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THE POSTULATE OF IMMORTALITY IN KANT: TO WHAT EXTENT IS IT CULTURALLY CONDITIONED?

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Introduction

Kant's arguments for religious postulates are among the most intriguing and subtle in the history of philosophy. They have fascinated thinkers from a variety of perspectives and disciplines for over two hundred years, and their influence continues to grow. One of the remarkable things about these arguments is that they make the case for accepting religious ideas on a rationalistic basis, but without making knowledge claims about the primary objects of religious belief.

According to Kant, the existence of God, the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and so on are beliefs that we can and should accept on the basis of a rational faith, although we cannot demonstrate that any one of these beliefs is correct. Such transcendent truths by their very nature go beyond the limits of human understanding. Therefore, they cannot be known by theoretical reason, but only justified for moral purposes via practical reason. If anyone were to say that we ought not to believe such ideas, since we have no evidence to support them, Kant would reply that it is necessary to postulate them anyway—to live as *if* they were true—because of their tremendous importance for our practical and ethical lives.

Not all Kant scholars, to be sure, are convinced that he was being sincere when he wrote of the need to affirm a belief in God, the soul, or immortality on strictly moral grounds. Manfred Kuehn, for example, in his meticulously researched biography, notes that Kant's close friends Johann Scheffner and Karl Pörschke regarded him as an atheist because he had no use for religious rituals, prayers, or organized religion in general. "It was clear," Kuehn writes, "to anyone who knew Kant personally that he had no faith in a personal God. Having postulated God and immortality, he himself did not believe in either. His considered opinion was that such beliefs were just a matter of 'individual needs.' Kant himself felt no such need."¹ Yet although Kant evidently disbelieved in the kind of personal God that would respond to individual prayers, and although he spurned the traditional Christian picture of the afterlife, it does not follow that he rejected the ideas of God, the soul, and immortality altogether. Moreover, his arguments concerning the religious postulates are not based on contingent psychological needs that might vary from individual to individual, but rather on *a priori* principles that any moral agent allegedly must affirm. Before we dismiss these arguments as mere pandering to social opinion, then, it would behoove us to take Kant at his word and see if we cannot interpret his statements as

expressions of a coherent, albeit unconventional, orientation. The first step toward such an interpretation must be to recognize the linkage he sought to forge between a penetrating theoretical skepticism and an earnest affirmation of the religious postulates.

In making this linkage, Kant effectively opened up a new realm for philosophical exploration—one that would be at once noncognitive² and yet also rationalistic. In effect, this would require the two-pronged strategy of simultaneously (a) acknowledging the inaccessible character of the content of a postulated proposition *qua* transcendent knowledge, even while (b) seeking to demonstrate the necessity (or practical imperative) of affirming that postulate *qua* justified belief. This bivalent argument strategy has been tremendously influential, impinging on a variety of modern and postmodern movements ranging from liberal Protestant theology (e.g., Friedrich Schleiermacher) to philosophical pragmatism (e.g., William James) to the contemporary phenomenology of alterity (e.g., Emmanuel Lévinas).³

By no means all thinkers have endorsed Kant's postulational strategy, of course. Bertrand Russell, for example, quipped sarcastically that "postulation has all the advantages of theft over honest toil."⁴ By this he presumably meant to impugn the whole strategy as logically inconsistent. For how, as he and like-minded critics would ask, can it be shown that one ought on rational grounds to affirm what one admits one cannot prove? This is a fair question and a deep one, which many able philosophers have sought, with varying degrees of success, to answer.

Although the legitimacy of non-cognitive reasoning is an important issue in itself, it is not, however, the subject of the present essay. For the purposes of this essay, I will not attempt to criticize Kant's controversial use of practical postulation as a method of reasoning, but will simply assume its validity for the sake of argument. By means of accepting this methodological principle provisionally, one can participate with him in exploring a potentially fertile field of research, namely to determine the shape and boundaries of what a reasonable person may legitimately believe, even in the absence of sufficient evidence to justify making knowledge claims. In the discussion that follows, it will be an operative hypothesis—just as it was for Kant and his many followers—that some religious postulates may be affirmed for the sake of their invaluable, indeed indispensable, effects on the inner lives of believers, even while other postulates, although neither more nor less provable, have not the same intrinsic claim to legitimation through postulation.

The specific purpose of the present essay will be to focus on one of Kant's most significant, but also relatively neglected, practical postulates—that of personal immortality, or immortality for individuals *qua* individuals. Our goal will be to see how effectively he makes his case for the alleged necessity of this principle in any moral agent's inner life. This is a strong claim to make, even taking into account the non-cognitivist qualifications with which Kant hedges round his position. My contention is that although Kant's argument may be relatively persuasive in a limited sense, its rationale for affirming a belief in personal immortality is only plausible when operating within the assumed parameters of a Western conception of the self. If these culturally imbedded presuppositions are once abandoned, however, the case

appears much less compelling. As I shall seek to show, even if one accepts the broader agenda of employing a *a priori* moral postulates as regulative ideals, the particular form in which Kant conceives of *his version* of the (admittedly unknowable) afterlife is less than compelling.

In order to lend a degree of concreteness to this religio-cultural critique, I shall in the second half of this essay briefly consider an alternative way of conceiving what “immortality”—perhaps better expressed as “eternity for the Self”—might be like: that of Nishida’s dialectical Buddhism. My intention in doing so will be solely to point out some deficiencies in Kant’s argument by means of this counterexample. It will not be my purpose to present an in-depth philosophical comparison of Kant to Nishida. Nor will it be my goal here to show how Nishida’s dialectical thought might yield new insights applicable to Kant’s postulational strategy. Although either of these undertakings would be important and valuable in its own right, it would take us too far afield in the present context. Instead, I shall adhere to the specific and limited task of using this example in order to shed a critical light on Kant’s theory of immortality.

Before examining these questions in detail, however, it will be useful first to consider some of the different types of objections that have been raised against his *religious* or *ethico-religious* (as opposed to exclusively ethical) postulates by otherwise friendly critics who are willing to accept his methodological framework as at least a starting point. Some of these objections are more directly relevant than others to the approach to be taken here. By considering them at the beginning, the reader will be able to see more clearly the framework for the subsequent discussion.

