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Buddhist Political Ethics and the Legitimacy of State Power: A Comparative Study of Aśokan Kingship and Western Political Thought

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Abstract

The question of legitimate political power continues to be a fundamental problem of political theory. Western political thought has largely addressed this issue by exploring the concepts of justice consent sovereignty, public order, and rule of law; Indian Buddhist political thought suggests a complementary perspective involving questions of virtue, non-harm, compassion, and well-being of sentient beings. This paper explores the political ethics related to the Mauryan emperor Aśoka in a comparative context with certain classical notions of political legitimacy put forward by Plato Aristotle Hobbes, Locke, and Max Weber. By analysing Aśoka's edicts, early Buddhist textual traditions, and literature on political legitimacy through qualitative and comparative political theory, we will argue that Aśokan kingship represents an exemplary political model based on a legitimising morality of prudential restraint, enhancement of collective well-being, religious toleration, and minimization of needless pain and suffering. Still, the Aśokan model should be not confused with contemporary democratic models of legitimacy – it emerged in an imperial and hierarchical polity and its ethical commitments did not preclude the use of force nor bring about popular sovereignty. Their comparison indicates consonance and dissonance between the more philosophical ethical principles of Buddhist political ethics and Western accounts of legitimate authority. While Hobbes accentuates protection and political order, Locke stresses consent and rights, and Weber distinguishes among traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational types of legitimate domination, Aśoka-focused political ethics would highlight the ruler's ethical responsibilities as well as the authorization of political power in its orientation toward the public good. This article calls for a subtle reading of the many-sided structure of legitimate authority.

Keywords: Aśoka; Buddhist political thought; political ethics; comparative political theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Political legitimacy refers to the justification for and acceptance of the exercise of political power. It is distinguished from mere coercive capacity, since control over territory, ability to command compliance, and subjugation to the rule of law do not in themselves provide any moral justification for ruling authority (Beetham, 1991; Peter, 2023). Political theory is not merely concerned with who rules but to what extent we might justify their rule, what duties they owe and what boundaries should be placed around their power.

In Western political thought, these questions have generated different formulations and particular answers. Plato has grounded political rule in knowledge of justice and the right ordering of the political community; Aristotle has analyzed association in politics for the good life and has differentiated between governments, which serve the general advantage and ones, which serve the interests of rulers; Hobbes has explained the power of the sovereign for the need to escape insecurity, whereas Locke has relied upon the principle that political power rests with the people in the face of a duty to protect rights; and Weber, as a sociologist, has analyzed the ideas and institutional arrangements whereby domination is perceived as legitimate (Aristotle, trans. 1998; Hobbes, 1996; Locke, 1988; Plato, trans. 1992; Weber, 1978).

Another entry point into this discussion is Buddhist political philosophy. For example, its political import cannot be simply explained as the assertion that Buddhism is pacifist or indifferent to political power. Early Buddhist texts examine the social order kingship punishment and crime fortune the ethical disposition of the individual and ruler-ruled relations. Contemporary scholarship has after that challenged the presumption that there is no substantive political theory in Buddhism (Moore, 2016). It has found that we have multiple types of Buddhist political reasoning including an Aśokan model that is preoccupied with the ethical orientation of the ruler and the conditions of a just political order (Cummiskey, 2013).

Perhaps most quite a bit, we have a special case in Aśoka, the Mauryan king who reigned in the third century BCE. His inscriptions display a ruler who openly acknowledged the human pain inflicted by war and presented a special dharma of restraint, respect for religious pluralism, and compassion for human and animal suffering. They are most of all useful precisely because they are public performance of imperial power, unlike later Buddhist history, which is basically a retrospective account of a perfect Buddhist ruler (Lahiri, 2015; Singh, 2012).

All the same, there should be caution against reading into Aśoka's political significance. His edicts came from an emperor operating within a court defined by imperial hierarchy; they do not establish the existence of any form of contemporary democratic rights for the subject, the unwilling popular acceptance of sovereignty, or the end of coercive power. Neither should dhamma automatically be read as a Buddhist teaching per se. The political rhetoric of the edicts needs to be understood within the historical context of Aśoka's personal religious beliefs, the ethical programme he projected publicly, and subsequent visions of Buddhist sovereignty (Lahiri, 2015; Strong, 1983; Thapar, 1961).

