recognize these pitfalls and do their best to avoid them. However, these problems do bring up an important concern for this study, namely the fact of methodological asymmetry based on the history of scholarly engagement with the sources. This study places at its center the claim that there are distinctly religious comparative categories for the study of ethics which nonetheless support sufficiently dissimilar accounts about what it means to be religious from the perspective of different communities.

The third kind of incongruity is the incongruity in secondary scholarship. In terms of the amount of information available, there are many more accessible secondary sources to guide the study of Bonaventure’s thought than there are to guide the study of Buddhaghosa’s thought. In terms of the kind of information that is available, Bonaventure studies are mostly the work of Christian theologians for the purpose of advancing projects in Christian theology (which are, it must be said, carried on with a high degree of historical and sociological sensitivity). While the few existing studies on Buddhaghosa are projects primarily concerned with the translation and historical development of his writings, few of these focus on Buddhaghosa as a distinct line of interpretation within Theravāda Buddhism, and far fewer as the expositor of claims to truth that demand a public hearing. Within the study of ethics, we see variations on this asymmetry. For example, within Christian ethics more broadly and Roman Catholic ethics more specifically, Bonaventure has received paltry consideration compared to such thinkers as Augustine of Hippo or Thomas Aquinas. Within Buddhist ethics, significantly more time has been spent attempting to decode particular Buddhist concepts, to translate Buddhist teachings and the practices of Buddhist communities into terms familiar to contemporary philosophical and theological ethics, and probing the moral implications of Buddhist narrative forms than has been spent analyzing the thinking of individual Buddhists (even influential ones such as Buddhaghosa). A few recent exceptions to this will be noted further along.

While there is very little secondary scholarship on the moral thought of either Bonaventure or Buddhaghosa, the few available sources display divergent academic agendas. In most cases, scholarship on Bonaventure's ethics has been carried out by Roman Catholic scholars primarily for an audience working within the discipline of Catholic moral theology. This is not to say that such scholarship seeks a narrow audience, for it presents its work, in the wording of the papal encyclical salutation, to "all persons of goodwill." I mean only that such writings acknowledge that other Christians are the most likely persons to care about and engage these writings. Western scholarship about Buddhaghosa and his moral thought, on the other hand, has been carried out mostly by North American and European academics who are writing largely for other academics. While they tend to acknowledge that their work will have some bearing on the thought and practice of Buddhist communities, many of them are not working from within Buddhist communities, envisioning Buddhist practitioners as their intended audience. For this reason, there are potential methodological and ideological incongruities in the secondary literature, the acknowledgement of which guides much of the interpretation offered here. However, insofar as this book is primarily a constructive project in comparative religious ethics and moral psychology, and not an historical or linguistic study of either thinker, I employ this secondary literature cautiously with an eye toward its use in deciphering the complex normative implications of each thinker's writings.

Notes

- 1 Here I follow William Schweiker's formulation that ethics be viewed as "critical and constructive reflection on moral existence." See his *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.
- 2 On the notion of vocabularies, see Robert Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Holism," in Robert Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 167, cited in Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 9. I would pose the relevant question differently: Is it possible for the forms of religious discourse that inform comparative studies of moral topics to challenge or at least augment the operative notions about discursive practices on which some recent comparative studies (and many critiques of comparative study) are based?
- 3 On the notion of tradition, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12:

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.

I would want to extend the notion of tradition, however, beyond those formally equipped for engaging in its debates. MacIntyre's tale of the interaction between his own Roman Catholic Christian communion and modernity neglects what is arguably one of the central

ideas of that tradition, namely the silent witness of believers whose voices are frequently spoken for rather than listened to in a tradition's philosophical debates about its moral distinctiveness and coherence ("the power of the poor in history" as Gustavo Gutiérrez called it).

- 4 See Ronald M. Green, *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and David Little and Sumner Twiss in *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).
- 5 See Robin Lovin and Frank Reynolds, eds., *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), influencing subsequent studies such as Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), in turn inspiring scholars such as Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil*.
- 6 On the tradition-bounded character of moral reasoning and meta-ethical justification, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, challenged by those focusing on the performative-deliberative justifications of moral claims, within religious traditions and modern democratic polities, as in Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) and *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 7 For an early formulation of this idea, see Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 96–100.
- 8 For the outlines of this debate, see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) and Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). On the place of classics in the critical study of religion and liberal arts education, see Frank E. Reynolds and Sheryl Burkhalter, eds. *Beyond the Classics? Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).
- 9 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 100.
- 10 Ibid., 99.
- 11 Ibid., 101.
- 12 These three options for textual interpretation, as well as the fourth that Tracy views as a correction, appear in various forms throughout Tracy's work, but they are most clearly formulated in two places in his *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 50–52 and 74–7.
- 13 Ibid., 50–1.
- 14 Ricoeur's longer description of this process is helpful:

The problem of writing becomes a hermeneutical problem when it is referred to its complementary pole, which is reading. A new dialectic then emerges, that of distancing and appropriation. By appropriation I mean the counterpart of the semantic autonomy, which detached the text from its writer. To appropriate is to make "one's own" what was "alien." Because there is a general need for making our own what is foreign to us, there is a general problem of distancing. Distance, then, is not simply a fact, a given, just the actual spatial and temporal gap between us and the appearance of such and such work of art or discourse. It is a dialectical trait, the principle of a struggle between the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which all understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding. Distancing is not a qualitative phenomenon; it is the dynamic counterpart of our need, our interest, and our effort to overcome cultural estrangement.

Writing and reading take place in this cultural struggle. Reading is the *pharmakon*, the “remedy,” by which the meaning of the text is rescued from the estrangement of distancing and put in a new proximity, a proximity which suppresses and preserves the cultural distance and includes the otherness with the oneness. (Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth, TX: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976, 43)

On the notion of personal action as text, see Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, John B. Thompson, ed. and trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 197–221.

- 15 I adopt and extend Gadamer’s use of the term:

Husserl is obviously seeking to capture the way all limited intentionality of meaning merges into the fundamental continuity of the whole. A horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further. Thus the horizon intentionality which constitutes the unity of the flow of experience is paralleled by an equally comprehensive horizon intentionality on the objective side. For everything that is given as existent is given in terms of a world and hence brings the world horizon with it. (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, trans., New York: Continuum, 1998, 245)

- 16 Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 51. Here, Tracy is following Paul Ricoeur,

The subjective–objective dialectic does not exhaust the meaning of meaning and therefore does not exhaust the structure of discourse. The “objective” side of discourse itself may itself be taken in two different ways. We may mean the “what” of discourse or the “about what” of discourse. The “what” of discourse is its “sense,” the “about what” is its “reference.” ... Whereas the sense is immanent to the discourse, and objective in the sense of ideal, the reference expresses the movement in which language transcends itself. In other words, the sense correlates the identification function and the predicative function within the sentence, and the reference relates language to the world. It is another name for discourse’s claim to be true. (Paul Ricoeur, “Language as Discourse,” in *Interpretation Theory*, 19–20)

- 17 Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 102.

- 18 Ibid., 108.

- 19 Ibid., 134.

- 20 Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 93. Tracy is careful to note that not all limit-language is necessarily religious. As he says,

First, “limit” is argued to be *a* characteristic, not a universal definition of religion. Indeed such further characteristics as the “dialectical” character of religious experience and language involve further questions implied but not treated here.... Second, the argument is not that *all* limit-language is *eo ipso* religious, but rather that all religious (dimension or explicit) experience and language has a limit-character. In general terms, there can be “limit-to” language which is not disclosive of a final “limit-of” dimension. (p. 111, n. 11)

- 21 Tracy cites two sources for his employment of limit language: again, Paul Ricoeur (this time from an unpublished 1974 lecture “The Specificity of Religious Language” which appears in revised form in the first two chapters of Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion*,