Arguments Concerning the “Highest Good”

One of the critical moves that Kant makes is to distinguish between two possible ways of interpreting the concept of the “highest good” (*das höchste Gute*). These are: (a) the ideal of the “supreme good,” which would be good unconditionally and without qualification, and (b) what he calls the “consummate good,” which would include the supreme good as its foundation but would add to it other advantages or values lifting it to the maximum possible level of goodness. For Kant, as is well known, the only unconditional good is a good will, that is, one that would form its decisions on the basis of the pure moral law, and also be capable of autonomously following that law, without the influence of temptation derived from natural desires or self-interest. This is the concept of the “supreme good” (Ger: *das oberste Gute*; Latin: *bonum supremum*), which, according to his deontological theory, is a necessary condition in order for any voluntary action to be genuinely ethical. The concept of the “consummate good” (Ger: *das vollendete Gute*; Latin: *bonum consummatum* or *bonum perfectissimum*), on the other hand, is the ultimate extension of all the projects and designs of which such an unconditionally good will might conceive.⁵ This ideal is like the dream of an ultimate utopian world, or paradise, where there would be a perfect proportionality or fit between every agent’s moral virtue and his or her degree of personal happiness. It is this ideal of the “consum-

mate good" or (more loosely) the "highest good" that leads Kant to his religious postulates and all the controversies surrounding them.⁶

Kant claims that the principle of the consummate good is an essential ideal in moral reasoning. He also claims that the concept of immortality is necessary in order to complete that ideal and make possible the fulfillment of the ethical project. However, many critics have questioned whether the "necessity" Kant finds is a sufficient basis to ground the far-reaching conclusions that he seeks to derive from it.

One line of attack by those seeking to avoid Kant's religious postulates while still retaining his ethical imperatives has been to eliminate the ideal of the consummate good and posit only the "supreme good"—a much more limited principle. The concept of the *supreme good* would arguably be enough to make sure that responsible agents would recognize their unconditional obligation to do what is right, according to the categorical imperative. Whether the moral agents would succeed in their efforts to achieve the blessed condition of the *consummate good* is another matter altogether. Clearly this is something that only a God could accomplish. But how necessary is it really to aspire to this, or even to acknowledge it as an ideal? If one could avoid the requirement to strive for the consummate good, which leads straight to the religious postulates, then it might be feasible to reformulate Kant's ethics in a way that would satisfy even atheists. Lewis White Beck, Stephen Körner, and Thomas Auxter have been among the scholars taking this approach.⁷

Allen Wood, however, has presented a strong case that the "consummate good" plays an essential role in Kantian ethics, and furthermore that the major objections to it stem from a sort of "category mistake."⁸ The "category mistake," according to Wood, involves treating the "supreme good" like a separable ideal from that of the "consummate good," as if one could pursue the former without at the same time implicitly acknowledging the latter. Yet the rational will must not only go through the motions of obeying the moral law, but must also strive as much as possible to actualize the goals of moral action. For example, it is one thing to will a world in which all rational beings deal truthfully and honestly with each other, but unless one is prepared to struggle and sacrifice toward that end, the commitment would be half-hearted. Similarly, it is one thing to will that good people experience happiness commensurate with their merit; but unless one undertakes to work toward the consummation and universalization of moral deserts, these goals would remain inadequate and incomplete. To will the good, in other words, is necessarily to will the complete fulfillment of the moral project. It is not enough to make mere gestures in the direction of a moral universe. Therefore, as Wood writes, "Reason . . . always 'seeks the unconditioned,' always seeks to unify its rules under the idea of a totality."⁹ This totalization of the moral project is precisely what one means by the "consummate good."

If Wood is right, one cannot remain true to the Kantian perspective if one abandons the ideal of the consummate good. Nevertheless, it is still possible to question whether one must conceive of this consummate good as a genuine possibility, or whether one should rather regard it as a (necessary?) pipe dream without reality. A. G. Nuyen has presented an approach to Kant that takes this subtle position.¹⁰

On the one hand, Nuyen agrees with Wood that one must retain a commitment to the consummate good as an ideal of moral action if one is to remain true to Kantian ethics. On the other hand, Nuyen also doubts very much that the religious postulates are at all realistic. He therefore raises the following question: to what extent can an atheist still accept the fundamental principles of Kantian ethics, and in particular the categorical imperative? Nuyen argues that the necessity of striving to fulfill the moral law does not require one to believe in the possibility of ultimate success, even in a thinkable noumenal realm beyond the limits of space and time. It may well be that all moral endeavor finally ends in failure, as the laws of nature grind mercilessly down on the frail projects of human volition. Yet the impossibility of ultimate success does not exempt one from the obligation to continue trying. The result may be a Sisyphean task, in which the moral agent endlessly strives to fulfill the ethical goals envisioned in the consummate good, while at the same time remaining convinced of their final impossibility:

We have seen that faced with the choice between pressing ahead in the face of uncertainty or the descent into total despair, the rational nonbeliever can and must choose the former. The picture for the rational nonbeliever is admittedly bleak. Indeed, there is something rather absurd about striving to attain something that could turn out to be impossible (one is here reminded of Sisyphus). . . . To paraphrase Sartre, we are condemned to be rational. . . . Still, since only the believers can hope, it might be felt that the non-believers' fate is worse than that of the believers. For those who feel that way, and only for them, morality does indeed lead ineluctably to religion. In the end, it could well be more rational to be religious.¹¹

There is something peculiar about Nuyen's apparent conviction that the religious postulates of God and immortality are both morally necessary and at the same time theoretically implausible. The reference to Sartre is apt. Sartre regarded the concept of a God as a "hypostatized totality" that necessarily "haunts" human consciousness, but he also insisted that such a concept is phenomenologically impossible, even logically inconsistent.¹² In the same way, Nuyen seems to hold that the moral nonbelievers are "condemned" to entertain certain ethical ideals of whose radical impossibility they are completely convinced. This is a most unsatisfactory conclusion.

Another critic who has questioned the necessity of positing the ideal of the consummate good and the religious postulates that follow from it is Chin-tai Kim. Kim distinguishes the following degrees of "moral necessity" in Kant, in descending order: First, and of absolute importance, there is the *obligational necessity* to act ethically, using the categorical imperative as a criterion of judgment. Next, and somewhat less imperative, there is the *valuational necessity* to esteem the goods recommended by the categorical imperative, to value their actualization to whatever extent they are attainable. Third, and again slightly less compelling than the first two, there is the *subjective necessity* to entertain certain ideas about transcendent possibilities that, if true, would make the ultimate fulfillment of our ethical obligations more thinkable. Fourth, and least requisite, there is the *assertoric necessity* of

choosing to believe in the reality of these possibilities, in order that one may commit oneself wholly and unconditionally to a life in pursuit of the consummate good.¹³ What Kim wants to say is that it might be feasible to grant the first type of necessity, which is unqualified, without having to go on to the next steps of affirming and actually believing in those postulated concepts which, according to Kant, are only “necessary” in order to make coherent sense of, and adequately motivate, our pursuit of the moral life.