This article addresses the following research question:

The nature of the ethical idea of kingship of Aśoka's edicts; and its relationship with the debate on the legitimacy of state authority; and similarity and dissimilarity with some Western theory of political authority.

The article makes three points. The first is that it reads Aśokan dhamma as a form of political language that publicly commissions and moralizingly constrains the exercise of imperial power. The second is a cross-cultural comparison of this ethic with theories of justice, common advantage, security, consent, and sociological hegemony. The third is a comparative strategy that underscores the difference between ethical legitimacy and popular authorization or institutional accountability. The main conclusion is that Aśokan political ethics at least brings the moral exigencies of a welfare-oriented and ethically demanding form of rule, but it does not, in itself, satisfy the full normative criteria of legitimacy today.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

2.1. Buddhist political thought and the problem of political authority

The contrast of renunciation and worldly power has historically been used to account for the connection between Buddhism and politics. While the Buddhist ideal of emancipation may appear to focus our attention away from the political sphere and towards individual change and the disappearance of suffering, the distinction between renunciation and worldly power is no more dismissive of a political texts' relevance to governance than it is of the social conditions under, which individuals seek to live moral and religious lives. Politicians too are subject to moral scrutiny (Moore, 2016).

Studies of Buddhist kingship illustrate how Buddhism and kingship have engaged one another in many historical settings. Tambiah (1976) explores the relation between the Buddhist sangha and political kingship in Thailand and traces the legacy of Aśokan Buddhist models on later ideas of righteous kingship. His importance is to have understood Buddhist kingship as a historically contingent relation between religious institutions and political rule.

cummiskey (2013) also distinguishes an Aśokan form of Buddhist political ideas from other visions of Buddhist politics (2013). The relevance of this model to legitimacy but is that it is about how political life is organized and morally justified where citizens and rulers cannot just be assumed to be wise and virtuous. The Aśokan model makes Buddhist political ideas comparable with arguments about how political institutions should rule imperfect human beings.

But it is essential for scholarship to differentiate between early Buddhist texts, the historical record of Aśoka's reign and the later Buddhist versions of the model king. The edicts are political pieces of contemporary propaganda; later literary traditions have their own religious and cultural agendas. Strong's (1983) analysis of Aśoka's legend and Lahiri's (2015) archaeological history demonstrate how these sources need to be connected rather than conflated.

2.2. Aśoka and the political meaning of *dhamma*

We focus on Aśoka's inscriptions because they are a discourse of rule expressed in public language. They invoke the good treatment of subjects, elevate ethical behavior, promote forbearance in dealings with other religious communities, and outline the obligation of the ruler to disseminate ethical teachings to the entire empire. In the Rock Edicts, the emperor offers the lesson of the conquest of Kalinga as a motivation for

reevaluating the political power of military victory, a lesson that transforms the pain generated by state violence from a private or religious concern into a political problem (Dhammika, 1993; Singh, 2012).

Dhamma, then again, should be approached with greater caution. In the inscriptions, it cannot be merely equated to a fully-fledged philosophical formulation of Buddhism, nor to a modern conception of constitutional morality. It was part of a particular imperial agenda and expressed normative ethical and social orders that could be articulated in a manner not restricted to a single religious group. Lahiri (2015) highlights the need for the recovery of Aśoka's life and political messaging through an evidential reconstruction rather than merely through the model of the ideal Buddhist king as later Buddhist tradition constructed him.

This way, Aśokan politics is a project to make empire a practice that resides when it comes to the ethical and the beneficial to subjects. Its importance is not in establishing that Aśoka presided over a modern democratic nation, but in determining what manner of government can be announced in public as a measure of moral forbearance, tolerance, and alleviation of pain.

