

Buddhism & Political Theory Transcript

Author: Matt Moore (MM)

Conversation Partner: Joe Lynch (JL)

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Description: Transcript of a podcast of the discussion of the book, *Buddhism & Political Theory* between author Matt Moore of political science and Joe Lynch of philosophy.

[Music]

Brett Bodemer (Moderator): Welcome to Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on Friday, November 4th, 2016 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Matt Moore and Joe Lynch discussing Matt's book, *Buddhism and Political Theory*, published by Oxford University Press. Dr. Matt Moore, associate professor in political science at Cal Poly, received his Ph.D. from John Hopkins University in 2004. His previously published work ranges from Buddhism to Wittgenstein, to empirical research investigating what and how political theory is taught in United States higher education. His success as a teacher at Cal Poly is evidenced by the campus-wide Distinguished Teaching Award he received in 2014, and his students have cited him as creating a learning environment that supports and encourages creativity and comprehension. Dr. Joe Lynch, Matt's conversational partner, is a professor in philosophy at Cal Poly. Joe is Chief Editor of *Between the Species*, a journal that explores philosophical issues of human and animal relationships. A practicing martial artist, who regularly teaches a course on Buddhism, Joe has explored dimensions of these pursuits in Chapters, such as "Buddhism, Daoism and Dudeism", in the edited volume titled, *The Big Lebowski and Philosophy*.

[Music]

MM: Well, thank you all very much for coming. I know that everyone has other things to do on a Friday morning, so I'm really grateful to all of you for being here. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Matthew Moore from the Political Science Department. I teach mostly classes in political philosophy and some in the area of law and some in California politics, too. And I just want to hold up the book so you can see it, so here it is, I'm very pleased. My mom was proud. [Laughter]

JL: She should be.

MM: So *Buddhism and Political Theory* is my first book and apparently they're available for sale even at a discount outside, so that they're now only outrageously expensive as opposed to just ridiculously expensive. [Laughter] Don't wait for the paperback because then they won't publish one. So, and I was just telling Joe when we were chatting while you folks were coming in that my dissertation, right, so my graduate school project was so much kind of like psychotherapy for me, I mean it was so much about figuring out what I believed and who I was that I didn't

have much critical distance from the ideas. And so I published them, but it was like, hello, so like giving birth, you know, it was ripping some piece out of my head and putting it on paper and it was kind of a mess. Unfortunately, I was able to publish pieces of it, but I didn't have the kind of scholarly perspective that you're supposed to have on your work. And when I started thinking about this project I sort of thought of it as a test, can I write a really scholarly book, can I actually go out and do what we tell our students we do, which we don't necessarily actually always do, like identify all the relevant literature and read it, and try to figure out the schools of thought that it groups itself into and figure out how they all relate to one another. And so it's been very satisfying to have finished it and feel like I actually did that. Whether I did a good job we'll find out, I'm still waiting for reviews, but it's really a satisfying piece. And the way that I came to the project is the way that I think a lot of people I hope come to their intellectual projects, which is that there's a little bit about my personal life and a little bit about my professional life mashing together. So I've been a Buddhist practitioner for 12 years, 13 years, something like that, and started out as I think many American Buddhists do at kind of a crisis point in my life where I realized that I was under a lot of stress, didn't really know how to manage that stress, and that was not going to be happy if I didn't find some way to manage that stress. And so I did what I always do when I come to a turning point in my life, I bought one of the *Dummies* books, so I bought *Meditation for Dummies*, so I have to say it's actually a terrific book, and started meditating and found it extremely helpful and difficult and frustrating and subtle. And then thought, okay, well, I want to know more about this, and *Meditation for Dummies* as great as it is can only take you so far. So I started reading Buddhist magazines and Buddhist books and realized that the Buddhists were the ones who knew the most about meditation and were going to be the most helpful. When I moved to California, I started meeting with a Buddhist group up in Atascadero and sat with them for five years, not continuously, and learned a lot from them. And when my dissertation project kind of finally spun itself out and I'd published all that and was done with it I thought what am I going to do next? And really one morning I woke up and thought I wonder if the Buddhists said anything about politics? And then started sniffing around and thought, okay, well, how would you even find that out? Because if you go to Barnes and Noble there are thousands of books on Buddhism, but there are very few that are actually the ancient text, right, most of them are commentaries or they're translations or sort of like the ancient text in new language or something like that. And so I spent several years just finding out where are the ancient texts and are they available in English, and are the translations any good, and is there any commentary on it? And so slowly found out that the Buddha actually did say quite a lot about politics, and I'll tell you what some of that is in just a sec. And realized that it was really interesting and that there wasn't that much scholarship on it and that there was kind of room for someone to come and say, hey, look, here's how these pieces fit together and here's how, sort of, Buddhism can interact with politics. So that's the story of how I got here into this project. So what do the Buddhists say about politics? So in English translation the earliest body of Buddhist text, which is often called the *Pali Canon* or the *Tripitaka*, is about 12,000 pages long and out of that there's about 15 pages that are about politics, maybe 20 on a good day. There's tons of mentions of kings and states and wars and things like that, but there are only a handful of places where the Buddha suggests the way that kings should act or the way that government should be organized. So when you shift from kind of just purely descriptive