But the sort of motivational coherency required for the latter stages of “necessity” would, according to Kim’s interpretation, only apply so far as the optimal structuring of a rational agent’s inner life was concerned. If an individual were habitually to compartmentalize his or her actions, values, and beliefs, then such a person might well lead an ethical life even without adopting the postulational worldview that Kant has argued for. After all, it could be that someone would rigorously follow the most altruistic ethical ideals, even though she were an atheist and believed death to be the final end of human existence. Surely this person would be preferable, in terms of Kant’s own theory, to someone who believed in God and immortality, even though he habitually disregarded the moral law. Granted, many people do believe in God and the afterlife, and they may use these concepts to orient their lives in ethical ways. But to Kim the decision about one’s ultimate metaphysical worldview is not, and cannot be, a matter of moral obligation.

Furthermore, Kim points out that *valuing* something does not *per se* entail a judgment about its real possibility. One might indeed value a universe that would contain a just and good God without being prepared to concede that such a being is real or even possible.¹⁴ Since, moreover, human reason is, according to Kant’s own testimony, forever precluded from knowing anything about the transcendent noumena, we are effectively in the position of willing and acting with blindfolds on. Kim suggests that this is the human condition, and that recognizing it puts us very close to the existentialist view that morality requires a forthright confrontation with the absurd:

It takes only a step from Kant to the Kierkegaardian view that the ground of reason is “the absurd,” forever opaque to reason but powerful enough to obsess it. Kant does not provide anything but a question-begging rejoinder to the Kierkegaardian challenge. There have been some desperate attempts subsequently to restore, somehow, the accessibility of the transcendent to human subjectivity. Religious consciousness demands at least an intelligible account of the openness of human subjectivity to the transcendent—an account of the possibility of the irruption of the transcendent in human consciousness, existence and history.¹⁵

Kim’s criticisms are challenging and insightful, yet one can easily anticipate what Kant’s likely response would be. First, he could agree that there are degrees of moral necessity, and that the duty to obey the moral law is more compelling than the requirement to affirm the religious postulates. Kant states explicitly that to believe in the claims of rational faith is not obligatory in the same way that obedience to the moral law is. This, he says, is because “faith that is commanded is an

absurdity,” while at the same time one has to recognize that “there can be a moral interest that turns the scale.”¹⁶ In other words, the concept of the consummate good is something that practical reason recommends, but does not demand. Second, Kant could still claim that these religious postulates ideally ought to be working hand in hand with the moral law in motivating us to pursue the right course of action. The plausibility of this argument is in no way diminished by the undeniable fact that human beings are often thoughtless and inconsistent, and that given this proclivity to mental laxity it would be better that they disregard the religious postulates than neglect their obligation to act morally.

Kim doesn’t help his own case when he cites Kierkegaard’s existentialist embrace of the “absurd.” Kant could reply that if it is “question begging” to reject what is logically absurd, then this is a question that deserves begging. The objection amounts to no more than irrationally doubting whether rationality is defensible in the first place. But if one is not even prepared to accept rationality and reject what is absurd, then any criticism of others for question begging or self-contradiction would be pointless, since one would already have abandoned the logical foundations for consequential reasoning and self-consistency in any case. Kant is here only “question begging” in the sense that he justifiably presupposes the need to remain at all times rational.

Kant could also argue that if one has followed his reasoning, proceeding from the most necessary principles of moral obligation down to the less compelling (although still valid and significant) principles, and if one has seen that each step is unavoidable and permits no alternative formulations with regard to his ethico-religious postulates, then that should suffice for his purposes. He would have succeeded in demonstrating as much “moral necessity” as his argument requires, at least for anyone who is committed to rational coherence in his or her moral life. An essential attribute of something is still essential, even if it happens to be lower in the hierarchy than some other essential attributes. In the same way, to acknowledge the importance of derivative, yet still morally necessary, principles may be all it takes to confirm the need to accept his religious postulates—provided only that one is already committed to being rational.

The paragraphs above have sought in general terms to defend Kant’s doctrine of the consummate good against the charge of superfluity. We have seen that it is no simple matter to extract the concept of the supreme good from the rest of Kant’s ethics because the latter concept of itself points toward the ideal of an ultimate degree of fulfillment, and this is precisely what the doctrine of the consummate good was designed to supply. Nevertheless, I do agree with one of the main criticisms that Kim, Nuyen, and others have sought to make—namely, that Kant was mistaken in assuming that the chain of practical reasoning he provided, from the first step in his system to the last is sufficient to persuade all rational and morally motivated minds to accept his religious postulates. For it may be that one would acknowledge the need to strive toward some sort of consummation of the moral life, without sharing Kant’s specific vision about what such a consummation might look like.

These reflections suggest, therefore, that it may be useful to divide the question by distinguishing the broader issue from a more specific one. The issue that I wish to pursue in the following pages is not the broad question of whether *any* quest for the highest good is necessary, nor whether *any* ethico-religious postulates are needed, but rather the more limited question of whether the precise formulations that Kant has given to *his version* of the consummate good are in fact compelling and unavoidable. By concentrating on this more circumscribed topic, it may subsequently be feasible to return with renewed insight to the broader issue of whether any version at all of the highest good is necessary. (But that would be a topic for another paper.)

In order to address the more circumscribed topic effectively, we may begin by asking whether Kant has been led to his religious postulates through the logic of “practical necessity” alone, or whether certain culturally imbedded presuppositions have unduly influenced his argument. In the former case, we may in the end concede Kant’s case that, granting only the necessity of positing a consummate good, one is forced down an “ineluctable” and “inevitable” path (as he puts it) from the categorical imperative to a rational faith in his specific versions of the religious postulates.¹⁷ If culturally imbedded assumptions are found to play a role, however, we may find it appropriate to explore the possibility that different moves in the chain of reasoning might lead to variant paradigms to guide one’s ethical decision making, which in turn might produce an alternative set of religious postulates.