2.3. Western theories of legitimacy

Western political philosophy offers a number of accounts of political authority. As we will see below, Plato's Republic ties political rule to knowledge of what justice is and how the political community is ordered to produce it; Aristotle's Politics assesses political constitutions with their capacity to promote the common advantage of the community or simply the private advantage of those exercising the government (Aristotle, trans. 1998; Plato, trans. 1992). These different approaches seem helpful to think through for Aśoka because they not only look beyond simply having political power but also concern the aims and results of government.

Hobbes presents an alternative line of reasoning. In *Leviathan*, the need for political authority arises from threats of insecurity and violence. The sovereignty's ability to provide safety and security is a key thing of the rationales for political rule (Hobbes, 1996). This line of reasoning would lead to security being a key dimension in judging the political import of an Aśokan concern for public happiness. Yet a concern for protection does not necessarily entail ethical restrictions; a state may maintain order but do so unjustly, or propagate higher moral principles without sufficient protection.

Locke offers a more explicit restriction on political power. In his view, legitimate government is based on consent and is entrusted with the protection of rights; political power is not an absolute property of the ruler (Locke, 1988). Aśoka's emphasis on responsible monarchy resembles Locke's approach in that both allow criticism of how power is exercised. Yet, their foundations differ: Aśokan inscriptions articulate the duties of an imperial ruler, while Locke's theory places consent and rights at the center of political authorization.

Weber differentiates the idea of the justifiable use of power from the sociological predicate of power's acceptability. Weber's classification of traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational domination shows how the 'possibility of the acceptance of authority can be explained without assuming that it conforms to an independent moral criterion' (Weber, 1978). This is an important consideration here as the emperor's moral depiction as a just king could generate acceptance of imperial rule and the political will of the image, but it does not in and of itself justify the regime.

2.4. Research gap and analytical contribution

A vast literature exists on Aśoka, kingship, and legitimacy. But, the debate can be clarified by delineating four questions commonly conflated: the ruler is doing good, the state is doing good, political institutions serve to constrain power, and the constituted peoples authorize political power. Legitimacy literature is like that usually distinguished as normative justification versus social acceptance, and between the authority/coercion nexus and the political obligation nexus (Beetham, 1991; Peter, 2023).

This piece synthesizes the differences and similarities in a comparative way. Instead of stating that Aśoka foresaw a particular modern political theory, it inquires what does his ethical way of thinking tell us about the obligations of rulers and where that way of thinking reaches its limits by using consent- and institution-centred theories.

3. METHODOLOGY

This document uses qualitative textual analysis and comparative political theory. It does not constitute an empirical evaluation of the administration of Aśoka's empire nor does it try to discern the outlooks of all the populace for Mauryan administration.

Three types of evidence are used in the analysis.

First, it considers the edicts of Aśoka in English translation, focusing on those on the conquest of Kalinga, the dissemination of dhamma, religious tolerance, and public well-being, and the emperor's duties. We read these as political declarations, which tell us about how empire defined its own aims. Discrepancies in translation and ambiguity in historicity persist, so we verify each individual formulation in specialist editions before publication (Dhammika, 1993; Lahiri, 2015).

Second, it works with the early Buddhist literary traditions on kingship and order, which work as a wider structure of interpretation, but are not equated with Aśoka's inscriptions. In particular, the stories about righteous rulers and the history of order should be understood related to their textual and doctrinal contexts and not simply as history of Mauryan political institutions (Walshe, 1995).

Third, the study examines the Aśokan material alongside selected Western political theories. Plato and Aristotle are considered for their views linking political authority with justice and the common good; Hobbes highlights security; Locke focuses on consent and rights; and Weber offers a sociological perspective on legitimacy and types of domination. These thinkers are not presented as representatives of a single, unified Western tradition.

The comparative method notes structural similarity, but also conceptual dissimilarity: similarity does not mean historical influence, nor does it mean philosophical identity. We proceed instead by asking how each compares to explaining the justification, purpose, and limits of political power.