mentions into kind of the normative dimension of political theory. And what the Buddhists suggest in these early texts is that government emerged out of what we would today call a social contract, although there's a fierce debate amongst scholars about whether it's appropriate to call it that since it came about in the 4th or 5th Century B.C.E. and in a country where there really was no tradition of legal contracts, so that idea wasn't really available intellectually, but in fact it's basically what we would call social contracts, nonetheless. And the Buddha says, so interestingly enough Buddhism doesn't have a foundation story about the foundation of the universe, the universe simply is in a permanent cycle of collapse and rebirth and growth and collapse and rebirth and growth, so it's an endless loop. And after one of these cycles you get sentient beings who reemerge from the kind of primal nothingness and they eventually start eating, it's a little hard to explain, they're kind of non-corporeal and they live above an ocean and on the ocean there's sort of a skin of what, maybe algae or something. And at one point one of them says I wonder what it would be like if I ate some of that? And so eats some and that's how they discover sensation and bodily desire. And then slowly, they say, well, what if I ate more of that, what if I ate a lot of that? And they slowly shift from being the ethereal mind spaced being to being bodies, to being selfish bodies, and eventually to being you. And then they settle down to do agriculture, growing rice. And then one morning someone wakes up and thinks I don't really feel like doing my work, I'm going to go steal my neighbor's rice instead. And that keeps happening and they think, okay, well, this is bad because it's making us mad. They throw dirt clods at the person who has stolen the rice, but that doesn't do anything. And then they tell them to cut it out, but that doesn't do anything either. And so finally they say, and this is kind of the key moment, what if we asked someone who was capable if they would make some rules for us that everyone would have to follow and then we would all agree to do what they said to enforce those rules and we would give them a share of the rice profit payment, in other words, let's have a social contract, right, let's create government, and so they do. And this thing, ancient India, they pick the person who is the tallest and the best looking, which is very common if you look at the ancient Hindu texts that's exactly what they always say. So they took the strongest, tallest and best looking person and made him the first king. The title is Mahasammata, which roughly means the people's choice or the great elect. And so government begins. And what I read from that text is that government is inevitable, that human beings simply can't live together in a kind of purely anarchic society, that you need to have someone who is in charge, someone who can enforce the rules. You go on to some of the later texts and the Buddha says that's true, but there's a good way to do it and a bad way to do it. And so there's a second idea, this is the Chakravartin or sometimes also called Chakravarty, which is the wheel turning king. You may know that the sort of typical religious symbol for Buddhism is the eight-spoked wheel and the idea is that the Buddha set the wheel rolling through the world, the wheel represents the truth or the dharma, and it's actually a pre-Buddhist symbol that's roughly connected to the sky, the sun and the seasons. So the Buddha sets the wheel rolling and a wheel turning king does the same thing, not in the realm of spirituality but instead in the realm of politics. And if you are a wheel turning king, if you're someone who achieves the right level of kind of spiritual refinement, you get these magical treasures. And in fact, one of them is a wheel, so you get a magical wheel that then allows you to peacefully exert control over the entire world politically. And so there is a wheel turner. The first one's name is Dalhanemi, which literally means tough tire or something like that, so he's a

wheel turner who isn't harmed by the turning of the wheel, right, his wheel can turn and turn and turn. And so for eight generations they all do it right, they do everything right, and then in the ninth generation someone screws it up. And in that generation what happens is the king, instead of relying on the wisdom of his advisors and the way that things have been done in the past, decides to make his own rules and do things his own way. And the key mistake in this generation is that he fails to support the poor, he fails to make things available to them and they start to steal so that they can get enough food. And when they start to steal, the first person who steals the king brings him in and says why did you steal? And the man says because I don't have enough food. And the king says, oh, that's terrible, here have some food, which seems perfectly reasonable, but then of course other people start stealing so the king will give them food too. Then the king says, oh, well, that was a bad idea, that's not going to work. So the next person who steals he has them executed and that seems like a good solution except that now what happens is the people say, well, if we're going to steal we should probably kill our victims so they can't inform on us. And so every time the king makes a mistake it gets replicated within the society, but worse. And so in that first generation people lived to be 80,000 years old and they have children at 40,000 years, but because of all this violence that now emerges in the society the next generation only lived to be 40,000 years old and they reproduce at 20,000 years. And it just keeps going until you get down to the present generation where we live to be 100 according to the Buddha, but in the future, it's going to get down to a generation where we only live to be 10 and reproduce at 5. And in that last generation what's going to happen is there's going to be a kind of an apocalyptic fight in which people are going to, almost everyone is going to be killed by almost everyone else, except for a tiny little lump of people who run off and hide in the woods, eat only nuts and berries, and commit themselves to not harming anyone. And that group will survive, everyone else will be killed, and then they will start this kind of moral regeneration all the way back up to the period in which you can live to be 80,000 years again, and then will screw it up again. But, okay, so the reason I'm telling you all that is that you have this earliest text which says government is inevitable, you really need some form of coercive power, and then you have the second text that says but, boy, every time you actually use coercion to try to get to a social end it seems to have an unintended consequence. And I think Buddhist politics really bounces back and forth between those two concerns, that Buddhists accept that government is necessary, but also accept or also believe that there's some way which is deeply problematic and is less important than we would otherwise be tempted to think it is. Okay, so that's kind of the big picture. What I argue in the book is that—well, sorry, one more piece. In the earliest text, and actually this is true really up until about 1850, the only form of government that the Buddha or any Buddhist scholar ever seriously discusses is monarchy. There's one passing mention of sort of 5th Century B.C.E. semi-Republican system of like tribal leadership, although it's deeply disputed how Republican it really was, everything else is monarchy. And Buddhist governments from the earliest period up until about 1850 are all monarchy, I mean there isn't anything else. And so one question I had to kind of confront in writing the book was, okay, so then who cares, right? Like it turns out there aren't any monarchists today or maybe there's like a handful, right? I mean even in Thailand, right, where the Buddhist monarch is deeply revered in fact it's effectively a constitutional democracy kind of, I mean at least in form if not in practice. I mean it isn't an absolutist monarchy, even in Bouton the closest to a Buddhist absolutist monarchy that we

