

Ashoka's Dhamma as a Project of Expansive Moral Hegemony

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INTRODUCTION

Ancient, pre-modern, pre-democracy rulers and their states can be classified into three kinds. First, those rulers who conquer territories and rule people by brute force and elaborate surveillance. They enslave people, treat them as subhuman, subject them to arbitrary power, and tyrannize them. Second, those rulers who seize power in the territory that they inhabit or conquer other territories, but then form alliances with subsidiary rulers, neutralize opposition, and impose or compel others to accept their worldview. This is rule by domination. In such states, the elementary needs of people may be met but their conception of the good life is utterly disregarded. Political domination is accompanied by cultural domination. Third, and finally, there exists the ruler who rules neither by brute force nor by domination. Instead, he provides political, cultural, and intellectual leadership. He wishes to arrive at a political ethic that accommodates the worldview of his subjects; that is, he seeks to find a common ground, allowing multiple conceptions of the good life to exist and then to integrate these conceptions into his political ethic. In short, he encourages discussion among different groups within his territory, and once a common political ethic is identified, he becomes its guardian. He leads by example, doing everything in his power to provide ethical education to his subjects.

Although formulated in an entirely different era and context, the modern Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci coined the term “expansive hegemony,” which can be used to describe such rule. When a ruler is morally hegemonic in this sense, he manages to arrive at a new ethic that coalesces the multiple ethical perspectives of all the groups in his society. Expansive hegemony is entirely consistent with pluralism. This new ethic provides a social cement to his rule within the territory

and could be equally valuable to rulers and subjects beyond the boundaries of its originator. Therefore, this ethic may take root not only within the territorial boundary of the hegemon's rule but also spread beyond it. This diffusion does not happen automatically, but is undertaken by suitably trained moral educators. This establishes the basis of a new kind of imperial order where brute force and domination is replaced by the intellectual and moral leadership of the hegemon. Word is spread not just by the traveling trained officials of the state but by the ruler himself, who leads by example.

Asoka, who ruled in the third century BCE in India, is probably the first leader in the world of this third kind. Knowledge about him comes from his inscriptions or edicts that lie scattered in more than thirty places throughout India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.¹ Most of them are written in Brahmi script from which all Indian scripts and many of those used in Southeast Asia later developed. The language of the edicts in the eastern part of the subcontinent is Prakrit, associated with the people of Magadh; in the edicts of western India it is closer to Sanskrit in the Kharoshthi script, with one extract of Edict 13 in Greek and one bilingual edict in Kandahar, Afghanistan, written in Greek and Aramaic. Asoka's edicts, the earliest decipherable corpus of written documents from India, have survived throughout the centuries because they are written on rocks, cave walls, and stone pillars. These edicts appear to be in Asoka's own words rather than in the more formal language in which royal edicts or proclamations in the ancient world were usually written.

Excessive self-praise was common in oral cultures, especially among rulers. Modesty was not a political virtue. Thus, many of his inscriptions describe his achievements. He claims to have ushered in a new era, to have broken away from the past, a feature that already distinguishes him from other empire-builders of his time. However, other significant features need highlighting. His self-praise is almost always tempered by self-criticism. Talk of his achievement is disrupted by intense self-reflection about the difficulties faced by a leader who wishes to be ethical. Rock Edict 5 states: "It is easy to commit sins, or do wrong, and far more difficult to do something good or morally right. Nor is it easy to follow the example of a righteous person." Pillar Edict 3, for example, reflects on human nature: "We all notice only the good deeds we have done but not always our wicked deeds." To confront oneself, to ask if one has been cruel, harsh, unjustly angry, or proud, is hard; Asoka speaks of how he had been close to failure and expresses regret for the harm he might have caused to humans and animals. He reflects also on human frailty and vulnerability, and more generally on the human predicament. Some of these inscriptions are less like the edicts of a ruler and more like a personal diary, often confessional, that he nonetheless shares with the public, a sort of published personal notebook in stone or iron.

Second, it was a normal royal custom, particularly in his times, to affix a long chain of self-glorifying honorific titles before one's own name. For example, the

Achaemenidian inscriptions of Darius begin thus: “I, Darius, the Great King, king of kings, king of countries, king on this earth, son of Hystaspes, the Achaemenid” (the Elamite text of the inscription DPf).² Contrast this with Asoka, who humbly eschews such titles and wishes to be known simply as “devanam priya” (the beloved of the gods or other rulers). Third, the moral worldview propagated by him does not ask others to abandon their own idea of the good life but seems to say to them, “Keep yours, but also embrace my own.”

This essay explores the Asokan politico-moral ethic, called Dhamma, and the role of moral and intellectual leadership in it both within the king’s own territory and beyond it. It shows that one of the central aspirations of Asoka’s Dhamma is a form of universalism, to shape the global order by sending emissaries all over the world. At appropriate junctures, it shows similarities of Asoka’s views to Xunzi’s as enunciated and compared by Yan Xuetong in this volume with Kautilya’s political vision. Kautilya provides somewhat of a contrast to Xunzi, whereas Asoka and Xunzi share many similarities. A comparison between Xunzi and Asoka is equally interesting, perhaps even more appropriate.

ASOKA’S DHAMMA AS CIVIC RELIGION

At the core of Asoka’s edicts lies his conception of Dhamma, a set of precepts about how to lead a good individual and collective life. Dhamma is generally understood in India’s scholarly tradition to mean “law.” But in a recent essay, Patrick Olivelle has proposed that Dhamma be reconceived as civic religion, a term revived by Robert Bellah, after Rousseau first coined it in his classic work, *The Social Contract*.³

Dhamma as Personal Morality (Interpersonal Morality)

For Olivelle, Dhamma has far more to do with the cultivation of personal and religious virtues, with spiritual growth, and with the development of character than with obedience to civil and criminal law. He cites Rock Edicts 2 and 3, which explicitly speak of Dhamma: “Obedience to mother and father. Giving to friends and acquaintances and relatives, to brahmanas and sramanas. Showing kindness and abstaining from killing living beings.” Asoka extols “spending little and storing little” and “speaking the truth.” Both Rock Edicts 9 and 11 and Pillar Edict 7 add that “proper regard to slaves and servants” is morally important.⁴

In Pillar Edict 2, Asoka explicates further: “It is having few faults and doing many good deeds (*Kalyana*), compassion (*Daya*), charity (*Dana*), truthfulness and purity (*Sochaye*).” Later two other virtues are added: *Samyama* (self-control) and *Bhavashuddhi* (purity of mind). Olivelle rightly points out that Asoka’s Dhamma does not discriminate between individuals and groups. Dhamma is applicable to all, regardless of social station, economic status, gender, or ethnicity. Its aspiration, like Buddha’s, is universal.⁵

But I wish to push Olivelle further. I do this by making explicit two distinctions implicit in his remarks on Asoka: first, between the personal and the social, and second, between morality and law. Olivelle is right that Asoka's Dhamma is not obedience to law, civil or criminal. Force and coercion are not part of the moral and political lexicon of the epigraphs.⁶ Asoka relies on persuasion (*Nijjhati*) rather than legislation, but it does not follow that Dhamma is thereby equated with personal or individualistic morality. Individual morality is not the only alternative to law. As important for Asoka is collective or intergroup morality—what we owe each other as members of religio-philosophical groups. Dhamma is then more than interpersonal morality—what we owe each other as individuals and to members of one's own family, those who are extensions of one's self.