The analysis is organized around four dimensions:

1. Ethical justification: can the behaviour and intentions of rulers be ethically assessed.
2. Public welfare: whether political authority is designed for the protection and good of the citizens.
3. Limitations on power: factors that may constrain someone's or an institution's power, for instance, ethical requirements, legal systems, political institutions, or enforceable rights.
4. Public authorization: Attaining political authority through consent, participations, or different modes of having an individual or institution authorized by the general public.

This set of scales so offers an analytical setup for comparison without equating imperial rule in ancient days with the constitutional governance of modern times.

4. AŚOKAN KINGSHIP: ETHICAL CONDUCT AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF RULE

4.1. From conquest to moral reflection

The political significance of Aśoka's depiction of the Kalinga campaign lies in how it frames suffering from state action. In his edict, the emperor expresses regret for the suffering caused by conquest and treats the consequences of war as morally important. This contrasts with political narratives that see military victory as proof of successful rule. Instead, the suffering experienced by the people becomes part of the ruler's public record of political responsibility (Dhammika, 1993; Singh, 2012).

The inscription does not even show that Aśoka abandoned all force or that the Mauryan empire was no longer a political entity. In fact, its significance is more limited; it contains in the public face of state power a mainly significant reflection on the human effects of conquest. It raises a political question that has persisted to the present day: can a regime be said to be legitimate because it has fought successfully for power and territory or must the effects of its policies be measured with their effects on its hapless subjects?

The political dimension of the Aśokan material indicates that political success and moral legitimacy do not align. The conquering player has power; the decision to accept the damage of conquest introduces a moral standard by which to judge its application. This position is compatible with modern perspectives that have refused to equate effective domination with legitimate authority (Beetham, 1991; Peter, 2023).

4.2. Dhamma as a public ethic of government

Aśoka's dhamma was also understood as a 'public ethical programme' intended to shape the behaviour of the ruler and the ruled. The edicts call for restraint, morality, and compassionate care for living beings. They also stress the importance of harmony between religious groups and oppose the slander of other faiths (Dhammika, 1993).

From the political point of view, this programme is important because it specifies those criteria, which are not simply extensions of the ruler's will. Should the ruler be expected to be tempered by concern for the welfare

of the people, then political power is potentially answerable, at least in the language of public reason, to anything beyond the power to will. Dhamma is a language for inquiring into the ends of government.

This point must not be exaggerated. A public ethic programme is not necessarily an instrument of autonomous oversight, rights, and democratic accountability. The sovereign can still be the main rubric for the ethics of his own behavior. Aśokan political ethics because of this offers a moral model for imperial authority without necessarily a fully institutionalized template for power curtailment (Lahiri, 2015; Moore, 2016).

4.3. Welfare and the moral responsibilities of the ruler

The concern with welfare expressed in the edicts enlarges the political significance of dhamma well beyond the morality of the ruler himself. On the edictal conception, the state itself is responsible for the conditions of life of the population. This stance may be contrasted with political philosophy that holds an assessment of a government for its usefulness for the common good, though the historical and conceptual incompatibilities are obvious.

Aristotle contends that political association is best conceived related to a good life and separates political orders that promote the common good from those that advance the private interests of the ruling class (Aristotle, trans. 1998). Much in the language of Aśoka's concerns about the welfare of his subjects resonates with this broad question about the ends of political power. The analogy is less historical than functional: the two traditions need not agree on ideas about virtue, membership, or order in the constitution to raise the question.

A welfare orientation also brings a benchmark. When a government formally asserts its concern for the welfare of its inhabitants, policies can be assessed considering that aspiration. But welfare in itself does not establish legitimacy. It may be delivered alongside illiberal measures such as repression or restrictions on political participation. In consequence, Aśoka's case establishes that welfare can be a necessary condition of legitimacy, but not sufficient on its own.

4.4. Religious tolerance and the limits of imperial pluralism

Aśoka's inscriptions seek to promote tolerance between different religious traditions, and to avoid denigration of other traditions. This aspect is important in political terms, as religious diversity is dealt with in a moral and administrative sense, rather than as a divisive threat to the empire (Dhammika, 1993; Lahiri, 2015).