really have had in the last 50 years the king abdicated in favor of a Parliament, right? Democracy was created mostly as a project of the king. So you can see this also, by the way, in the Tibetan Diaspora where the Dalai Lama is trying to give away his power over the strenuous objections of the Tibetans. No, no, really, you should have the power, not me. There aren't any sort of absolutist monarchs left, and so why should you care what the Buddhists said about politics 2,000 years ago abdicating a system that no one wants anyway? And so what I tried to argue in the book is that, wait, there's more, that the interesting part isn't his arguments about monarchy, the interesting part is the philosophy that's underneath that, how do you get to the monarchy, what is it that leads him there? And I argued that there are three parts. So one is the Buddhist doctrine of no self. The second is the Buddhist idea that ethics and morality are what Kant called hypothetical imperatives rather than categorical imperatives, so that when you— and so a hypothetical imperative is I made a promise and so I have a duty to fulfill it, a categorical imperative is as a rational being I recognize that this is a moral duty upon me that every rational being must obey. And most of Western ethics is categorical, most of Western ethics says once we figure out what the rule is everyone must do it. And Buddhist ethics on my reading is not categorical, it's hypothetical, it says if you want to achieve enlightenment act in these ways. If you don't, you're an idiot, but you're free to be an idiot, that's totally up to you. And so that's, I think, very interesting and very different than most of Western ethics. And then finally the third sort of piece that underlies this vision of government is what I call the theory of limited citizenship, and the idea here is that government is necessary, it's inevitable, but it's not that important. That once you get it going you are free to turn your attention to something else and, in fact, you probably should turn your attention to something else. And I argue that that Buddhist vision of kind of the modest role of government actually does have a Western parallel in the work of ultimately Epicurean, Thoreau, and contemporary theologians like John Howard Yoder. That there, too, you see people saying, yeah, you need government, you can't just get rid of it, but at the same time you don't have to run it either, there's always going to be someone who wants to run government usually for bad reasons, but actually you should probably just let them because then you can get on with the truly important thing like living the way that Jesus lived in the case of Yoder, being a morally earnest if somewhat sardonic essayist in the case of Thoreau, achieving ataraxia, right, or kind of equilibrium in the case of Epicurean, and in the Buddha seeking enlightenment, but that's really what's important. And the government can help you a little in those endeavors, it can harm you a little in those endeavors, but that it can't either make you enlightened nor prevent you from achieving enlightenment, and that in that way government is necessary but not terribly important and that those three pieces add together to be an interesting philosophical perspective on government. All right, so in sort of one more minute, two more minutes. So in 1850 virtually every Buddhist majority country in the world was some kind of absolutist monarchy, with the exception of Sri Lanka, which had already had been colonized. Between 1850 and 1950 virtually every Buddhist majority country in the world ceased being absolutist monarchy and became some kind of constitutional democracy of some form or another. Now we know why, the answer to why is fairly clear, right, it was either directly the effect of colonialism or an indirect effect. So Thailand was never colonized, but it was obvious to the Thai elite that they needed to adopt kind of more Western forms of democracy to be able to compete and to defend themselves against the colonial powers. But in cases of Sri Lanka or any of the other sort of southeast Asian nations