Interpasandic (Intergroup) Morality

Among historians, a consensus exists today that Asoka lived at a time when urbanization was well under way. New towns had arisen, and with them a new, separate class of traders and merchants. In large tracts of land, different categories of people—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, merchants, and ordinary people—freely lived or were compelled to live together, and to interact. This was also a period of the emergence of larger state formations. One new function of state officials was to address the possibly troublesome interaction among these groups and individuals. These state officials possibly lived among and jostled with these groups. Since, as one of the epigraphs tells us, members of each of these socioeconomic groups attached themselves to different *pasandas*, these *pasandas* too interacted with one another. As they regularly met face to face, the quality of their interaction would surely have depended on the moral and ethical character of their respective *pasandas*, and the different content of their worldviews. Profound disagreement and conflict were likely if these differences were major.

What was the nature of these differences? First, those who agreed on the ethical centrality of ritual sacrifice began to differ on its form—some accepted that it involved several Brahmins, was large, complicated, and expensive, while others thought this baroque quality obscured its real meaning, which lay in simplicity and economy. A second difference also emerged within practitioners of ritual sacrifice. Some claimed that the main purpose of ritual sacrifice was to propitiate the gods, to persuade benevolent gods to work in favor of the *yajamana* and prevent malevolent gods from obstructing *yajamanas* from receiving the desired goods. Others thought that the gods, even if they existed, were irrelevant to this entire process. The correct, meticulous, flawless performance of the ritual by the Brahmins was sufficient to beget all the desired goods. Third, there was a straightforward disagreement between those who affirmed the centrality of ritual sacrifice and those who denied it or who claimed that the act of sacrifice was meaningless unless related to knowledge, unavailable to or hidden from the empirical self, what later came to be viewed as the identity of the Brahman and the Atman (the

Upanishadic Thinkers). Fourth, among those who denied its significance were those who disregarded Karma (Ajivikas) and those who believed that any alternative ethics must make it its pivot (Jainas, Buddhists). Fifth, among those who gave Karma a central place in their ethics, there were the radical ascetics who evaluated all Karma negatively and believed that cessation of all Karma—physical and mental motionlessness—was the only way to individual salvation (Nirgranthas or Jainas) and there were those who argued that Karma could be both positively and negatively evaluated and that salvation depends not just on self-focused action but even more on other-related actions of kindness and compassion (Buddhists). Finally, in the broadest possible terms, a straightforward conflict existed between ritual specialists (Brahmins) and all those who rejected the ethical significance of ritual sacrifice (*Shramanas*, i.e., the Jains, Buddhists, Ajivikas, and some ascetic Brahmins).⁷

What, despite profound differences in worldviews, could be the basis of such coexistence? For a start, the possibility of coexistence depended on toleration, the capacity to put up with the practices of others, despite deep moral disagreement. Better still, it needed mutual adjustment and accommodation: to the extent possible, Vedic, Brahmanical ethics needed to be moralized; the shramanic worldview, the worldview of Buddhists, Nirgranthis, and Ajivikas, needed to accept some value in rituals and rites. This could hardly have been easy, given the Shramanic contempt for rituals and the Brahmanic distaste for anti-ritualistic, transcendental morality. The edicts encourage partial reconciliation. Rock Edict 9 notes that rituals and ceremonies play an important role in the daily lives of people. They are also significant on the occasions of births, the marriages of sons and daughters, journey, sickness, and death.⁸

Several edicts mention, however, the limited value of rituals and ceremonies.⁹ Rock Edict 9 says, “It is right that ceremonies are performed but this kind bears little fruit and is of ‘doubtful value.’”¹⁰ The only ceremonies worth performing are Dhamma-related, i.e., those good deeds that concern others: ceremonies of Dhamma, the *Dhamma-mangalas* that celebrate the proper treatment of slaves and employees, restraint of violence toward living creatures, reverence toward teachers, and liberality toward Brahman and Sramana ascetics.¹¹ Yet rituals do not address one of the most burning moral issues of the times: interpassandic disagreement and conflict. Hence, Edict 12 says, “The beloved of the Gods does not wish to overvalue gifts and sacrifice. More important than these is the reverence one’s faith commands or the number of its followers or its core ethical values. Even more important than these ethical values are the essentials of all faiths and *pasandas*. It is these essentials that constitute the common ground of these seemingly conflicting conceptions.”¹²

What then are these essentials? Interpreters here give differing answers: Dhamma is sometimes seen as virtue, religious truth, or simply piety. But the most convincing answer, consistent with what is mentioned above, is that Dhamma is

akin to a social ethic.¹³ If so, it is fair to say that for Asoka, rites and rituals have no meaning unless embedded within an ethical perspective, and the ethical import of these gifts is overshadowed or overridden by their lack of moral significance. This is why only those rituals may be performed that are not injurious to anyone (humans as well as nonhumans). No animal may be killed in order to be sacrificed. Nor should there be any *samaja* (assembly) for such a purpose, implying that other kinds of assemblies, especially the Sangha, are permissible.¹⁴

What then is the social content of Dhamma? The fundamental principle of Dhamma is *vacaguti*, variously interpreted as restraint on speech or control of the tongue. Why is such importance attributed to *Vaca*? We do not have much evidence of the verbal battles and hate speech of that period, but the edicts imply that verbal wars in that period were intense and brutal. They simply had to be reined in. And what kind of speech had to be curbed? Edict 12 says that speech without reason that disparages other *pasandas* must be restrained. Speech critical of others may be freely enunciated only if one has good reasons to do so.¹⁵ However, even when one has good reasons to be critical, one may do so only on appropriate occasions; and even when the occasion is appropriate, one must never be immoderate. Critique should never belittle or humiliate others. Thus, there is a multilayered, ever-deepening restraint on one's verbal speech against others. Let us call it "other-related self-restraint." However, the edicts do not stop at this. They go on to say that one must not extol one's own *pasanda* without good reason. Undue praise of one's own *pasanda* is as morally objectionable as unmerited criticism of the faith of others. Moreover, the edicts add that even when there is good reason to praise one's own *pasanda*, it too should be done only on appropriate occasions, and even on those occasions, never immoderately. Undue or excessive self-glorification is also a way to make others feel small. For Asoka, blaming other *pasandas* out of devotion to one's own *pasanda*, as well as unreflective, uncritical, effulgent self-praise, can only damage one's *pasanda*. By offending and thereby estranging others, it undermines one's capacity for mutual interaction and possible influence. Thus, there must equally be multi-textured, ever-deepening restraint with respect to oneself. Let this be "self-related self-restraint."