- Narrative and Imagination*, David Pellauer, trans. [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], 35–72) and also Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), especially where Ramsey singles out, in Tracy's words, "the kind of situation which religious languages discloses is a situation which involves both 'an odd discernment' and a 'total commitment.' More exactly, religious language points to the kind of highly personal situation which cannot be described in straightforward indicative language. Like poetic metaphors, religious language discloses an odd personal discernment which cannot be described literally but whose reality cannot be denied." David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 160–5.
- 22 Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 93.
- 23 Ibid., 101.
- 24 It would be fair to say that, insofar as Tracy's implied ethical theory does not depart explicitly from Ricoeur's, it too is a form of "mixed deontology." See Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 111, n. 11. For a summary of Ricoeur's approach, see his "The Teleological and Deontological Structures of Action: Aristotle and/or Kant?" in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, A. Phillips Griffiths, ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99–111.
- 25 Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 108.
- 26 For a helpful review of these positions, see *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 27 I view the notion of persons developed here as related to but distinct from Aaron Stalnaker's effort to establish "person" as one of a series of useful "bridge concepts" for comparative ethics. Stalnaker takes his lead from the recent discussions between Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor about the necessity of reflexivity and strong evaluations for an authentic notion of personhood (pp. 44–9). Stalnaker's use of "person" as a "bridge concept" stems from his judgment about where one ought to locate the greatest danger and most likely pitfalls in comparative ethics projects. As he says,
- the theoretical impetus behind the use of bridge concepts is the desire to bring culturally distinct religious figures into an imagined dialogue, to relate their distinctive bodies of thought and associated practices by describing them around certain shared themes. The paradigmatic danger of such a move is to obscure or confuse differences. Thus, when choosing bridge concepts, we should strive to take nothing for granted that may be at issue between the two, and in general to be as spare as possible... This concept of personhood takes little for granted about how exactly to understand "human nature," what the constituent elements of a person are (i.e., what sort of general account of the human person ought to be given), why spiritual exercises are necessary, what they are, what their ultimate *telos* might be, or how they produce their effects. In other words, this bridge concept is compatible with the desired comparative questions, without smuggling in answers ahead of time or focusing on extraneous or misleading issues. (Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil*, 48–9)
- 28 On the range of hermeneutics beyond texts, see Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance," *History of Religions* 26.1 (1986): 1–33, and "Seeking an End to the Primary Text' or 'Putting an End to the Text as Primary,'" in Reynolds and Burkhalter, *Beyond the Classics?* 41–59. The notion of person as classic suggested here, following Tracy, includes activities and entities not formed as or directly by texts.
- 29 Zachary Hayes, *Bonaventure: Mystical Writings* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 15.

- 30 Hayes cites Bonaventure's, *Legenda minor*, which details the following story:

Because of him [Francis] innumerable benefits from God do not cease to abound in different parts of the world as even I [Bonaventure] myself who wrote the above have experienced in my own life. When I was just a child and very seriously ill, my mother made a vow on my behalf to the blessed father Francis. I was snatched from the very jaws of death and restored to the vigor of a healthy life. Since I hold this vividly in my memory, I now publically proclaim it as true, lest keeping silent about such a benefit I would be accused of being ungrateful. Accept, therefore, blessed father, my thanks however meager and unequal to your merits and benefits. As you accept our desires, excuse, too, our faults through prayer, so that you may both rescue those faithfully devoted to you from present evils, and lead them to everlasting blessings. (Bonaventure, "The Minor Legend of Saint Francis," VII.8 in *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, Vol. II of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William Short, eds., New York: New City Press, 2000, 717)

- 31 For examples of these chronologies and for more detailed accounts of the events summarized here, see Hayes, *Bonaventure: Mystical Writings*, 15–35; Ewert Cousins, ed. and trans. *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 1–18; J. M. Hammond, "St. Bonaventure," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd edn., vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Thomson Gale/The Catholic University of America, 2003), 479–93.
- 32 Cousins, *Bonaventure*, 9–11.
- 33 This chronology is adapted from Hammond, "St. Bonaventure," 479–93.
- 34 While not in any way determining the papal judgments on the mendicant orders, one must note that the papacy of Innocent IV followed closely on the papacies of Innocent III (1198–1216 CE), Honorius III (1216–1227 CE) and Gregory IX (1227–1241 CE), all of whom were in continual conflict with the German monarch Frederick II. The give-and-take of excommunication and invasion, mostly between Pope Gregory and Frederick, must certainly have left its mark on succeeding papacies. As threats to papal secular power were mounting, any models of reform internal to the church, including the voluntary simplicity of the mendicants' example, could certainly have been viewed as aligned with, or at the very least substantially similar to, secular critiques of the papacy. For a good summary of these events, including the dramatic events of the "first formal papal conclave," see Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 2nd edn. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, [1997] 2001), 151–8.
- 35 This is surely complicated by problems of authorship, commentarial style, the massive size of the works attributed to him, and the apparent inconsistencies in perspective that the attributed works suggest. The most helpful summary of the range of Buddhaghosa's writings is found in the introduction to the most recent translation of his *Visuddhimagga* by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli [Osbert Moore] (Seattle: Buddhist Publication Society Pariyatti Editions, [1975] 1991), xxi–l. The major sources for biographical information about Buddhaghosa are the Pāli chronicles, *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūlavamsa*.
- 36 A significant study of this region and the period of time immediately after the life of Buddhaghosa is R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1979).
- 37 Ñāṇamoli offers the following hypothesis in his introduction to *Visuddhimagga*: "It may not unreasonably be supposed that he did not work alone, without help, and that he had competent assistants. If so, he may well have delegated the drafting of the Khuddaka