that were colonized their traditions were essentially disposed of by the colonial powers and replaced by Western modeled democratic systems. The interesting question for me is how did Buddhists understand that transition, right? What is it that they thought and what did they write about? And there are, unfortunately, only a handful of texts, so we have some texts from the Burma Myanmar and some from Thailand in which various Buddhist thinkers that reflect on that. And then, of course, we have texts sort of after the colonial period, so starting in roughly the 1950s, although in the Sri Lanka case starting in the 1890s, where you have Buddhist thinkers trying to reconcile governments and democracy. Say, okay, was Buddhism always really secretly democratic? And one of the pieces—so I mentioned there's this discussion about this ancient tribal method of government. The other piece of evidence that Buddhism might have always been democratic is that the Sangha, which is the group of monks and, or nuns living together as a religious monastic, was always organized democratically, so the internal decision making of the Buddhist communities of monastics has always been democratic. And so a lot of scholars have said, well, okay, the Buddha was really pro-democracy, but he couldn't say that in the ancient world because he had to rely on the protection of monarchs and so sort of pretended to be pro monarchy, but that was just a politically convenient guise. And that may well be true, but unfortunately I don't think the documentary evidence proved that, I don't think that that's the better reading of the evidence. I think the better reading is that the Buddha generally did support monarchy, at least as far as his political vision went, but that the underlying premises of politics can also be mobilized to support democracy. And we see some pieces of that, right, that the ninth successor to Dalhanemi's estate is not supporting the poor and so there's an emphasis on egalitarianism, there's an emphasis on redistribution, an emphasis on the idea that everyone's interests count, that are obviously in some way kind of proto democratic and could be mobilized to support democracy. So what I argue sort of at the end of the book is that even though Buddhist politics has traditionally been monarchical in fact is available as a basis for democratic politics and that what we're seeing now in Buddhist majority countries like Cambodia, right, or Thailand or Bouton is Buddhists kind of figure out how to make that work under different settings. So Bouton never colonized and has a relatively peaceful history and the king willingly gave away power and so they have one path. Cambodia obviously has had a horrible history in the 20th Century, but it has been trying to figure out how to create a Buddhist form of democracy there. The same thing in Myanmar, right, where Aung San Suu Kyi has been a long-term advocate of the idea that Buddhism can be democratic and is now trying to figure out some way to make that happen. So I think there's actually, I think, a very interesting historical moment where we see a major world religion trying to figure out how to apply itself to politics in the future in a way that's been quite different from what it's been in the past. It's almost like a Buddhist political reformation, and so I think that hopefully there'll be many more books and better books that will fill this in as we see over the next few decades what happens. All right, so that's the background piece. Thank you for listening to a lengthy monologue. And now we turn to questions and discussion.

JL: Okay, so I've got to say first of all this is a great book, go get it.

MM: They're right out there.

JL: Oh, good, okay. And I have a background—I'm a philosophy guy and I'm not a political theorist, but I did, I was in a Buddhist studies graduate program at the University of Virginia for a little while until I annoyed everybody by asking philosophical questions and then I sort of migrated toward philosophy. And I can say that what you said about the Barnes and Noble kind of experience is that's my office because when I got the book and I started, I learned a lot about the relationship between Buddhism theoretically and politics, and I just wondered did I miss these passages? And so I started looking through the books and there's like nothing on it, right, so there's information concisely expressed in this book that is really valuable. Furthermore, I teach a course here in Buddhism, come on by, by the way, and I realized that about half of that course is covered in maybe three-and-a-half pages in the introductory material that Matt does. And he lays out the core stuff clearly, I mean you might want to think about it more, but clearly and accurately right in the beginning of the book. So the book is actually really pretty short and has a lot of useful stuff, right, so there's my sales pitch.

MM: Thank you.

JL: And I never, I'm not getting any money for that, by the way, I never met Matt, right, before today.

MM: I've been here for 10 years and somehow our paths have never crossed.

JL: Yes, never crossed, and we even sat in the same meditation group—

MM: Yes.

JL: —but not at the same—

MM: We have a lot of overlapping interests, yes.

JL: So it's great to meet you. Some of the interest, because I'm a philosopher and all the sort of metaphysical stuff, I get kind of excited about that, was the role of the no self, you said a lot about that, you just kind of breezed over it now in your introductory remarks, and so I wonder if you could, I have a couple of questions about the defensibility of the view, how, there's a really nice section on what the similarities and differences between this view and that of Nietzsche, of all people. Like when I thought about it and I'm always thinking about David Hume and more contemporary philosophers, a guy named Derek Parfit, and I hadn't thought about the Nietzsche connection and Matt does a good job of spelling that out. And the other part of this I'd like you to say something about is can you clarify what affect that has exactly on the political stuff?

MM: Yes, maybe, yes. So, yes, the no self-doctrine I think is the hardest part of Buddhism for most people to understand and I'm not sure that I fully understand it myself, I mean I'm still trying to really bring it in. The Buddha says there is no self, and the first level of that isn't that strange, right. So the first level of that is you could interpret it as there is no soul, right, there is