Elsewhere, in Edict 7, Asoka emphasizes the need not only for self-restraint, *samyama*, but also *bhavashuddhi*, again a self-oriented act. But in my view, *bhavashuddhi*, purity of mind, here includes cleansing one's self of ill will toward others. Self-restraint and self-purification are not just matters of etiquette or prudence. They have an other-related, moral significance.

For Asoka, hate speech and self-glorification produces discord and dogma. He wishes instead to advance mutual understanding and mutual appreciation, for which it is better to have *samovaya*, concourse, an assembly of *pasandas* where they can hear each other out and communicate with one another. This may or may not result in agreement and consensus, but it certainly makes them *bahushruta*, i.e., one who listens to all, the perfect listener, or one who hears or has heard

the many, and thereby becomes open-minded. In this way they can tease out the impurities and imperfections from their own collective ethical self-understanding. This is the only path to *atma pasanda vaddhi*, growth in the ethical self-understanding of one's own *pasanda*, and to *par pasanda vaddhi*, growth in the ethical self-understanding of others. It also brings growth of the essentials of all (*saravadhi*). The edicts here imply that the ethical self-understanding of *pasandas* is not static but constantly evolving, and such growth is crucially dependent on mutual communication and dialogue with one another. Blaming others without good reason or doing so immoderately disrupts this process and, apart from damaging Dhamma, diminishes mutual growth of individual *pasandas*. In another passage, Asoka says that those seeking improvement in their own ethical views should not only communicate with others with different ethical perspectives in order to learn from them but even follow their precepts, "obey" them. Thinking as if you were in someone else's shoes may not on occasion be sufficient; you have to act with their shoes on. This practical ethical engagement brings an experiential dimension that could be ethically transformative.

Vacaguti and *samovaya* are social virtues irreducible to personal or individual virtues because they involve a set of dispositions and comportment not only regarding one's own self—the particular beliefs and practices that are dear to me—but also regarding other selves. Like civility, openness, and tolerance, they too are associated with individuals, but even more, they are relational. They are an attribute of whole societies. We may legitimately speak of a civil (with *samyama* and *vacaguti*) society, an open society, a tolerant society, and a harmonious rather than an acrimonious society. Asoka himself conveys strongly that he has in mind "harmony" as an attribute of social life.¹⁶ The social dimension of Dhamma requires that each group act in a manner that generates harmony in society.

This point needs to be made more centrally than Olivelle does. Doing so lends greater weight to his argument that Asokan Dhamma be seen as civic religion, for a key feature of civic religion is that it is neither opposed to any particular religious-philosophical perspective nor associated exclusively with it. The need to have a space for it arises precisely under conditions of diversity, as Olivelle recognizes. In a multi-religious, multi-philosophical society, civic religion draws attention to core values around which citizens can unite, rise above, or discover commonality beneath radical diversity and conflict. *Samyama* and *vacaguti* are crying out to be included in a list of virtues and values around which everyone, disagreeing on much else, can agree. For Bellah, civic religion is the moral glue, a common reference point that gives people a sense of unity amidst radical differences. It exists only where multiple religions and philosophies cohabit. Furthermore, in Bellah's use of the term, in the American context, this individual and social morality is called a religion because it includes rituals and a variety of other spiritual elements, not the least of which is the symbolic role played by "God," an empty sign which means so little that it can be filled in as each person wishes. In Asokan edicts

this role is performed by Dhamma; as long as they agree on the broad idea, each religio-philosophical group can read into it whatever else they wish.

DHAMMA AS POLITICAL ETHIC (RULER-RULED MORALITY)

Equally important, there exists a crucial political component of Dhamma that outlines how political power is to be used for ethical purposes, what ethical relation there must be between the ruler and the ruled, and what is expected of royal officials. It is also about what the ruler owes to people who are not directly his subjects—in short, concerning interstate relationships, or what ethical principles shape the global order. True, these are not present explicitly in the list of virtues or norms associated with Dhamma, but, I would argue, nor is Dhamma conceivable without them. Indeed, I would argue that unlike other conceptions of Dharma or Dhamma extant in Indian society, Asoka offers us a uniquely political conception. In the remaining part of this essay, I elaborate this point, which is somewhat less emphasized by scholars on Asoka. This strong political dimension should also have been underlined by Olivelle. Adding it to the idea of civic religion does not contradict Olivelle's claim; rather, it strengthens it. For civic religion, as I have already mentioned, is also a political idea. It refers not only to widely held social principles but also to political principles. In the American context it refers primarily to values of democracy and citizenship equality. These two values define the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. American civic religion is not possible in the absence of democracy or if citizenship is reduced to subjecthood. These values, and others such as justice, tolerance, and freedom, must be pursued by the president and the citizens alike. No one is above them. The president also becomes the point of reference, acting as a moral exemplar, sometimes as a pastor, sometimes as a priest, and sometimes as a prophet. Obviously, Asoka is no democrat, but it does not follow that the idea of civic religion is not deployable within the framework of kingship.

Three points must be kept in mind before I elaborate the political dimension of Dhamma. First, Buddha's teachings opened up the possibility of the radical socio-political restructuring of the world and the self by politico-moral action from above. Buddha's ethic included the pivotal importance of moral action. Once one stands outside the whole cosmos and is able to see its limitations, and once the transcendental point from which one examines the cosmos is viewed as emanating a moral vision, it becomes possible to imagine a profound restructuring of society and polity in accordance with that vision. Once again, D. D. Kosambi imaginatively engages this point when he says that more than a personal conversion of the emperor, there appears to have taken place in Asokan times a deeper conversion of the whole previous state apparatus. The king not only preaches a new morality but is able to launch radically new political and administrative measures that include

public morality as an essential ingredient, and provide a framework within which radically differing ethics can coexist and nourish one another.¹⁷ Indeed, Asoka never tires of saying that he is breaking away from the past, that he is inaugurating a new order, something unlike any of his predecessors. His is a radically new vision of kingship.¹⁸

Second, also emerging at this time in India is the idea of the *Cakravartin*, the wheel turner. The wheel that these great rulers turn is the wheel of Dhamma. Whereas the Buddha turned the wheel of the Dhamma in the religious sphere, the *Cakravartin* turns it in the political sphere. The *Cakravartin* represents the Buddhist political ideal of the just ruler, who brings peace and prosperity to his subjects.¹⁹ The normative king, it seems, is intrinsic to the social and moral order of the world.²⁰

Third, with the birth of the idea of a moral ruler or the “normative king,” Asoka’s Dhamma is seen in a new light.²¹ Before Asoka, right and wrong actions were possibly determined by the king himself. The law must not have been applied in a consistent or legitimate manner but in a highly personal and arbitrary one. Thus, *rajas* are often depicted as rewarding or punishing according to how their personal interests were served.²² By fashioning the idea of Dhamma, Asoka attempts to tame the institution of kingship itself and to contain the absolute exercise of power by the king. Indeed, the reconceptualization of Dhamma may also be viewed as an attempt to transform power into authority by infusing it with certain norms. It is also, as far as possible, to place strategic considerations secondary to the moral vision of Dhamma.²³ Dhamma was an immutable moral principle that was above even the *Cakravartin*. The *Cakravartin* conquers other kingdoms not by physical force but by moral appeal.²⁴ Wherever he travels he is welcomed and people voluntarily “submit” to his rule out of respect for his adherence to the principles of Dhamma.