- Nikāya commentaries – those of the Khuddakapāṭha and Suttanipāta, Dhammapada and the Jātaka –, or part of them, supervising and completing them himself, after which the official ‘postscript’ was appended.” (p. xxxi)
- 38 Literal translation of the Pāli name: the voice (*ghosa*) of the “enlightened one” (Buddha). See also the legend surrounding the rebirth of the *deva* prince named “Ghosa”, as related in the Sinhalese text translated by James Gray, *Buddhaghosuppatti, or, The Historical Romance of the Rise and Career of Buddhaghosa* (New Delhi and Madras: Asian Educational Services, [1892] 1998).
- 39 Ñāṇamoli, *Visuddhimagga*, 742.
- 40 This account is summarized from three texts: Ñāṇamoli’s introduction to *Visuddhimagga*; the only English monograph on Buddhaghosa’s life and work, Bimala Charan Law, *The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa* (Calcutta and Simla: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1923); and the translation cited in n. 38 of the Sinhalese legend about Buddhaghosa and his arrival in Ceylon, Gray *Buddhaghosuppatti*. Most of Buddhaghosa’s story appears in the *Mahāvamsa* (“great chronicle”) which records somewhat historically the events surrounding the rise of Buddhism in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) which is still to this day a predominantly Theravāda country.
- 41 Richard F. Gombrich, *Buddhist Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Highlands of Ceylon* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995 [1971]), 23–4.
- 42 For a good summary of the historical background, and the translation of one of the more widely known versions of Aśoka’s fame, see John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- 43 The ordination lineage is an important aspect of Buddhist monastic life. For example, whether or not Mahinda actually came to Ceylon, it was very important to succeeding generations of monks that he traveled there with five companions to ensure the proper institution of the *sāsana* (message, tradition). As Gombrich relates it,
- To Ceylon was sent one of Aśoka’s own sons, Mahinda. According to the chronicle he was accompanied by four other monks, a novice, and a lay disciple. A single monk performs the lower ordination ceremony, by which a layman enters the Order as a novice, but five monks are the quorum needed to perform the higher ordination ceremony (*upasampadā*) by which a novice becomes a monk; if such a quorum cannot be mustered, no ordination can take place, the line of succession is broken, and after a time there are no more monks. Mahinda’s group was therefore the smallest possible paradigm community of male Buddhists. (*Buddhist Precept and Practice*, 32)
- 44 Ñāṇamoli, *Visuddhimagga*, xxiv.
- 45 Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*, 24.
- 46 A helpful summary of the positions attributed by the Mahāvihārins to the Abhayagirins is given in Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*, 27–30.
- 47 Ibid., 25.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ñāṇamoli, *Visuddhimagga*, xxvii.
- 50 This claim, and indeed the method of this study, is largely a test of what one can do with moral concepts across traditions. The use and reformulation of various moral concepts is related to, but not identical with, the problem of using broad theoretical classifications of ethics in Western discourse to situate religious thinking about moral matters. On this issue see Charles Hallisey, “Ethical Particularism in Theravada Buddhism,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 3 (1996): 32–43.

- 51 For a study to this effect, which focuses on the primacy of insight wisdom (*paññā*) in *Visuddhimagga*, see Km. Vyanjana, *Theravāda Buddhist Ethics with Special Reference to Visuddhimagga* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1992).
- 52 See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of this topic. In several places in *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa gives the example of one who should benefit from his instructions as *kulaputto*, which means something like “a young man of good social standing”. See, for example, Vsm. I.68, VIII.190. This could be an indication of those who were likely to become monks, or those who were not monks but were envisioned by the author as people who might still benefit from the practices advocated.
- 53 In Chapter 3, I refer to material simplicity as both a practice (something that people perform which is a kind of active approximation) as well as a context in which ideas are examined and tested for their transformative power. I understand material simplicity as a problem that points to or can be reformulated as a prior question or set of questions, as my approach to moral struggle (or “the problem of the weak will”) attests. Following Gadamer on this point, we can say that “Reflection on hermeneutical experience transforms problems back to questions that arise and that derive their sense from their motivation.” See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 377.
- 54 The closest source we have to an alternative interpretation of the issues Buddhaghosa was addressing is the commentary of his *Visuddhimagga* (*Visuddhimagga-mahāṭīkā*) called the *Paramattha-mañjūsā*, written by the eighth-century monk, Dhammapāla. The brothers Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu are among the most revered Buddhist scholars of roughly this same period (fifth century CE). They began as monks in the Indian Sarvāstivāda (afterwards one of the originators of the Yogācāra school). See James Duerlinger, *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu’s Refutation of a Theory of a Self* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).