The consequences must be articulated thoughtfully. Aśokan religious toleration is not the same as contemporary freedom of worship, constitutional secularism, or a legally protected right to religious speech. The edicts embody an imperial political structure where the emperor advances standards for respectful speech from above. What they are significant for is the potential of a social ethic that attempts to obviate interreligious animosity, rather than the claim that Aśoka set the standard for modern liberal pluralism.

This matter is crucial for comparative political theory. With tolerance, either a ruler's private behaviour and public pronouncements can promote it, or it can be preserved through rights and institutions that restrict the state's capacity to discriminate. In the first case, tolerance might signify moral dedication; but in the second case it offers an alternative safeguard.

5. AŚOKA IN COMPARISON WITH WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

5.1. Plato: knowledge, justice, and the moral purpose of rule

Plato's Republic considers the question 'what is justice' and the nature of political rule within a just society. The Republic presents the figure of the philosopher-ruler related to political rule, connecting political power to the knowledge of the good and reasoned ordering of the political realm (Plato, trans. 1992).

Versus Aśoka, we find a similar renunciation of the notion that the morality of ruling power may be considered only for success in rivalry or the victorious overthrow of enemies. Both positions allow morality to be factored into evaluation of the ruler, but on wholly different grounds, since Plato relies on certain ethical and epistemological assumptions, and the teaching of the Aśoka inscriptions on the principles of dhamma relies on a pragmatic ethical and political programme.

This decision has a structural consequence, also. The much-valued access to the moral capacities of the ruler may result in a theory which, by relying on the ruler's claimed knowledge of the good, culminates in an interpretation of the good, which may be entirely in the hands of the ruler or a ruling circle. To claim that the ruler has gained some knowledge, in fact, does nothing to demonstrate that others subordinate to power can contest it. This question so returns to both theories.

5.2. Aristotle: the common advantage and responsible government

Second, Aristotle's theory of the polity gives a basis for comparison. Aristotle's taxonomy of constitutions identifies the difference between regimes that serve the public interest and regimes that serve the interest of the rulers (Aristotle, trans. 1998). The distinction offers a way of considering whether those in power act in the public interest or private interests.

Aśoka's concern with welfare and moral restraint can be seen as consistent with the general idea that government should serve purposes beyond the ruler's self-interest. In both cases, political rule is judged by its goals rather than simply by its existence.

But Aristotle's ideas about political community, citizenship, and constitutional types are not straightforwardly applicable to the Mauryan imperial state. Aśokan kingship, unlike Aristotle's Greek polis, does not work as a convenient exemplification of the concept. The most significant comparison is at the level of political evaluation: that the intention of the ruler and rule for the personal benefit of the ruler is morally inferior.

5.3. Hobbes: security, order, and the justification of sovereignty

The book Leviathan by Hobbes emerges out of the problem of insecurity and the threat of violence without a common power. The creation of political authority is desirable because humans have compelling reasons to desire a situation in which their life and physical security will be secured (Hobbes, 1996).

This argument offers a clear contrast with Aśoka's public focus on the effects of violence. Both perspectives acknowledge that political order cannot be considered separately from the harms caused by insecurity and conflict. Still, they attribute different importance to moral restraint. In Hobbes's view, the sovereign's main

responsibility is to ensure peace and safety; the rationale for sovereignty is closely tied to the need to avoid the risks of uncontrolled conflict. In contrast, Aśoka's inscriptions emphasize ethical behavior and the alleviation of suffering as priorities that should guide the use of imperial authority.

But we shouldn't run the risk of making the opposition between a violent Hobbes and a peaceful Aśoka as crude as that. It is true that Hobbes did not wholly endorse violence, nor did Aśoka eradicate coercion. But, the two seem to emphasize different aspects of the political problem. Hobbes provided a justification for having a powerful authority; the Aśokan way of thinking shows what that authority should do once in power.

That this comparison reveals a further problem with welfare-based kingship. We do need public goods like security; but they can't be secured through any mere moral declaration. Nor, then again, is security sufficient for the legitimacy of any kind of state action; we will need to attend to its moral boundaries as well.