It is obvious that Asokan Dhamma presupposes neither democracy nor citizenship. But does this make the idea any less political, or the term “civic religion” entirely inapplicable to the Asokan period? Like civic religion, Dhamma also presupposes a certain politico-moral relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Dhamma specifies what the king and his officials owe to the subjects and what subjects owe to the king and all his men. What subjects owe to the king and his officials is obedience to his commands. They must follow Dhamma. Yet, Pillar Edict 7 makes it clear that this compliance must arise from *Nijjhati* (persuasion), not *Niyama* (law). Everyone must follow Dhamma out of an inner disposition to comply with one’s conscience, as it were. This is precisely where the roots of his notion of hegemony lie. Indeed, Asoka follows Dhamma as conscientiously as his subjects. Quite like a good democratic leader, Asoka is a moral exemplar to his people, acting sometimes as teacher, sometimes as healer, and always as father.

This does not exhaust the political dimension of Dhamma, however. For it must also include what the king owes his subjects. The politico-moral order stands

above the king, at least partially. Just as the head of the family is as much part of the family as his wife and children are, the king is part of the political order as much as his subjects are. And just as all members of the family owe something, though not the same, to each other, the king owes something to his subjects, though it is qualitatively different from what the subjects owe him. Pillar Edict 6 clarifies what this is: *Sarvajana*, or *sarvaloka hita* (welfare of all living beings in this world and hereafter) or *Sukha* (happiness) in this world and *swarga* (heaven) in the other. Asoka declares that even those condemned to death must have the possibility of attaining *swarga*. Furthermore, another quality or virtue is expected of the king and all his officials: *viyohala* or *vyavahar samata* (procedural impartiality in the judicial domain) and *danda samata* (impartiality in the domain of retributive punishment).

Like Xunzi, Asoka insists that the ruler's role in day-to-day ruling is central.²⁵ Rock Edict 6 indicates that the primary duty of the ruler is to rule for his subjects. Once again, he is keen to establish a break from the administrative system of the past. Official matters in the past were not dispatched quickly and reports were neither composed nor received by the king at all times. Political administration was inefficient, everything was done leisurely, and the king did not devote enough time to this task. The king was not involved in day-to-day administration, for there was no real interest in ensuring the welfare of the subjects. But now, in his time, by his conduct, things are transformed because anybody could approach him at any time, is allowed to interrupt him while he is dining, in his own apartment or in the apartments of his women, in his carriage or in the cattle shed. Information is being fed to him all the time; reports are given about what is happening in the country, on the basis of which he can act and transact public business. When he gives a verbal instruction to his officers, concerning, say, a donation or a proclamation, and if there is any ambiguity, difference of opinion, or dispute over what it means, and if as a result there is any deliberation or discussion over it among the officers, then it is reported to Asoka immediately. He adds, "But simply hard work and efficiency in doing things, in dispatching business is not enough; you have to get results." The main result he hoped for was the happiness and welfare of his subjects in this world and in heaven. The other crucial quality is the attitude and motive by which the ruler acts. Any good deed of significance or consequence that he has performed and for which he is known has been done solely to discharge his debt to all beings.

The Role of Officials

Asoka believes that no king can rule on his own but needs a team of committed officials.²⁶ Rock Edict 5 tells us that state officials are crucial for Dhamma. These officials must work for all sections, among the servants and the nobles, among the poor and the aged, among the wealthy householders, and in women's residences.²⁷ They must work with all classes of people and all *pasandas*. They must

even be committed to promoting the welfare of prisoners, and those who have children, are sick, or are aged must not be kept overly long in prison. They must ensure not only that Dhamma is practiced by everybody, but everywhere, regardless of age, gender, wealth, social status. There is no aspect of Dhamma that they can ignore. They must scrutinize every little detail.

The king must appoint different categories of officers to perform different functions. These officers, who increase the glory of Dhamma throughout the world, act on behalf not only of him but his queens, his sons, and other princes.²⁸ Yet the king must play a direct, active role in ensuring that officials follow Dhamma. In the First Separate Edict, he gives instructions directed at officers and city magistrates: “If I (morally) approve of something, I desire it. And anything I desire I seek to achieve by taking appropriate action.” It follows that only a ruler who himself follows Dhamma has the ability to appoint the best person suited for this job.²⁹ In this respect too, Asoka’s views are similar to Xunzi’s.

Asoka tells his officers that “they can influence the many thousands of living beings under their charge, only if they gain their affection.” But personal affection does not come in the way of performing dhammic functions. Impersonality is not a condition of impartiality. These officials are expected to be impartial, to conduct judicial proceedings, to reward and punish impartially (*viyohala samata* and *danda samata*). Besides, only if the ruler leaves the offer of rewards and punishments to the discretion of the officials will they exhibit responsibility, and confidently and fearlessly discharge their duties.

In sum, that everyone must follow Dhamma does not entail a spurious universalism in which each person is required, at all times, in all contexts, and regardless of their role, to follow the same moral precepts. That is an absurd demand. Undoubtedly, some moral precepts are to be followed by everyone, but there are parts of Dhamma meant for one section in relation to the other section. What one section does, the other doesn’t have to do. For example, the precepts for the educator or the instructor cannot be the same for the instructed or the educated. But the point is that these precepts are relevant for everybody and must be known to everybody.

The Turning Point: Rock Edict 13

Buddha’s teachings certainly played a role in Asoka’s vision. But the turning point in his life came in the eighth year of his rule, after the war waged on Kalinga.³⁰ The scale of wanton destruction at Kalinga left Asoka distraught and changed his perspective on war. The edicts mention the displacement and deportation of 150,000 people, and the death of at least 100,000. They speak of “many more who perished unknown.” The slaughter, death, and deportation has “caused immense grief to the beloved of the gods and weighs heavily on his mind.” The war, he discovered, had tragic consequences not only for those who directly suffered violence, but practically every resident of Kalinga, for even those who were fortunate to have

escaped its direct impact suffered from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and relatives. No one then is unaffected by the horrors of war, and everyone participates in suffering. The survivors of war are the ones who are left to grieve. Thapar rightly notes that “the regret and remorse at the suffering in Kalinga is not the regret of a man moved by a passing emotion, but the meaningful contrition of a man who was consciously aware of the sorrow he had caused.”³¹

The realization that those who suffered were followers of Dhamma made things worse. For ordinary people living in his territory, those who were not themselves warriors, but brahmanas, sramanas, followers of other pasandas, and householders, all follow Dhamma when they obey their mothers and fathers and their teachers and behave well and devotedly toward their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves, and servants. The thought of what happened to such dhammic people during the Kalinga war weighed heavily on Asoka's mind and, at the time of inscribing the thirteenth edict, he writes, “If even a thousandth of that were to occur now, he would be filled with horror.” It has been said that it was easy for Asoka to renounce war after he had already established a large empire. But imperial ambitions have no limit, and at whatever stage this was done, it must be seen as a significant self-limitation. Indeed, Asoka not only began to discourage war but publicly denounced the very idea of glorifying continuous conquest.