no immortal soul, and we hear that enough in Western philosophy that that's not super shocking. But then the Buddha goes on to say something more than that, says, well, not only is there no immortal soul, there actually isn't even a psychological entity that's the same thing over time, right? Because I think most of us could think, okay, well, maybe if there's not a soul that survives after I die but at least there's like a me, right, that's here in my body and it's the same me that was here when I was 10, it's going to be the same me who is here when I'm 75, God willing, right? And that that will, and that that's sort of a continuous thing, right? Like when I wake up in the morning, I feel like me and I have my memories and my habits, unfortunately, and my disposition and that that's going to keep happening. And the Buddha says, no, actually that's an illusion, what you have is present moment awareness and memory basically and you knit those two pieces together into the sort of fantasy that that has been a thing moving through time, like a boat floating down a stream, but that's not so. All you've got is present moment awareness and memory and you can fabulate that into this story of a self. And the Buddha goes on to say that turns out to be a terrible mistake because the worst thing you've ever done, probably inevitable, right, psychologically you sort of have to do it or you're going to get eaten by a tiger, but when you do it you come to think of yourself as having interests and needs and desires and preferences that then you need to organize your life around defending. You need to organize your life, well, I've got to meet my needs, right, and I've got to defend my interests, and so you organize your life around the desires and that sense of being a thing moving through time. And that is actually ultimately what causes rebirth, right, that by engaging in desire based action you generate karma, right, because Buddhism is basically Hindu Protestantism, right, it's a variant of Hinduism that then changes quite dramatically, but it shares many of the same basic assumptions. And so by generating karma and accumulating karma you end up creating a disposition in your personality that then leads you to the next incarnation. And the goal of Buddhism through enlightenment is to not only get rid of all your old karma, but stop generating new karma, to live in such a way that your actions don't generate karma and that when your body dies it simply dies, there's nothing there, there's no kind of knot of energy that could then move on and inspire the next incarnation. So just one last piece about that and then I'll talk briefly about the politics part. I find that students often find it very difficult to understand what the hell I'm talking about when I say that there is no self. And so one of the metaphors that I've found helpful and that maybe will be helpful for you is a hurricane. So think about what a hurricane is, do you think they're so real we even give them a name, right? And yet all a hurricane is is a certain amount of heat and a certain amount of moisture, concentrated at a certain point in space and time and that's it. It spins itself up out of that combination of heat and moisture, it destroys a variety of things along the East Coast, and then it spins itself out and that's it, right? And no one says, but where is the hurricane now, did it become a new hurricane, did it get reborn, is it a tropical cyclone, right? No one thinks that, and yet the same thing is true of you, you're just some matter and some energy that got spun up at one moment in time and you're going to make your way through life hopefully not destroying too much on the East Coast and then you're going to spin out, and it would be a little odd to say but where is Jonas now, right? Jonas must be somewhere? But that's like saying if Hurricane Matthew, the Matthew-ness must be somewhere, where has it gone, right? And the Buddha says it's as silly to ask that about a person as it is to ask it about a squirrel or to ask it about a hurricane. And that, at least to me, has a certain kind of intuitive plausibility, whether I

can live that is a different question. But Hume famously says, "I can convince myself of all kinds of things sitting in my chair by the fire, but when I go out the door I don't believe any of them." In terms of politics, I don't think there's a direct link, you know, I don't think that, okay, once you figure out that there's no self you're going to start voting Republican, right, or whatever. I don't think there's any obvious connection to any particular disposition, but I will say one thing which is that the Western focus on the idea of people as being bearers of rights I think is complicated by the idea that people aren't real. And a lot of Buddhist scholars have worried about that, that the whole idea of human rights seems to rest on the idea that you're a real thing, right, that you have interests that are perdurant, that we have to protect them over the course of your lifetime. And if you're just a hurricane it's not clear what we're going to base that on other than maybe just convenience, right, that's just a good way for us to live and it works well for us. And so I think that's the piece that I worry about the most.

JL: Right, yes. So I mean it occurs to me that maybe you could account for this kind of thing just in terms of reducing suffering and bringing about human flourishing or something like this, but it's certainly true who is it that's going to bear the right, to whom are you just?

MM: Yes, exactly.

JL: So could you just continue, if you don't mind?

MM: No, not at all.

JL: This is what I like, right? So you made a particular point to distinguish what Nietzsche does with a very similar doctrine from what you take the Buddha to be doing, I thought that was kind of a cool point.

MM: As any of my students will tell you, it takes virtually nothing to get me talking about Nietzsche, so that's easy. So Nietzsche and the Buddha I think both actually they have the same critique of the self and then they end up going in diametrically opposed directions about what to do about it, which I think is very interesting. So and I'll give you Nietzsche's version first, so Nietzsche says when we look at ourselves first there's the soul myth which is like whatever, everyone knows that fault. And then he says but then there's also this sort of sense of unity myth, and if you really examine your own psyche what you'll see is that there's a whole set of conflicting instincts and conflicting capacities that are at war with one another, right? And so perhaps students will have the most immediate feeling about this. So in the morning when your alarm goes off my guess is that very few of you have the instinct of I must go to Professor Moore's class, right? Presuming most of you think I want to go back to sleep or I'd like to eat more or, God, it's a beautiful day I want to go to the beach. And yet nonetheless, you get up and come to my class, why do you do it? Well, because you think I've got to get a degree and then I'm going to go to law school and then things are going to work out well, right? So you have, you've committed yourself sort of mentally to a certain set of outcomes and a certain course of conduct, and those are to some degree at war, right? And probably most students at least one day during the quarter my class will not win, right, if I remember my own college