5.4. Locke: consent, rights, and the limits of paternal authority

Locke makes a clearer distinction between responsible rule and rightful political authority. Political power is not an absolute right of rulers, but is a trust granted to government for particular ends (mainly protection of rights). Consent is key in supporting political authority, and government, which breaches its trust poses a legitimacy problem (Locke, 1988).

Aśokan kingship is closer to Locke's theory in allowing the ruler's behavior to be judged by standards external to the sovereign power itself. Welfare and morality as constraints on rule can be taken as obligations rather than rich expressions of royal benevolence. But the comparison stops where the basis of authority is concerned: Aśoka's edicts do not set out the Lockean doctrine of the consent of the governed, nor the people as the 'final' authority.

It matters for contemporary political philosophy. Even a good ruler might uphold societal wellbeing and promote toleration as long as large discretion remains in the ruler's hands. Citizens would suffer under such a rule without having an enforceable claim against the ruler's decisions or an effective means of replacing that ruler or participating equally in political choice. Locke's device reveals the inadequacy of benign goals and outcomes.

Because of this, the Aśokan model is more compelling as an explanation of the duties of the ruler, and Locke is more compelling as an explanation of the prerequisites of legitimate state authority and the limitations upon it.

5.5. Weber: moral justification and social acceptance

A sociology of domination from Weber helps us see this distinction. They may have political power because it is based in tradition, charismatic personalities, or legal-rational institutions. These types of legitimate power relate to the social beliefs and practices of authority, whereas the question of whether political power is ethically legitimate is another matter entirely (Weber, 1978).

Aśoka's public writings could be interpreted as the 'transmission of a certain kind of moral representation of kingship, a certain way of imagining the rule of empire, through the physical persona and physical words of

the emperor'. It is difficult to know how all people who read the inscriptions interpreted them, whether they accepted the message, or whether they even noticed it.

Weber's conclusion, and what we are led to by our critique, is so that 'real ruling' must be distinguished from acceptance of rules (which is not the same as strong social support) and from moral justification (which is different from 'real ruling'). A population may believe that a ruler is legitimate, but that belief does not itself settle the question of justice.

The upshot of this comparison is that a full account of Aśoka must separate three issues: the content of his political programme, how the exercise of imperial authority was publicly expressed, and the internal cognition of the ruled masses. The first is accessible to normative political theory; the second, to reading the edicts as political communication; and the third, to historical evidence, which the edicts alone cannot offer.

6. TOWARD A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ACCOUNT OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

This comparison lends itself to a four-dimensional approach, under, which the qualities of political legitimacy are evaluated along four distinct but interrelated axes.

First, the normative case. The criterion for any principled assessment of political power is based on the ends it aims at and the methods by which it operates. The moral discipline and an ethic of care about suffering are incorporated into Aśokan dhamma, that public display of governance. In kind, Plato's theory of justice and Aristotle's emphasis on the public interest also focus on the nature and objectives of political power, but are founded on differing philosophical assumptions. (Aristotle, trans. 1998; Plato, trans. 1992)

Second, public welfare and protection. Any judgement of government has to be made with the security and welfare of those who are governed. Aśoka's edicts cast welfare as a public matter; Hobbes stresses the protection that political power is required to give (Dhammika, 1993; Hobbes, 1996). Neither component of the second principle can be assumed in and of itself: welfare may be coupled with paternalism without rights; security may be coupled with unjustified coercion without morality.

Third, limitations of power. While moral requirements motivate good behavior, they are not sufficient to stop bad behavior. Institutional responsibilities, legal rights, and restrictions on the scope of discretionary authority are responses to problems that cannot be solved by the good will of the ruler, as Locke's theory of delegated power demonstrates (Locke, 1988).

Fourth, political authorization and acceptance. The legitimacy of political authority involves questions of consent and the relationship between rulers and those they govern. Locke emphasizes consent as central to authorization, while Weber examines the social beliefs and structures that sustain obedience (Locke, 1988; Weber, 1978). These are separate issues: a government may be broadly accepted without being just, and an ethical agenda does not guarantee that a government's authority has been freely authorized.