In other words, Asoka made a valiant attempt to move away from the warrior ethic, i.e., the ethics of physical courage and manly prowess, particularly on the battlefield. He firmly refused to play war games, dismissing the idea that fame and glory are goods in themselves. The only kind of fame and glory he desired is one that is achieved by obeying and following the Dhamma. Alternatively, he can be seen to be changing the very idea of what counts as glory; Dhammic glory is achieved by getting rid of all evil tendencies that give us no merit. Indeed, there is glory and dignity in siding with victims of plunder and conquest, with the poor and the downtrodden rather than with the heroic chieftains. It also lies in elevating the sustaining goods of ordinary life (life-goods) well above power, conquest, and glory. To secure life-goods for his subjects is central to the king's Dhamma.

Life-Goods for Ordinary People

The ruler's commitment to provide material welfare to his subjects in Asokan inscriptions is echoed elsewhere in Buddhist texts. “After the *cakkavatti* had brought the entire universe under his umbrella, he must proceed to ensure that his people live in comparative comfort, in a world where destitution has been wiped out.”³² Asoka takes it upon himself to care for the sick and the aged, to plant mango groves, dig wells, build rest houses along main routes, to grow banyan trees on the road in order to provide shade to both humans and animals.³³ Thus, he provides two kinds of medical services, one for humans and the other for animals. Medicinal herbs for humans and for animals are planted in places where they did not grow earlier.³⁴ The care of animals is very interesting here because with respect

to basic material needs—water, food, shelter, medical treatment—the distinction between humans and animals is irrelevant. He commits himself not just to human universalism but to a universalism across species.

It is the moral duty of the king to provide material welfare. The king owes this to the people and the people know that the king has these obligations to them. He neither excludes life-goods from morality nor reduces Dhamma to the acquisition of this-worldly goods. So, he takes a middle path between hedonism and asceticism. The attainment of life-goods is a very important benefit and everybody should enjoy them. Not that this was entirely absent from the plans of earlier rulers. “But I have done these things in order that my people might conform to Dhamma,” Asoka says.³⁵ I suppose it means that all these acts are part of a larger moral vision which he explicitly formulated. It is part of Asoka’s Dhamma, his moral vision that people live and travel in comfort, be happy, and enjoy material benefits. War, conquest, and the pursuit of glory upset both the physical security of humans and their valid pursuit of life-goods. They violate Dhamma. Therefore, they must be avoided.

The masculine Kshatriya culture is also relentlessly un-self-critical and unforgiving. For Asoka, however, the ruler is required to develop two further virtues. First, the ability to self-correct. Since a leader learns from his followers and his mistakes, he must be ready to own up to them. This is already demonstrated in Edict 13. But this self-reflective, self-critical tone is present in other inscriptions too. For instance, in Edict 14 he says, “In some places there are inaccuracies, some passages have been omitted or the engraver has made some errors and in acknowledging them, he is acknowledging inadequacies in his edicts.” Second, as far as possible, one who does wrong should be forgiven. One must reconcile with adversaries. He says this in the context of forest dwellers. He says that “he wants to reconcile with the forest dwellers, he doesn’t want to have any kind of hostility with them but he also warns them that while he feels remorseful and is prepared to atone, he still has power and can use it against them.”³⁶ The tribes must repent for the wrongs they have done and follow Dhamma or else he warns them they might not be spared. Asoka here admits that there are limits to political toleration and forgiveness.

Thus, by formulating Dhamma and elaborating how it is to be realized, Asoka attempts to reshape the entire Brahmana-Kshatriya culture. What Buddha appears to have done to the brahmanas and their ideology, Asoka appears to be doing to the Kshatriyas and their ideology. The introduction of the idea of civility too must be understood in this context. Asoka wants a change not only in the warrior ethic but what might be called the word-warrior ethic, in the reckless display of manliness in verbal fighting, in hostility conveyed through words, in attempts at braggadocio and using language to humiliate others. He strongly advises against *himsa* (violence) through *vaca* (speech). It seems he is not just against killing but against any assault on human dignity.

From now on he considered only one victory to be important: the victory of Dhamma, a moral conquest, a transformation from a warrior ethic of conquest to a political ethic of moral hegemony. In the past, there were war drums and a spectacle of arms and weaponry. Now he wishes a moral spectacle, wishing through these festivities to stoke the moral imagination of the people. Likewise, in the past, people conquered territories and built kingdoms in order to enhance their own pleasure. They worked for their own good, for their own benefit, but Asoka says that he has changed all that. He thinks that all his descendants should also be like him and receive all the pleasure and delight from following Dhamma rather than vanquishing other people's territories, which only brings suffering to everyone and torture to all moral beings. The purpose of kingship, of state-building, Asoka claims, is not to benefit the king himself but to benefit everybody, to bring happiness to everybody, illuminated by Dhamma.³⁷ This brings personal gain for the king. He earns spiritual revenue (merit).³⁸

Further evidence of the disavowal of the warrior ethic comes from his views on hunting. In Rock Edict 8, he speaks once again of a break with the past when it was mandatory for kings to go on pleasure tours that consisted of hunting and other amusements.³⁹ The king, he says, goes on tours but these are dhammic tours. During these journeys he meets *brahmanas* and *sramanas* and bestows gifts on them. But it is important that everybody understands and follows Dhamma, so he gives instructions in Dhamma to others; if there are any questions on Dhamma then these questions are answered by him. These moral assemblies, discussions, deliberations, conversations, dialogues, and question-and-answer sessions on ethics, on what is good and bad, how to do the right thing, give him great pleasure. The pleasure derived from the ethically significant is qualitatively different from the pleasures of self-seeking. In short, Asoka wishes to have moral education as an important component of his politics. He wishes to embody this morality in his person, to educate others by his own example. When he leads by example, he gives *cakhdane* (spiritual insight)⁴⁰ with which to lead the good life.