career, right, that certainly happened to me. And so Nietzsche says why assume that there's a single unity that contains all of those things, why not just talk about them as being, he actually calls them a poly, why not treat them as if they were competing political parties or competing powers that really are genuinely in battle to decide your conduct? And he calls these the under soul. And then he says, okay, so if you have these under souls you've got to find some way to kind of organize them, they have to have some kind of order or else there's just going to be chaos. And so for Nietzsche the process of what gets called self-overcoming is a process of learning how to get one of them to win most of the time, right? So one of them, you develop a habit of saying, okay, I'm striving for this, I want this outcome and that one is going to win out over the impulses that are in some way in conflict with that. But Nietzsche says that doesn't make that your self, right, that that identity remains sort of fictitious and temporary and at some point it's going to collapse hopefully and you're going to overcome it. And you're going to say, okay, I used to have to, for example—I'll give you an example, when I was in grad school I lived in Brooklyn and I wanted to go running more but I was lazy, and so I finally realized that what I needed to do was put my alarm clock on the opposite side of my bedroom, which is fairly far away, so that I had to get physically out of bed to turn off my alarm, and then I put my running shoes and clothes right next to the alarm clock. So that that way I'm already out of bed and standing up, well, shit, I might as well at least put on my shorts and go running, right? But that was the only way I could do it, right? And so maybe early on you have to do something like that, you have to really beat yourself into obedience, but maybe later you could have or you could overcome that and have so a different version of which thing is going to be in charge. And, of course, different parts of your under soul—different under souls may be in charge at different times. But the crucial thing for Nietzsche is he says there always has to be one of them that's in charge, so even though it's fictitious, even though your current identity is kind of fraudulent you can't do without it because if you let it go you're just going to have chaos, you're just going to have all the various instincts and conflicts with one another. And the Buddha says everything you just said was right up until the last point because, in fact, you can let it go, you can let that, you can let go of the notion that even though your self is fictitious you've got to have one and you'll overcome it, but you cannot do without one at any given moment. Basically because he says on my reading you can sufficiently tame the various parts of your self so that they achieve a kind of harmony without pretending that there's this encapsulating self. And so the Buddha, and for those of you who are Nietzsche fans I think the Buddhist critique of Nietzsche is that Nietzsche holds onto the last tiny shred of resentment [assumed spelling], right, that he can't quite get rid of or can't quite accept the way the world really is so he has to hold onto this organizing fiction of the self. And the Buddha says that's ultimately going to be fatal to your project, you were right about everything up to now and now you sort of have to have the courage to let go of that last piece and accept the world the way it is rather than say I know it's not really like this, but I have to pretend it's like that or else it's going to fall apart. So that's my reading anyway.

JL: Yes. So with respect, I'm just I'm kind of hanging my question on your three elements there.

MM: Sure.

JL: There's a lot more I could talk about on self indefinitely. The other sort of philosophical feature that I enjoyed reading in the book was the appeal to a kind of moral naturalism and the distinction that you made earlier between categorical and hypothetical imperatives. So again a similar kind of question here, what exactly do you understand by moral naturalism or irrealism, right, and what distinctions are there, and the impact that you see that this has on the notion of politics and government?

MM: So this is tricky and I'll try to keep this one brief just because I don't want to get too far into the sort of philosophical weeds. So I make these two distinctions in the discussion of ethics. One is between naturalism and non-naturalism, right? So naturalistic theories of ethics say ethics, whatever it is, emerges from the world of nature, so the world of animals and plants and rocks and stuff like that, as opposed to non-naturalistic theories which emerge from something typically supernatural, like a God or some kind of divine order. And so naturalistic theories want to get rid of the supernatural and ground ethics in sort of the tangible, and Buddhist ethics is naturalistic in that sense. But most naturalistic ethics is then what you would call realist, right, that would then go on to say and those natural facts that give rise to moral truth are in some sense kind of universal truths about nature, such that you must behave according to them. And Buddhist ethic is irrealist, it says there are these natural facts but they don't give rise to categorical imperatives, right, they give rise to these kind of hypothetical imperatives. So, for example, it is true that if you, according to the Buddha, that if you lead a life of greed and gluttony you will create a character in your mind such that you will continue to seek the satisfaction of those desires and you will then be led to a poetically appropriate next incarnation as, for example, the prey of some carnivorous animal, right? It's not really punishment, but for Buddhists it's that you're not punished for your deeds but by them, and so in the same way it's not like there's some scorekeeper somewhere that says, oh, you were a jerk, let's make you a shrew and someone will eat you, but rather that you have chosen that kind of life by creating that kind of character in your previous incarnation. So, and what do I want to say about that? And so in that sense the ethics are irrealist, in other words they say it's not that you're wrong or bad or evil for having done that, you just made a choice that you're now going to have to live with the consequences of and if you didn't want those consequences you might think about making a different choice next time. Fortunately for you you'll probably have thousands of incarnations in which to get it right, so with any luck you'll pull it off eventually. The Buddhists say that human incarnation occurs as often as if you took like a lifesaving ring and you tossed it in the ocean and there were a turtle who surfaced only once every 100 years, as often as the turtle would surface with its head poking through the ring, that's how often you get a human incarnation, so don't screw it up, right, this is your chance. And so I argue that Buddhist ethics is naturalistic in the sense that there's no God, there's no divine order that underlies it, but that it's irrealist in the sense that it's not telling you how you must behave, but only how you should behave if you want these particular kinds of outcomes, that's the hypothetical imperative. Now let me say scholars of Buddhist ethics are not universally agreed on this, I would say the majority of opinions are actually on the other side, but there's a pretty substantial minority that sees them as irrealists in the same way that I do. In terms of the consequences for politics, I think, here's what I think and then who knows if it's right. What we want—what we often want to do, all right—what I often want to do in politics is