As I shall attempt to show in the following pages, there is reason to believe that Kant was indeed unduly influenced by his cultural background in the Judeo-Christian tradition (understanding the latter in a broad sense to include all major historical, religious, and philosophical developments that have shaped the Western tradition over the last two millennia) to conceive of the soul as an enduring substance. Not all religious and cultural traditions conceive of the soul along substantialist lines, however. One may think, for example, of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. There is strong *prima facie* evidence that these traditions have been just as capable of sustaining good ethical behavior as the modern Western monotheisms. In the following pages, I will critically examine the postulate of immortality, but will do so (as indicated) from a deliberately limited perspective. What I will try to demonstrate is that the arguments presented by Kant for willing the completeness of the moral project after death, even if partially convincing, do not preclude other ways of thinking morally about a possible future existence. My strategy will be to show how an alternative model, rooted in Zen Buddhism but also nourished by a thorough familiarity with Western philosophy, is equally feasible within the terms of Kant’s own moral theory. Nishida’s conception of what it might mean to “transcend” phenomenal existence (and others, too, not considered here) can be interpreted in a way that possesses genuine, if understandably vague and “underdetermined,” plausibility. In that case, Kant’s moral postulates, including the postulate of immortality, may provide *one* feasible and worthwhile way of representing humankind’s ultimate moral destiny, but by no means the *only* way.

Summary of Kant's Practical Argument for Postulating Immortality

We now turn to consider Kant's argument for the need to affirm the soul's immortality (even while he admits that such immortality can never be an object of *knowledge*). The argument consists of five basic steps.¹⁸

1. The complete fulfillment of the moral law is a necessary object of the rational will; so it follows that one must also will to have the capacity for perfectly intending to achieve that complete fulfillment.

2. To have such a capacity of perfect moral intending, however, would mean that one's spirit would be holy.

3. Yet to exist as a finite creature in a world of sense entails always being subject to the temptations of desire and inclinations toward selfishness. So no finite creature in a world of sense can ever *be* holy in actual fact.

4. Since we must always will to be holy, but can never aspire to achieve that state of moral perfection, there is only one way of reconciling these two requirements: that is to will that one would be perpetually approaching the unattainable holiness as an asymptotic ideal in a transcendent world beyond the world of sense.

5. To undertake a perpetual approach toward a goal that one can never reach requires that one think of oneself as immortal.

This argument contains a number of intriguing, if somewhat peculiar, implications. First, notice that it nowhere claims to prove that the soul actually *is* immortal, but only that one ought to think of oneself *as* immortal. (In taking this approach, of course, Kant is just being consistent with his avowed postulational method, as discussed above.) Second, granting the non-cognitive status of the reasoning, observe that it simultaneously seeks to accomplish two aims, which may not be directly contradictory but at least make for an odd combination. On the one hand, the argument posits a continuation of personal existence in an unknowable realm beyond the current phenomenal one (step 4), while at the same time it bases a major part of its argument for such a world on the requirements of a sense-based existence (step 3). Kant states in many different places that there can be no "sensible or supersensible" intuition of any one of the transcendent entities whose existence is postulated by the practical reason. Presumably, this means that one must not even suppose such entities to reside within space or time—their being lies elsewhere. Indeed, Kant even goes so far as to suggest that the "Infinite Being [i.e., God], to whom the temporal condition is nothing, sees in this series, which is for us without end, a whole conformable to the moral law; . . . [which whole] is to be found in a single intellectual intuition of the existence of rational beings."¹⁹ In other words, God (if there is a God) would hold the very notion of an everlasting existence (in the sense of an infinite duration) as a nonstarter, since God would apprehend each individual soul in its noumenal essence rather than under the sensible conditions of space and time. Consequently, even sensible creatures like ourselves, if we wish to escape falling into transcendental illusions, should recognize that our ideas about the soul and its destiny have only a metaphorical significance.

When practical reason thinks about such things, it must avoid employing “the transcendental predicates” in any ordinary, empirical sense—we may affirm, for example, the idea of a “magnitude of existence, duration, which is not in time even though this is the only means by which we can think of the magnitude of existence.”²⁰ Evidently, Kant is here employing a type of reasoning known in the philosophical tradition as “analogy of attribution,” whereby one seeks to adumbrate the nature of imponderable entities by means of symbolically suggestive, rather than literally accurate, discourse. Such symbolic discourse, of course, cannot claim to be very reliable; and yet Kant wants to base on it his concept of immortality. Within this metaphorical medium, moreover, an unstable incongruity persists: we are led (he affirms) to postulate immortality, since “holiness [an ideal we have to aim for] . . . is a perfection of which no rational being *in the world of sense* is at any time capable.”²¹ Yet if, *ex hypothesi*, death involves a transition beyond the world of sense, why would there be a reason to suppose anything even remotely analogous to an infinite “duration” outside all time?

This is a point that one recent commentator, J. J. MacIntosh, makes repeatedly. What he wants to argue is that the concept of immortality in Kant is not just unprovable, but logically incoherent.²² The reason it is incoherent, according to MacIntosh, is that any notion of “immortality” outside space and time makes no sense whatsoever. Even to imagine a sort of “continuation” of the self that would persist beyond the temporal medium that makes all “continuing” possible would be, for MacIntosh, an exercise in futility. Besides this, there is the problem of conceiving what relation, if any, there can be between one’s own putative “continuation” outside time and that of other rational agents (for, presumably, moral progress after death would involve some kind of interactions with other moral agents). Although one may invoke the notion of analogy of attribution *ad libitum*, this hardly suffices to make the idea of personal immortality any clearer.

On this point, however, Chin-tai Kim has sought to come to Kant’s rescue, for he argues that Kant could, without contradicting his basic philosophical position, invoke a kind of escape clause: after death there might be another type of sensuous existence, with its own sort of quasi-space and quasi-time, and this, rather than a merely noumenal existence as a purely intelligible entity beyond any sensuous manifold, would supply the context for the individual’s continuous moral advancement:

Kant could perhaps say that there is no incoherence in supposing successive systems of empirical consciousness, structurally similar (all spatial and temporal and in agreement with the categorial principles of experience) but differing in special laws, such that, given two successive systems, the later is more harmonious with the increasing moral worth of persons. That is, a series, even an infinite series, of natures embodying increasing degrees of justice asymptoting the *summum bonum* can be thought.²³

Going even a step further, Patrick Shade makes a case that the implicit presuppositions inherent in Kant’s metaphysical framework not only *allow for* such a continuation of sensuous embodiment after death, but actually *require* it. Shade bases his argument on Kant’s claim that we must conceive of the consummate good in

terms of a harmonizing of two distinct aspects of every human personality: on the one hand the transcendent, noumenal aspect, whose aim is perfect virtue, and on the other hand the empirical, sensuous aspect, which deserves a degree of happiness correspondent to one's virtue. According to Shade, this universal goal of happiness for each rational agent corresponding to his or her merits requires that one must conceive of a continuation of some kind of sensuous (although not necessarily material) embodiment for each end-in-itself, since such an embodiment is the only conceivable condition by which happiness is thinkable. Shade concludes, therefore, that the idea of a postmortem "rephenomenalization" of every finite rational agent is required as a moral postulate.²⁴