The idea that political morality can be taught by instruction and example is what really distinguishes him from all his predecessors. Some kings in the past had probably glimpsed the idea of Dhamma, he says.⁴¹ They may even have genuinely searched for ways by which to foster Dhamma, to make it a part of everyday life and popular consciousness. But they didn't succeed in getting people to respond. For Asoka, education ensures the development of an interest and relationship with Dhamma. Inculcation, teaching, and instruction help people to devote themselves to Dhamma. There is an element of formality here. Practical initiation seems to Asoka to be insufficient. Custom alone will not help. A whole discourse on Dhamma is required, which in turn needs specialists, a new class of intellectuals employed and trained by the ruler's administration. These intellectuals are responsible for teaching Dhamma, to make its content explicit, to explain it in moral assemblies. Besides, it is not enough to know Dhamma. One has to be

moved by *kamataya* (the love) of it, and have the energy to realize it.⁴² This intense love generates conviction and commitment. Dhamma requires that it be taught by educators who love and are committed to it and can communicate both to all subjects. Inculcating this enduring commitment is as important as careful examination, obedience, and a fear of committing wrong or sin.⁴³

It is important for Asoka that Dhamma grows. Growth can be of two kinds, however. First, deepening of its meaning, as when its content is enriched in mutual encounters between different *pasandas*; but growth also refers to its spread among the people. Dhamma needs moral and intellectual refinement but also a vertical spread. Asoka seems to have a universal aspiration for Dhamma. He wishes that its moral appeal not be restricted only to elites but to move among ordinary folks. It must become part of common sense, popular imagination, and the entire social imaginary. Dhamma is a social project, a kind of mission to transform popular consciousness. This means that moral educators and intellectuals must take Dhamma everywhere within the kingdom to help raise popular ethical awareness. Engraving and inscribing Dhamma is one way to realize this mission, but the message also needs to travel to other countries, to distant places. Asoka believed that Dhamma was continuously growing in his own time by virtue of his own love of morality, instructions, and education and by the effort of all the officers—the moral educators and frontier officials.

It is this idea that rulers must be committed to impart Dhamma, through pedagogical techniques such as public meetings, discussion, and question-and-answer sessions, that pushes me to deploy a concept developed two millennia later by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci: expansive hegemony.⁴⁴ Hegemonic rule is different from other, more common forms of rule.⁴⁵ One form, rule by violent conquest and brute force, is discussed in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which, although not a text about imperial rule, encourages rulers to be desirous of conquests (*vijigisu*), to have as their ultimate goal conquest in all four directions.⁴⁶ A second form, rulers who seize power by violent conquest of an alien territory and then rule by compelling the conquered to assimilate to their own worldview, is rule by domination. All kinds of methods are deployed to identify how these other countries are ideologically opposed to them and then to neutralize this opposition. This too is discussed extensively in the *Arthashastra*. As Olivelle puts it, "A king's success hinged to a great extent on his ability to 'outwit' his foreign rivals. The *Arthashastra* has a technical term for this, *atisaṃdhā*-. The 'outwitting' or 'overreaching' of rivals was the goal of all deliberations on foreign policy. Whether through diplomacy, intimidation, supplication, or open hostility, a king always sought some kind of advantage against ally and enemy alike."⁴⁷ In this form of rule, different strategies are used to cause other populations to acquiesce to the conqueror, even if it means that their cultural identity is subsumed in the cultural identity of the conqueror. Although, here, a king's rule depends on ideas, not on brute force alone; the ruling ideas must be the conqueror's own.

Finally, there exists a third form of rule that is without brute force or cultural domination. Here, the ruler provides ethical education to his subjects and takes active measures to arrive at a consensus. This is rule by hegemony. This is done by leaving untouched a country and its people's conception of the good, its substantive ethic and individuality; however, by emphasizing some elements already present in the country and its people's views and building upon them, by finding a common ground from within, the basic objectives of rulers are no longer in conflict; and indeed, at some level there is a unity or active consensus on values. This is strikingly similar to some points made by Xunzi. "His majesty being the most marvelous is the cause of no one in the world presuming to oppose him, his majesty permitting no opposition coupled with a way that wins the allegiance of others is the cause of his triumphing without having to wage war, of his gaining his objectives without resort to force, and of the world submitting to him without his armies exerting themselves."⁴⁸

When a ruler is morally hegemonic in this sense, he manages to arrive at a new ethic that coalesces the multiple ethical perspectives of all the groups in his society. Expansive hegemony is entirely consistent with maintaining diversity and an endorsement of pluralism. This new ethic provides a social cement to rule within, as well as beyond, the boundary of his own territory. Therefore, this ethic spreads beyond the territorial boundary of the hegemon's rule, establishing the basis of a new kind of imperial order where brute force and domination is replaced by the intellectual and moral leadership of the hegemon, which shows the way, inspiring and improving upon the status quo. In this way the ruler of one country is able to provide intellectual leadership and moral direction to others so that those who are led feel their own lives enriched. This is achieved pedagogically, by moral education.

Asoka claims that his efforts at education in and about Dhamma and all other practices and ceremonies that surround these pedagogic efforts bear fruit. The hard work by him and his officials achieve at least two things. One, certain moral virtues such as mercy, truthfulness, purity, gentleness, charity, and liberality grows, as do the quality of social relations, both interpersonal and interpasandic. There is greater obedience to mother and father and to teachers. There is deference to people who are aged. There is greater regard for *brahmanas* and *sramanas*, for the wretched and the poor, the slaves and servants. This regard increases as never before, perhaps as in no other century. Besides, this is not just something that happens in his own time; he is convinced that it will continue in the future. This certainty results from his belief that his good work will be carried forward by his sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons. All of them have committed themselves to the practice and instruction of Dhamma.

If the hegemon is interested in gaining the affection and consent not only of his own people but also people of other countries, he must relinquish an instrumental attitude toward them. He must also be moved by a commitment to their "identity" and welfare. The idea is to provide transformational leadership in which leaders

and “followers” have a reciprocal relationship that raises everyone to higher levels of motivation and morality, alongside or perhaps beyond life-goods. Although Asoka does not explicitly mention this, he seems to abandon the view presupposed by the old warrior ethic that interstate relations are anarchic, a view held possibly by Xunzi and quite certainly by Kautilya⁴⁹ for whom the origin or basis of kingship is not to be found in transcendent moral principles or social contract but solely in the staff (*danda*) or coercive political power.⁵⁰ Unlike Asoka, who is guided primarily by Dhamma, Kautilya’s principal motivation is *artha* or worldly success. The importance of every moral principle, if recognized, is secondary. Patrick Olivelle sums up his political ideology succinctly:

Ultimately, Kautilya’s focus on *danda* does not reduce the king to a naked tyrant. Kautilya does not jettison tradition, whether it concerns royal or religious practice. It is simply that he measures all things in the end according to how well they support the material power of the king. Ordinarily, the king is quite happy to conform to the traditions of kingship and Brahmanism. At heart, however, Kautilya’s true faith lies in power, and he does not hesitate to subvert these traditions if it will further the king’s interests. It is perhaps best not to interpret this as cynicism, but to take Kautilya at his word: the fruitfulness of all human activities—many of which are quite worthwhile—relies ultimately on effective governance.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