say, look, I've identified this moral truth that every rational being must obey and so, therefore, you must do the things that I want to do, right? And that there's a way in which that's sort of the way that we would like to win by being able to claim the principle that no rational person could disagree with and then everyone has to follow your particular policy preference. And I think that once you think that ethics are hypothetical that basically is no longer available, you can't argue that way anymore. And so you have to either argue at a kind of policy level, like a horse trading level, or you have to argue at kind of midlevel principles. So you and I may disagree about the morality of some actions, but we might be able to agree on how to regulate or we might be able to agree on whether it's a choice that someone should—I'm trying to think, something that is appropriately decided by a group or by an individual or something that is appropriately decided by children or should we only wait until they're adults. So that there may be some way in which we can find a kind of a middle ground or at least something mutually acceptable. But I think, yes, the idea of arguing from kind of first principles more or less disappears.

JL: I mean it occurs to me, I don't think you said anything about this in the book and if you did I apologize, but I really did read it more than once, I read part of it twice, right? So but like a little while ago, well, a lot of Western tradition would be more absolutely, but as a counter example I thought of like John Stewart Mills' utilitarianism. And it's long struck me that the principle of utility and a Buddhist approach is also hypothetical. Do you care about having this, you know?

MM: You don't have to.

JL: Right, you don't have to, but here's a policy, it's sensitive to the facts, let's promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Would you see Buddhism like roughly there? There's another Western tradition that has some striking similarities.

MM: Yes, so and many scholars of Buddhism I think do see that, right, so a lot of people who study this say utilitarianism really does seem like the right interpretation of Buddhism. So my hesitation about that is that, what's the way to put that? I guess this is why I'm a political theorist and not a philosopher so that I can make this claim without really trying to justify it adequately. It has long seemed to me that one of the problems with Mills' version of utilitarianism and most of the versions of utilitarianism that I've studied is that they make a leap from what's rational at an individual level in terms of my own behavior towards myself to becoming duty in my behavior towards others. So, for example, obviously it would be best for me if everyone acted towards me as to maximize my happiness among everyone else's happiness, but it's not obvious why I have a duty to act that way towards other people except to secure their cooperation, right? So I'm not sure that utilitarianism can get to the level of kind of duty, I think it can get to the level of enlightened health interests. And so I think the Buddha may be happy to go there, you know, and say, sure, like if you want to have a peaceful society act in a way that is going to secure that. And I think the various rules that are given for Buddhist practitioners to behave are, in fact, basically that, so the noble path is largely about avoiding unnecessary conflict either internally or externally. But I guess I don't think the consequentialism can get from there to the level of kind of genuine duty, and so that's why I'm

hesitant to put the pieces together. But that may ultimately be in its benefit, right, so I mean maybe that if consequentialism is also essentially just a version of enlightened self-interests and so is Buddhism then maybe they are a good thing. I haven't sort of fully chewed that through yet.

JL: Right, yes, I guess like when I think about proposals that, well, you'd want a government to at least stay out of people's way as they pursue a spiritual path and minimize and make sure people aren't starving and things like that and if you ask the question, well, why should they do that? It seems to me that Mills and even Bentham would have a straightforward—

MM: That path.

JL: Yes, that's exactly what you should do, but I'm sure there's more to the moral story, like the Buddhist emphasis on motive of not just the consequences, it's the motive that sort of generates the karma.

MM: Right, yes, exactly. Yes, the desire driven action, the karma and not merely the action itself. Yes, that's a good connection there.

JL: So I don't know how we're doing for—is it question time or are we going to keep going with our—well, just something that generally occurs to me because the treatment in the book is Buddhism as a religious tradition because it is, right? But as we were talking about earlier there are those who say, well you know, we ought to look at the Buddha and some prominent Buddhists, like Nagarjuna [assumed spelling], like major philosophers, look at the Buddha like Aristotle or something like this, and then evaluate, think of this thing philosophically. And so that's a separate question from like what the Buddhist countries do and what sort of thing that a committed religious Buddhist could accept. But if you had those people like I mentioned Owen Flanagan earlier, once a naturalized Buddhist and there are lots of folks like that, like Stephen Batchelor Buddhism. And so all that karma and rebirth, as you pointed it out, that's kind of a working assumption and the thought and while I tell my students, well, the Buddha can defect his belief in karma and rebirth because it was a part of the, his experience, so I have a direct experience of how karma and rebirth works, and the enlightenment, and then he gives something like Pascal's wager about why the rest of us ought to, well, you'll be better off if you believe it and if it turns out it's not true then you're still better off, and if it turns out that it is true and you don't believe it it would be bad for you because you'll be reborn as an ant or something like this or hell, whatever, right? Like a contemporary person, I don't, I can't accept that, there's no self so what sense can I make of the continuity of consciousness or whatever jumping around, what's the mechanics of that, is there like a computer programmer in the sky that takes the program that is me and plants it into, or you're going to be a beaver now or whatever, you know? And so I just can't accept that, and yet I see something really philosophically promising, maybe it's the ethics, it's the four noble truths, a lot of that is still it seems to me defensible without the religious stuff. And the reason that I ask this is that when we're talking about this, you know, like is there something just philosophically there that can have an impact on how we think about politics? It's not just about, well, I'm a Buddhist

religiously, how should I think about politics? But for anybody, here's a defensible way to think about politics, whatever your religious commitments are or are not.