A weak point in Shade's argument is his taking for granted that moral progress is empirically observable within the phenomenal realm, and hence that it is in principle knowable as a verifiable datum.²⁵ Yet Kant never says that the morality quality of any phenomenal act is knowable, nor is progress in a person's moral development empirically verifiable in any case. Based on his questionable interpretation, Shade virtually ignores the distinction between the possibly noumenal type of evolutionary progress that might attend one in the afterlife and the concrete, empirically verifiable progress that would presumably pertain to a sensuously "rephenomenalized" being. By assuming that moral progress requires *empirically verifiable knowledge* of one's progress, Shade passes too easily to the conclusion that an embodied existence in the afterlife is a moral requirement on Kantian terms:

The progress in virtue central to the theological conception of the summum bonum requires the phenomenal self in two ways. First, such progress requires the interplay between the moral and phenomenal selves. Second, progress presupposes time, which is relevant only to the phenomenal self. But since the phenomenal self perishes, the moral self must be joined with another phenomenal self if it is to continue its progress in virtue. We are thus left with the implication of the rephenomenalization of the moral self.²⁶

Another problem with Shade's view is that it is difficult to reconcile with certain passages in Kant's writings where he expresses doubt that the afterlife would involve any kind of physical embodiment. For example, in his *Vorlesungen über Metaphysik und Rationaltheologie* (Lectures on metaphysics and rational theology) (ca. 1788–1790), Kant indicates that of course we cannot *know* the condition of the soul after death, and specifically that we cannot know whether it would be an embodied existence or not, and yet that from a moral standpoint it is preferable to conceive of the afterlife as a disembodied state.²⁷ Kant recommends the idea of "a purely spiritual life, wherein the soul will have no body whatsoever" (ein ganz reines geistiges Leben, wo die Seele gar keinen Körper haben wird).²⁸ The primary reason Kant gives for this supposition is that the body is only a hindrance in this life and, further, that it seems absurd to conceive of the spirit itself "localiter," as if it could be located in one physical place as opposed to another. Far better, Kant suggests, to think of our condition after death to consist in a spiritual community with other, like-minded souls. Those who have been virtuous in the sensible world will likely continue their moral improvement in connection with other disembodied good spirits (this being

the true meaning of “heaven”), while those who have been sinful will likely find themselves on a downward path together with other disembodied wicked spirits (the true meaning of “hell”). Kant acknowledges that this opinion cannot be demonstrated by any philosophical proof, but he says that it is “a necessary hypothesis of reason.”²⁹ He concludes his speculations in these pages with the observation: “Why it should be necessary for this spiritual experience to have a body, I cannot see at all. Why should the soul still be encumbered with this dust, once it has freed itself therefrom?”³⁰

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Kant continues to think of moral progress as involving a struggle against some kind of opposition, something analogous to a field of sensuously presented temptations, which would provide the context for either moral progress or moral regress on the other side of death. The simplest way to reconcile Kant’s rejection of postmortem embodiment with his affirmation of a continuing condition of moral imperfection after death would be to imagine a world that bears no relation to the current physical universe (and hence is without an existence “localiter,” according to the norms of this-worldly physics), and that at the same time does include some kind of quasi-sensuous medium within which phenomenal temptations could still occur. This hermeneutical hypothesis may be feasible, yet the fact that one is driven to such refined hairsplitting in the interpretation of Kant’s view of the afterlife is itself indirect evidence that his ideas on this topic are far from clear and are subject to wavering.

Although Shade goes too far in treating the postulation of postmortem rephenomenalization as a moral *requirement*, he does make a plausible case for it as one *possible account* of the afterlife from a Kantian standpoint. There is no obvious contradiction involved in supposing that a rational agent could, after death, continue on its course of moral development through the mediation of one or more embodied lives. And this is precisely the point that Chin-tai Kim was making, as discussed above. Kim’s and Shade’s proposals are intriguing ones, even if surprising and rather paradoxical. It remains to be seen to what extent their interpretations are consistent with other passages in the Kantian corpus. Most Kant scholars agree, on the other hand, that what he envisions is a kind of moral “progress” that would extend outside space and time. This is why, as Kant repeatedly insists, it is something that we cannot know, although we may still envision it as a transcendental moral ideal. The problem remains, however, how one can think coherently about a nontemporal progression. MacIntosh’s objections, even if they do not entirely defeat a noumenalistic interpretation of Kant’s position, must give its defenders pause.

Perhaps all that Kant is really entitled to claim on the basis of his argument is that a rational being in the world of sense may legitimately postulate something remotely *analogous* to an afterlife in order to complete the moral progress that death cuts off. We might paraphrase this reasoning as follows: “In our present condition we think in terms of a quasi-temporal continuation after death,” the rational being might assert, “and this is the sensuous framework we must use in order to contemplate the completion of moral progress begun in this life. But once positioned in the noumenal world on the ‘other side’ of this, we may encounter a reality that eludes description

as either ‘mortality’ or ‘immortality.’ In either case, our goal is to fulfill the practical imperatives that duty imposes on us all. . . .” So much, maybe, could a Kantian reasonably maintain without overstepping the self-imposed limits of his argument. Yet as Plato already made abundantly clear, there is an immense difference between postulating an afterlife and postulating immortality (see *Phaedo* 87a–88b). Exactly how one should conceive of any hypothetical “continuation” after death—whether (a) as a spatiotemporal existence just like the current one, (b) as a quasi-sensuous phenomenal world that lies beyond the current material universe, such as Kim imagines, (c) as a noumenal realm in which the individual would directly enter a state of personal and moral completeness, or (d) as a noumenal realm in which the individual would continue somehow to be in a state of perpetual process—all of these seem to be equally speculative possibilities, without anything compelling us to choose among them. It would appear, then, that Kant is dealing with some very paradoxical ideas here concerning the afterlife that may or may not be logically coherent but, in any case, are scarcely capable of being limited to one and only one interpretation.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that one pursues option (d) above. This is the choice that Kant seems to favor. Yet problems of interpretation continue to bedevil such a position. For a curious implication of Kant’s doctrine is that it forces him to walk on a razor-thin line between the twin dangers of either disrupting the framework of moral action or advocating ultimate failure.