It could be said, with due caution, that Asoka tried to establish a paternalistic perfectionist state. What makes it perfectionist is its embrace of an objective theory of the good life (or of human well-being) and the belief that it is the business of the state to (sometimes) promote it. This point needs emphasizing: Dhamma is not what Asoka wills it to be or merely desires. In this sense, it is not subjective. Rather, Asoka is as bound to and by it as are his subjects and follows whatever action Dhamma implores him to do. Though objective, this good is not to be equated with any particular thick, substantive conception of the good of a specific *pasanda*, however. Instead, the good it promotes is common to all *pasandas*, and thin. To follow Dhamma is to avoid vices such as cruelty, envy, arrogance, fierceness, and wrath and to cultivate virtues such as compassion, truthfulness, purity of mind, and self-restraint. None of these dictate any particular thick idea of the good life. Asoka’s Dhamma takes a stand against the violent, warrior ethic and promotes any ethic that abjures a violent culture of glory and vainglory. What makes it paternalistic is that the ruler views himself as the father, his subjects as his own children, and puts his entire apparatus of rule toward the realization of what is objectively considered to be good for them.⁵¹ He sees it as his personal and direct responsibility to do so. If and when the subjects go against Dhamma, it becomes his duty to intervene in their lives, not coercively but largely through education and persuasion.

To break away from this warrior ethic, Asoka underscores the moral significance of nonviolence and noninjury to others. He strongly discourages

ill-treatment of the aged, servants, and even slaves. Asoka had seen this warrior ethic creep into intellectual life. While elites viewed themselves as rival warriors, at the more popular level, people acted as word-warriors, living in a culture of verbal abuse and mutual humiliation. Through hate speech people did violence to each other, saying the wrong things on the wrong occasions. Asoka addresses this problem of verbal violence, particularly among pasandas, and through a variety of self-restraints, seeks a change in this culture by bringing in the idea of general moral concern and dignity.

In short, Asoka wants to launch a new, sustainable moral order. He tries to offer a new paradigm for kingship, specifying how power is to be ethically wielded. He tries to specify what it is to be a proper king, and to be an exemplar of good rule.

This ethical perspective, more relevantly for this volume, is meant potentially for the entire world, to guide interstate relations. He wants a new global order led by Dhamma and its main propagator, whoever that happens to be. As he says, "The Beloved of the Gods considers the victory by Dhamma to be of foremost significance." In Rock Edict 13, he claims:

In this moral endeavor, he has gained victory on all frontiers to a distance of six hundred yojanas [about 1,500 miles], where reigns the Greek king named Antiochus, and beyond the realm of that Antiochus in the lands of the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas, and Alexander, and in the south over the Colas and Pandyas as far as Sri Lanka. Likewise here in the imperial territories among the Greeks and the Kambojas, Nabhakas and Nabhapanktis, Bhojas and Pitmikias, Andhras and Parindas, everywhere the people follow the Beloved of the Gods' instructions in Dhamma. Even where the envoys of the Beloved of the Gods have not gone, people hear of his conduct according to Dhamma, his precepts and his instruction in Dhamma, and they follow Dhamma and will continue to follow it.⁵²

This insight—that we could find an alternative to the violent chaotic world order in a moral vision that is common to all countries and can bind them together into a harmonious world order—is what makes Asoka a fascinating figure even in our own times. In *Glimpses of World History*, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, writes:

Men of religion have seldom, very seldom, been as tolerant as Asoka. In order to convert people to their own faith they have seldom scrupled to use force and terrorism and fraud. The whole of history is full of religious persecution and religious wars, and in the name of religion and of Gods perhaps more blood has been shed than in any other name. it is good therefore to remember how a great son of India, intensely religious, and the head of a powerful empire, behaved in order to convert people to his ways of thought. It is strange that any one should be so foolish as to think that religion and faith can be thrust down a person's throat at the point of the sword or a bayonet.⁵³

In the mythology of India's secular nationalism, Asoka is the tolerant and wise king par excellence, one who rules by moral persuasion rather than by force or

domination. He acknowledges substantive religio-philosophical differences, but proposes that through self-restraint and mutual discursive encounters, each society can live with these differences, learn from and enrich each other. By working out an ideological vision that incorporates and accommodates substantive differences within each society and between societies, Asoka develops a model of intellectual leadership and moral hegemony that has relevance for the entire world.

The world today, reeling in the aftermath of the disguised imperialisms of two major ideological blocs, and threatened with new forms of colonization and imperial conquests, would do well to heed these wise voices from China and India. It would be a happier place and morally more worthy if countries abandoned the path of physical conquest and domination and pursued the course of multiple, even if contesting, moral hegemonies.

NOTES

1. I do not wish to read ancient texts as a mirror in which I see my own socially embedded self. On the contrary, I wish to acknowledge their radical otherness, their remoteness from us. I begin with the presumption that they would appear to us strange and puzzling. I hope to be surprised by their resemblance to us. In short, I wish to first discover what these ideas meant in their own time and place before raising the question of their relevance to us. I hope these texts would challenge some of our deeply cherished assumptions, both those taken for granted in contemporary India and presupposed by mainstream Western epistemic frameworks. Nietzsche is my guide here, as is Bernard Williams, who quotes him in *Shame and Necessity*: "I cannot understand what would be the meaning of classical philology in our own age if it is not to be untimely, that is to act against the age and by doing so to have an effect on the age and let us hope to the benefit of a future age." To give ideas of the ancient text the power to change our own thoughts, it is crucial that we be familiar with the social history of these ideas, to know the sociology of that period.

2. Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 168.

3. Patrick Olivelle, "Asokan Inscriptions as Text and Ideology," in *Reimagining Asoka: Memory and History*, ed. Patrick Olivelle et al., 170–83 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4. Asoka speaks also of taking care of the aged and the sick, but among the group that might be called incapacitated, he does not mention "the physically challenged." Xunzi, possibly, enjoins the king to include them in his social welfare policies. This is suggested in passing by Henry Rosemont Jr. in "State and Society in the Xunzi: A Philosophical Commentary," in *Virtue, Nature and Human Agency in the Xunzi*, ed. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2000), 8.

5. Olivelle, "Asokan Inscriptions as Text and Ideology," 172.

6. The similarities with Confucius are striking for he too argued against relying exclusively or strongly on law to effect social harmony or ethical development. See Joel Kupperman, "Tradition and Community: Formation of the Self," in *Confucian Ethics*, ed. Kwong-Lui Shun and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

7. For a fuller account of these differences, see my "Beyond Toleration: Civility and Principled Co-existence in Asokan Edicts," in *The Boundaries of Toleration*, ed. Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). There is little supra-mundane about their ambition. This is underlined by the fact that life in heaven was a further continuation of a pleasant life on earth. In the Rig Veda, man is born and dies only once. There is no rebirth. Indeed, *amratva* (immortality) in some passages of the Rig Veda appears to be nothing but the continuation of a long life on earth.