MM: That's a small question, yes.

JL: Yes, I talk for a long time, I apologize.

MM: No, no, not at all, not the length, it's the enormity of the idea. All right, well, maybe two quick things about that and then we can switch to questions and discussion with the audience. So one quick thing about the mechanics of reincarnation that I think is at least worth noting. So a common image that you read in Buddhist texts is lighting one candle off of another, right? So you light, one candle gets lit and then you light the next and the next and the next and then soon the whole birthday cake is lit. And one of the points that the teachers make is no one thinks that there's like an essence of fire that moves from one candle to the next, to the next, to the next, and somehow there's something that's the same that has moved along, but rather one candle is able to kind of spark the next into life in some way, that it creates a chain reaction. And so that's the kind of typical way that reincarnation is described, it's not that there's a thing, right, so it's not psychosis, right, like in the Western tradition where your soul moves from one body to the next to the next to the next, but rather it's more like your dying body kicks the next body and kicks it in some characteristic way that sets it into motion. Whether that makes sense is a different question, but I mean that's at least how the mechanics get explained. So I think what I'm tempted to say about all that is that so the Buddha, there's this beautiful and often cited passage called "The Advice to the Kalamas", where Buddha goes to this town and the people of the town, the Kalamas, say, oh, enlightened one, lots of religious teachers come to our town including you and how do we know who is right, because you come and we think you're pretty great and then all these other people come and they seem pretty great too, how do we know? And the Buddha says, well, don't take my word for it, like don't take it on faith, don't take it on authority, don't take it on anything, except your own experience. And so if you practice my way and it's helpful to you then that's good reason to think that it's right, but if you practice my way and it's not helpful to you then I'm wrong. And then so in that same way I guess I think for me the message of Buddhism isn't become a Buddhist and think this way or you're Buddhist you ought to think this way, but rather there's this practice that lots of people have found helpful, but it is really about the practice ultimately. There's this practice of meditation that people have found helpful and there's this set of stories that they have told about why it's helpful and those might be helpful to you too, you know, and this is my own experience that meditation was helpful for me. And I thought, well, I'd like to know more about that, and so I started reading the stories about the meditations and some of them were quite helpful. I think like, oh, okay, that is a good way to think about that. Or some of them are more helpful in a literal sense, like okay I actually think that, and then some of them were helpful in a more kind of metaphorical sense of I get it that this is a fiction but it's a fiction that helps explain things or it's a fiction that helps organize my experience. And I guess, I don't know I'm just an early 21st Century cafeteria Buddhist but I mean I guess I think that people can stop along that path wherever they stop, and that some people, for some people reincarnation will be a literal truth that makes sense to them and for others it'll be a

metaphorical truth about things coming back to bite you in the ass later. And I'm not too worried about which one they end up with.

JL: You know, the connection is to make, here's some people in the West like at the Carissin and some similar things with respect to that, there's a plausible argument. Because one of our traditions is with the First Amendment and all that is that religious liberty, I'm kind of Jeffersonian on this point, that when you talk about a Buddhist government it might be a religious state.

MM: Right, or Buddhist inspired.

JL: Right, yes.

MM: That, by the way, is going to be the next revelation, that President Obama is actually a Buddhist. In case you're wondering, it's coming. No, I think that's right, I think maybe there is a kind of pared down version of Buddhism.

MM: Right.

JL: That a lot of people could accept or at least be inspired by based on the way the Buddha, himself, taught it, right? Which is human life seems to contain an inescapable amount of suffering, that suffering seems to be caused—so I have a nine year old and I'm trying to indoctrinate him, and so—

MM: Good luck.

JL: Yes, but when he's upset I do say to him, Buddy, the only reason anyone is upset, he's really interested in Buddhism so like if I say the Buddha said it he'll actually stop yelling at me and listen. So, but the only reason anyone is ever upset is because your mind wants something and the world is giving you something else, that's it, there's no other reason that anyone ever has an unhappy feeling. Your mind wants one thing and the world is giving you something different. And there's only three options, you can keep suffering, sometimes you can change the world like if you're hungry go eat, but sometimes you've got to change your mind. And that seems to me true.

MM: Right.

JL: Reasonably self-evident.

MM: Yes.

JL: And so maybe starting there, you know, there is a core of kind of the Buddhist perspective that could be more broadly acceptable. [Applause] Thank you, all, very much for coming.

[Music]

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