1. The danger of disrupting the framework of moral action comes from the fact that moral thinking always requires one’s reason to be holding the natural inclinations in check and rising above them, even if those inclinations might happen to be altruistic and loving. If a person’s action is motivated by feelings of benevolence toward others, Kant would regard that as a fortunate circumstance, but—precisely insofar it springs from the prompting of desire rather than practical reason—it is not to be trusted as a reliable criterion of moral goodness. To be kindly disposed and loving is generally a good thing, of course, but for Kant it cannot be considered on a level with the high moral imperative that impels us to rise above our natural desires for the sake of duty.³¹ This agonistic motif in Kant’s metaphysics of morals requires that there always be something within the agent’s natural disposition for the rational will to struggle against. Otherwise, the very framework of moral effort would collapse. Hence, if anyone could (*per impossibile*) become totally loving and altruistic in all her immediate impulses, she would *ipso facto* lose the status of a moral agent working to overcome her natural desires.

2. On the other hand, the danger of advocating a failure of the ethical project results from Kant’s insistence that the state of perpetual opposition between the rational will and one’s natural disposition must never end. Respect for the moral law, which is a precondition of the moral life, presupposes the continuance of this opposition between rational principle and natural sensibility. Indeed, Kant goes so far as to suggest that to imagine a rational being that was unencumbered by sensibility—with all the conflicts that such natural embodiment entails—would be contrary to the nature of morality as such.³² For morality lives and breathes in the medium of conflict and the struggle against natural inclinations:

It should be noticed that, as respect is an effect on feeling and thus on the sensibility of a rational being, it presupposes the sensuousness and hence the finitude of such beings on whom respect for the moral law is imposed; thus respect for the law cannot be attributed to a supreme being or even to one free from all sensibility, since to such a being there could be no obstacle to practical reason.³³

Paradoxically, therefore, the moral agent must never suppose that she could ever actually *achieve* the ultimate end that is the goal of an individual's ethical life—the attainment of holiness. Even after a lifelong struggle in this life, plus a “lengthy” extension (metaphorically speaking) of that struggle in the timeless dimension of a postulated afterlife, it is still not permitted to hope that moral perfection might come within one's grasp.—But does this not imply that one is destined to fail, no matter how hard one tries?

The need to avoid both these dangers puts Kant in a kind of double bind. He recognizes that the pursuit of virtue requires us to be constantly training ourselves to be well disposed toward others and to become increasingly sympathetic to them. At the same time, he also maintains that no motive resulting from such training can by itself be an adequate ground of moral action. Naturally conditioned motives may, of course, overlap with strictly moral ones, as long as one is not acting *because* of the former or relying on them for justification. Kant repeatedly emphasizes that the moral worth of an act derives solely from its origination within practical reason, not from sensuously conditioned desires, including those resulting from previous moral training. Consequently, any benevolent impulses that a person might experience in the future, even such as might arise from some kind of otherworldly “supernature” in the afterlife (along the lines of Kim's proposal, discussed earlier, of a series of successive, quasi-sensuous worlds), would still not qualify as moral *per se*. Although the obligation constantly to work on improving one's natural—or supernatural—disposition is a duty, for Kant each bit of progress simply moves the point of inner conflict a step further; it never can mean an end to the internal struggle with one's natural dispositions. While each stage of a person's development may involve progressively less struggle as her dispositional tendencies (hopefully) become more benign and tractable to reason, there must always remain an element of striving against one's own nature in order for the moral dimension to persist.

Kant evidently fears that any expectations of ultimate success in this regard would come at the cost of inspiring spiritual pride, leading one to imagine that someday it might no longer be necessary to strive any more, on account of attaining a quasi-godlike status. This prospect would go too much against the grain of Kant's deeply austere brand of religion. To be overly optimistic about the possibility of attaining moral perfection would mean that one would confront an insoluble situation:

Without it [i.e., the thesis of an unending progress toward moral perfection], either the moral law is completely degraded from its holiness, by being made out as lenient (indulgent) and thus compliant to our convenience, or its call and its demands are strained to an unattainable destination, i.e., a hoped-for complete attainment of holiness of will, thus losing themselves in fanatical theosophical dreams which completely contradict our

knowledge of ourselves. In either case, we are only hindered in the unceasing striving toward the precise and persistent obedience to a command of reason which is stern, unindulgent, truly commanding, really and not just ideally possible.³⁴

Notice that this proscription against the thought of ever completing the moral quest is not limited to our present state as human beings immersed in the present world of sense. To imagine such a limitation would undermine the entire purpose of Kant's argument for postulating a continuation of the moral agent's existence beyond this life into the noumenal realm. The danger of spiritual pride, therefore, is something that one must guard against always, both now as a human being and subsequently as a member of the purely intelligible "kingdom of ends in themselves." Unfortunately, the attitude Kant proposes in order to avoid this danger commits one to a sort of psychological defeatism that is no less morally debilitating for being transcendental.

Long ago, Hegel pointed out the deep logical perplexity that Kant's theory involves. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), he criticized Kant's theory of ethics on the grounds that it cannot be genuinely serious about fulfilling this moral task of perpetual progress:

Consciousness has, therefore, itself to bring about this harmony [i.e., between the natural inclinations and the call of duty] and continually to be making progress in morality. But the consummation of this progress has to be projected into a future infinitely remote; for if it actually came about, this would do away with the moral consciousness. For morality is only moral *consciousness* as negative essence, for whose pure duty sensuousness has only a *negative* significance, is only *not* in conformity with duty. But, in that harmony, *morality qua* consciousness, i.e. its *actuality*, vanishes, just as in the moral consciousness, or in the *actuality* of morality, the *harmony* vanishes. The consummation, therefore, cannot be attained, but is to be thought of merely as an *absolute* task, i.e. one which simply remains a task.³⁵

Another peculiar implication of Kant's theory is that it would remove all rational justification for attributing immortality to any existing holy will. Consider: Kant claims that our morally necessary ascription of immortality to ourselves derives ultimately from our moral *imperfection*. It is because we cannot claim to be ethically perfect that we must strive to progress in a never-ending duration. This argument—the only one that Kant allows for postulating immortality—obviously would not work for any being who was already morally perfect. For example, a perfect Messiah or a sinless bodhisattva, if such a being existed, would not have this means of rationally ascribing immortality to himself or herself, because he or she would be holy and therefore wouldn't need to keep developing and improving forever. It is only we inferior types, precisely because we are morally imperfect, who must think of ourselves as immortal on the basis of Kant's argument. (This is not to say that immortality, for Kant, necessarily entails imperfection. The obvious counterexample to that supposition is the concept of a perfect God—which is certainly possible on Kantian terms. But the point is just that a perfect being like a God, a saint, or an angel, if such beings exist, could never use Kant's specifically moral arguments in order to justify postulating immortality for himself or herself.)