These four dimensions are not a bare, pre-theoretic check-off list to be applied without regard to history. They are distinctions that serve the purpose of exposing what various theories account for competently and what they fail to address. The Aśokan model informs us in particular about factors of moral justification and welfare-

oriented rule; Locke offers a clearer picture of authorization and rights; Hobbes emphasizes the importance of protection; and Weber distinguishes between moral legitimacy and social acceptance of authority.

Ultimately, the system also prevents anachronism. It does not argue that Aśoka had human rights, democratic representation, or constitutional accountability in mind when he instituted a centralized administrative system. Rather, it applies modern political theory to ancient political structures, asking questions of the imperial king without erasing the historical distinctions of the state.

7. DISCUSSION

The comparison indicates that Buddhist political ethics can make a substantive contribution to political science, particularly by drawing attention to the ethical responsibilities of political power. Aśoka's inscriptions show that imperial authority could be represented through a language of moral restraint, welfare, and concern for the consequences of state action. This challenges any account of politics that treats the successful exercise of power as sufficient evidence of its legitimacy (Singh, 2012).

At the same time, the Aśokan case illustrates why ethical leadership cannot serve as the only foundation of legitimate government. The ruler's ethical commitments may depend on personal judgment, and the institutions through which those commitments are interpreted may remain under the ruler's control. Without enforceable limits and mechanisms of public authorization, ethical kingship can remain paternalistic even when its stated purposes are benevolent.

The Western comparisons help clarify this problem without implying that Western theories are uniform or necessarily superior in every respect. Plato and Aristotle emphasize justice and the ends of political association; Hobbes identifies the importance of security; Locke gives a central role to consent and rights; and Weber explains how authority is socially accepted. Each approach illuminates a different aspect of the political problem, and none should be collapsed into a single linear history of progress.

The most productive conclusion is therefore complementary rather than triumphalist. Aśokan political ethics highlights a question that remains vital in contemporary government: whether state power is exercised with restraint and directed toward the welfare of those affected by it. Consent-based and institutional theories add another question: how can those subject to power contest decisions, protect their rights, and hold political authorities accountable? A defensible modern account of legitimacy must take both sets of concerns seriously.

This conclusion also has implications for the study of religion and politics. Religious or ethical traditions may supply public languages through which rulers justify their conduct and citizens evaluate government. Yet the political value of such traditions depends in part on how their ethical commitments interact with institutions, pluralism, and the distribution of power. The use of Buddhist ethical language in contemporary governance should therefore be examined critically rather than assumed to produce just outcomes automatically.

8. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have contrasted Aśokan kingship with certain Western accounts of political legitimacy to investigate the ways in which the moral responsibility of rulers helps to legitimise political power. I have suggested that Aśoka's edicts offer a historically significant setup in which imperial authority is explicitly linked to dhamma, well-being, moderation, and empathy with the pain caused by political activity. These elements offer a useful starting point for analysing political authority independent of the performance of obedience.

The comparison with Plato and Aristotle exposes the principled reasons for government, whereas the comparison with Hobbes exposes the instrumental significance of protection and order. The Locke theory reveals why the moral reasons for government and its policies are not equivalent to consent or rights. And Weber brings out the distinction between the social and the normative dimension of authority.

The article's main contribution is a multidimensional setup that distinguishes ethical justification, public welfare, limitations on power, and political authorization. Aśokan kingship offers valuable insight for the first two aspects, but the available historical evidence does not support viewing it as an early version of modern democracy or constitutional government. Its significance is found in the ethical issues it raises on the use of power and the duties of rulers.

Ultimately, state power cannot simply be legitimated through morality, good government, submission, or violence. Morality and well-being can be essential, but we also need rights, institutional accountability and the political status of the people governed. A critical interface between Buddhist political ethics and Western political theory can make comparative politics more responsive to political practice, without having to knock out the distinctions between their historic origins and conceptual assumptions.

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