8. Major Rock Edict 9.
9. In this respect, there appears to be some difference between him and Xunzi. See Yan Xuetong, chapter 3, this volume, pp. 12–13.
10. See Rock Edict 9, in N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, *The Edicts of Asoka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 44.
11. Rock Edict 9, *ibid.*, 44.
12. See Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2000 [1951]), 469–70: “Asoka, rather than trying to uphold one view or the other—and thereby identifying himself with one school or the other—sought to emphasise what he held to be the ‘essence’ common to all sects and schools. Doing otherwise would have been to encourage a more vociferous conflict of ideas and practices among these sects and schools, thereby compromising the concord and cohesion he was trying to build up within his kingdom.”
13. The term is used by Romila Thapar in “Is Secularism Alien to Indian Civilization?” in *The Future of Secularism*, ed. T. N. Srinivasan, 83–108 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).
14. Rock Edict 12, in Nikam and McKeon, *The Edicts of Asoka*.
15. “There should not be condemnation of others without any grounds. Such slighting (*lahuka*, from *laghu*) should be for specified grounds only.” See Radhakumud Mookerji, *Asoka* (London: McMillan, 1928), 159.
16. Both K. R. Norman and Patrick Olivelle have used the term harmony for Asoka’s normative ideal for society.
17. Finally, the rules governing ordinary people and the ruler himself stemmed from the same moral source. This was quite unlike the statecraft recommended by Chanakya, where an entirely amoral ruler committing all kinds of crimes against subjects and neighbors reigned over a morally regulated population.
18. See, for instance, Rock Edicts 4, 6, 8.
19. See Damien Keown and Charles S. Prebish, eds., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 274.
20. *Ibid.*, 167.
21. This normative king—one who rules by a moral vision—is, as Xunzi puts it, a true king. The similarities between the two are striking. See Yan Xuetong, chapter 3, this volume, p. 10. On Xunzi’s occasional references to the “sage-king,” see Siufu Tang, *Self-Realization through Confucian Learning: A Contemporary Reconstruction of Xunzi’s Ethics* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016).
22. *Samyutta Nikaya*, III, 301–3.
23. Here there may be a marginal difference in the views of Xunzi and Asoka. See Yan Xuetong, chapter 3, this volume, p. 11.
24. The reference to conquerors by physical force is to those who perform the Brahmanical *asvamedha* rite. In contrast to the *asvamedhi*, rival kings welcome and submit to the Cakravartin and ask him to teach them (*anusasa maharajati*). See Keown and Prebish, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 273.
25. See Yan Xuetong, chapter 3, this volume.
26. The Delhi-Topra 7th Pillar Edict, as described in Jules Bloch, “Les inscriptions d’Asoka,” in *Collection Émile Senart* (Paris: Société d’édition, 1950), 134: “The rajukas are appointed for hundreds of thousands of people who are supposed to instruct the people to follow the dhamma.”
27. *Ibid.*
28. In these passages Asoka seems to imply that only people with certain virtues and education can be appointed as state officials. This seems to be similar to Xunzi’s views, expressed by Yan Xuetong in chapter 3 of this volume and endorsed by Henry Rosemont Jr., that moral qualities and character are an important part of the criteria for the selection of officials. Xunzi further appears to suggest that “although a man be the descendant of a king, duke, prefect or officer, if he does not observe the rules of proper conduct and justice, he must be relegated to the common ranks; likewise, even when he is the descendant of a commoner, if he has acquired learning, developed a good character, and is able

to observe the rules of proper conduct and justice, then he should be elevated to be minister, prime minister, officer or prefect.” Quoted in Rosemont Jr., “State and Society in the Xunzi,” 7.

29. The Delhi-Topra Fourth Pillar Edict, in Bloch, “Les inscriptions d’Asoka,” 124–25.

30. Asoka’s views on the adverse impact of war seem similar to Xunzi but with a crucial difference. Xunzi appears to think of the political consequences of war that will eventually threaten the king’s rule. Asoka is concerned more about the social and moral consequences of war. See Yan Xuetong, chapter 3, this volume, p. 10.

31. Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of Mauryas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1961), 36.

32. “The ideal king Maha Sudassana, for instance, establishes a perpetual grant (*evarupangdan-angpatthapeyyang*) to provide food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, gold for the poor, money for those in want, as well as wives for those who required them. Digha Nikaya, 2:137; Dialogues of the Buddha, 2:211. This dhammikodhammaraja “patronizes samanas and brahmanas who are worthy, providing them with all the things necessary to pursue their goals.” Digha Nikaya, 2:141; Dialogues of the Buddha, 2:217.”

33. Pillar Edict 7. Rock Edict 2

34. Rock Edict 2.

35. Pillar Edict 7.

36. Rock Edict 13.

37. Pillar Edict 7.

38. The contrast with the tradition of thinking articulated later by Kautilya could not have been sharper. For Kautilya, the king’s rule is explained in the last instance by the ambitions of the king and animated by the king’s unique capacity to coerce and compel others.

39. Rock Edict 8.

40. The Delhi-Topra Second Pillar Edict, 120–21.

41. The Delhi-Topra Seventh Pillar Edict, 134.

42. The Delhi-Topra First Pillar Edict, 119–20.

43. The Delhi-Topra Third Pillar Edict, 121–22. The sins mentioned here include fierceness, cruelty, anger, pride, and envy. Sinful actions are motivated by these negative passions.

44. For a discussion of the idea of expansive hegemony, see Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, ed. C. Mouffe, 168–203 (London: Routledge, 1979).

45. Yan Xuetong shows that Xunzi too divides leading powers into three types: *wang* (the true king or the humane authority), *ba* (the lord-protector/hegemony), and *qiang* (the powerful/tyranny).

46. He says, “The True King tries to win men; the lord-protector to acquire allies; the powerful to capture land.” This threefold classification is similar to mine, except that I use the term hegemony in a different Gramscian sense.

47. Mark McClish and Patrick Olivelle, “Introduction to *The Arthaśāstra*,” in *Arthaśāstra: Selections from the Classic Indian Work on Statecraft*, ed. Mark McClish and Patrick Olivelle (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2012), lxxi.

48. Quoted in Yan Xuetong, chapter 3, this volume, p. 15, from Knoblock, “Book 9, On the Regulation of a King,” *Xun Zi II*, 227. At least in this passage, it seems that Xunzi wishes the ruler to rule without using force but by winning their allegiance. Yet it is unclear whether this allegiance is to be gained by propaganda or consent through proper education. It seems certain, however, that for Xunzi, moral qualities were essential for effective political leadership.

49. Yan Xuetong, chapter 3, this volume, p. 9.

50. McClish and Olivelle, “Introduction to *The Arthaśāstra*.”

51. He presents himself as a father figure and says that “just as I would desire welfare and happiness in this world and the next for my children, just so, I desire the same for all men.”

52. Rock Edict 13, trans. Romila Thapar, in Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 256.

53. J. L. Nehru, *Glimpses of World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 62–63.