In view of all these logical problems attending Kant's postulate of immortality, and in view of the tenuousness of the arguments he uses to support it, I would suggest that the time has come to consider alternative paradigms of moral agency. In saying this I do not mean to assert that Kant's theory is incoherent or even implausible as seen from within a typically Western perspective (for the theory may be salvageable by means of reconstructive efforts). Rather, my point is that the logical and interpretive perplexities are sufficiently great to justify giving different models a chance for consideration. When looking for viable alternatives, however, one immediately confronts the difficulty that the cultural traditions within which ideas about noumenal realities evolve are notoriously laden with hidden presuppositions. It is extremely difficult for thinkers operating within a single historical tradition to conceive of alternative models that are free from prejudices potentially skewing their results. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has argued, human understanding requires a context of "fore-meaning" (*Vormeinung*)—that is, an encompassing framework of anticipated significance—and such anticipated significance always involves elements of unconscious prejudice (*Vorurteil*) absorbed from the surrounding culture.³⁶ (According to Gadamer, even the aspiration to purge rational thought of its latent prejudices is itself the result of a "prejudice against prejudices" inherited from the European Enlightenment period.³⁷)

The discovery by contemporary hermeneutics of the role that a cultural tradition plays in the formation of even the most abstract philosophical concepts raises a profound difficulty for Kant's theory of the religious postulates. One need not go so far as to maintain that unconscious presuppositions invariably infiltrate the results of rational reflection in order to recognize the importance of considering the possible influence of acculturated preconceptions on the postulated ideals of "pure practical reason." This caution is all the more appropriate when those ideals are professedly non-cognitive in character.

Given the inherent limits of human imagination, when seeking to identify alternative paradigms of the self and afterlife that effectively challenge those arising from a Eurocentric perspective, it can be useful to step outside the Western tradition entirely and turn for fresh insights to one of the traditions of the East. By means of considering the Buddhist tradition and the alternative paradigms that have evolved within it, one may find ways of fulfilling the requirements of Kant's moral imperative without subscribing to the implicitly Western assumptions that have hitherto limited most critical appraisals of his arguments. Indeed, after engaging in the process of cross-cultural comparison, it may even be possible to strengthen Kant's core arguments by giving them a different basis of application.³⁸

Alternative Noumenal Models for Representing Moral Responsibility

Let us examine some alternative ways of thinking of the noumenal "agencies" that lie behind, and ultimately serve to orient, our practical reasoning as responsible moral beings. We have seen that Kantian ethics, in seeking to account for the possibility of a moral conscience, a coherent sense of agency, and the assumption of responsibility for one's past and future actions, alleges that it is necessary to conceive

of persisting individual entities within the noumenal realm. Although these noumenal entities are admitted by Kant to lie beyond the reach of cognition by a sensuous consciousness, and although various logical aporias accompany our attempts to explain how either “individuality” or “persistence” is to be understood within a noumenal context, according to him these notions are indispensable features of a fully moral life. Yet might it not be feasible to accept the requirements of conscience, agency, and responsibility without necessarily buying into the particular noumenal framework to which Kant has conjoined them? Furthermore, even if Kant’s model works as *one* way of providing a moral compass to struggling individuals within the phenomenal world, does it follow that it is the *only* way? Might it not be that other accounts of the afterlife—or, more generally, of transcending toward what lies “beyond” the present life—could equally well fulfill the requirements that Kant’s ethics have identified? What I will seek to demonstrate in this section of this essay is that the concept of personal responsibility, as presented by Kant, does not preclude other ways besides immortality of thinking about a possible afterlife. I will briefly discuss two alternative models, which, I would suggest, are equally plausible within the terms of Kant’s own moral theory.

1. It is possible to dispense with the idea of a personal “self” altogether as the source and seat of moral accountability. Instead, one could represent each individual “act” as having its own ontological basis within an interlocking network of other, interdependently connected actions. However, there would be no enduring “ego” to tie some of them together while excluding others. In that case, of course, one would have to reevaluate the meaning of moral accountability and look for different ways of taking responsibility for one’s actions. We can call this the “no-soul” hypothesis.

2. It is also possible to conceive of eternity as capable of manifesting itself within the present, and of “true Selfhood” as transcending toward a higher reality—a reality of which the current temporal process is only a kind of projection onto the phenomenal plane. From this perspective, the goal of religious as well as moral development would involve achieving a standpoint from which the agent’s sense of purposiveness and conscience would break free of their dependency on the linear movement from a personal past toward a personal future, and instead find a basis of responsibility in a truer and more authentic appropriation of the present. We can call this the “transpersonal eternal present” hypothesis.

The first of these hypotheses is a very familiar idea of traditional Buddhist metaphysics, while the second is a conception developed in the twentieth century by the Kyoto School of Kitarō Nishida and his follower Keiji Nishitani. My claim is that both hypotheses are as feasible and logically defensible models for orienting ethical action as the Judeo-Christian metaphysical presuppositions that lie at the basis of Kant’s moral theory.

The No-Soul Hypothesis

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (563–423 B.C.E.), introduced a number of radical reforms into the religious thought of the Indian traditions. Among the most remarkable innovations was his denial that there is any kind of persisting personal essence,

or “soul,” that passes from life to life or even from moment to moment in the present life. The idea of such a substantial soul, the Buddha held, was not only based on a logically dubious reification of the subject; it was also soteriologically counter-productive. People’s habitual clinging to this notion was a major source of self-centeredness and egoism, thus constituting a major obstacle to the religious goal of achieving *nirvāṇa*. Instead of postulating a “soul,” Buddhism teaches that there is only a series of transitory point-experiences, or “*skandas*,” which aggregate together by means of resemblance, proximity, and causality to produce the continuous patterns that we recognize as “individual selves.”³⁹ Only by overcoming the false notion of an enduring, substantial self is it possible to enter into the supreme bliss of “*nirvāṇa*.”⁴⁰

This is not the place to expatiate on the Buddhist doctrine of no-soul (Skt: *anātman*; Pāli: *anatta*) and how it correlates with contemporary Western discussions of personal continuity, personal identity, or nonidentity, et cetera.⁴¹ Suffice it to say that the conception of final redemption via shattering the illusions of individual persistence evidently conflicts with the postulate of personal immortality, which posits a continuation of the individual identity. According to Buddhists, a preoccupation with one’s personal fate in the afterlife is symptomatic of being still in the condition of *saṃsāra*, that is, bondage to the realm of birth-and-death.

A question might be raised at this point, however, whether denying the reality of a substantial and enduring self would effectively undermine one of the core presuppositions upholding the principles of moral obligation. Could there still be such a thing as genuine respect for the humanity within oneself and other persons unless one bases that respect on the notion of a persisting, unique identity or underlying personal essence? After all, throughout the long tradition in Western philosophy ranging from Aristotle’s notion of a rational soul to Leibniz’ conception of an individual monad, the predominant assumption—with a few notable exceptions—has been that personal autonomy and responsibility are only possible if the individual is understood to comprise an indissoluble essence or Πρώτη οὐσία (primary substance) of some kind. Kant, too, implicitly adopts this assumption, even as he removes the individual’s substantial essence from the realm of phenomenal experience and places it instead among the noumena.⁴²

When Buddhists reject this substantial model of selfhood, therefore, it may appear to Western eyes as if they have abandoned the indispensable framework that alone makes personal autonomy and moral agency thinkable. Yet Buddhists would insist that their position is eminently compatible with an ethical point of view. Indeed, the original purpose in proposing the “no-soul” doctrine was to free people from the egocentric preoccupation with themselves that leads to suffering as well as unethical behavior. This teaching also includes an elaborate and subtle system of ethics that seeks to transform the ordinary consciousness’s fixation on its own, personal happiness and replace it with a more altruistic perspective. Buddhism insists on the necessity to free oneself from all actions that are grounded in the natural inclinations and desires. The *Dhammapada* (383 B.C.E.) states: “Him I call a *brahmin* [enlightened person] who has no desires for this world or for the next, who is free

from desires and who is separated from impurities."⁴³ As for the notions of personal autonomy and responsibility, Buddhism maintains that each stream of experiential *skandas* follows a single, karmically constituted continuity of personal consciousness. Within this karmic continuum, each individual is held to be accountable for his or her own ethical and spiritual progress. As the Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki writes: "One aspect of the Zen life may be said to consist in disciplining our will-power to the highest notch. The will is the essence of personality; to be a person means to have free will; the value of the individual, if anywhere, lies in conation."⁴⁴ Suzuki cites the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* (ca. 400 C.E.), a classic Mahāyāna text, which insists that each individual must develop within himself or herself, without depending upon anybody else.⁴⁵

A strict adherence to absolute moral principles constitutes an essential feature of Buddhist practice. The emphasis on disinterested motivation combined with autonomous action demonstrates an ethical ideal that is arguably deontological (or at least includes deontological elements) and is quite compatible with Kant's own position. Whether or not deontological approaches to ethics are ultimately feasible is not at issue here. The main point for our present purposes is that Buddhism, for all that it shares with Kant in its fundamental moral imperative, finds no need to postulate anything like a doctrine of personal immortality.

The Hypothesis of a Transpersonal Eternal Present

Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945), founder of the Kyoto school of philosophy and perhaps the foremost Japanese thinker of the twentieth century, has done a great deal to integrate Western thought, and especially Kant, with the basic principles of Buddhism. He acknowledges Kant's important contributions to moral philosophy and adopts many of his ideas, especially in the area of ethics.⁴⁶ In particular, he accepts Kant's principle that the intelligible world of noumenal entities lies beyond the limits of objective knowledge; he affirms Kant's key distinction between goods that are valued as means toward other things and goods that are ends-in-themselves; and he further agrees that only self-conscious persons endowed with free will can count as ends-in-themselves.⁴⁷

Yet Nishida faults Kant for three major shortcomings in his manner of thinking about the intelligible world: (1) He argues that Kant has an insufficient appreciation of the unique character of religious consciousness, leading him to import moral categories into a domain where they do not properly belong.⁴⁸ (2) He maintains that Kant's purely theoretical stance of a passive observer in respect to time skews his understanding of the unity of consciousness through time. Even when thinking about the noumenal realm, Kant presupposes a merely linear conception of infinite developmental progress beyond the limits of phenomenal time.⁴⁹ (3) He holds that the notion of a persisting volitional self, while justifiable with qualifications from the perspective of practical reason, is in the end to be sublated by a higher religious standpoint. The will must aspire to its own transcendence as a willing agency in order to find its "place" (*basho* 場所) within the Universal of absolute nothingness.⁵⁰ While Nishida makes these criticisms using the terminology of Western, primarily German,

philosophy, his vision is guided throughout by a Zen Buddhist frame of reference. We find all three points united in the following representative passage:

Existence of the moral Self means consciousness of one's own imperfection, and an infinite striving towards the ideal. In the degree in which the conscience sharpens, one feels more guilty. To solve this contradiction, and to see the depth of the Self, means to reach religious salvation. Man comes to know the real bottom of the Self, only by denying himself completely. In this state of mind, there is neither good nor evil. By transcending even the intelligible Self in the direction of noesis, one frees oneself even of the free will. There is no more Self which could sin. Even the idea of the good is the shadow of something that is without form.⁵¹

Although the religious mind seeks an ultimate orientation within the *basho* of absolute nothingness, this does not mean that one may abandon even for an instant one's total commitment to the moral law. The consciousness of one's own imperfection is a part of this, as is the constant striving toward self-improvement. Yet even within the transcendence of the rational will toward an unattainable ideal, there should always be an awareness of the contradictory character that is inherent in the very concept of a self. For what might appear to be substantial within the flux of subjectivity is not truly so. Nishida characterizes it as a dialectically contradictory synthesis of particular acts, bound together with all other actions in such a way as to express the infinite world from a series of finite vantage points. Each act takes place in a passing moment that is simultaneously eternal, a moment whose truth is ultimately to be seen as an "eternal present." Gereon Kopf explains the concept of the eternal present as follows:

[Nishida] contends that the linearity of objective temporality is juxtaposed with the atemporality (非時間性) of the eternal present (永遠の現在), which he alternately identifies as eternal now (永遠の今), nonrelative now (絶対の今), and nonrelative present (絶対の現在). These terms express the paradoxical conundrum that the present, which appears as "instantaneous present" "without dimension" in the linear model of temporality, infinitely extends into human experience insofar as every moment of experience is located in the present, and "past" and "future" exist only insofar as they are present.⁵²

Nishida's dialectical treatment of time as involving a "contradictory self-identity" of past and future within an eternal present does not claim to provide objective knowledge about the structure of the phenomenal world, and yet it has important implications for how one ought to think about the intelligible world from a practical, as well as from a religious, standpoint. In his last writings especially, Nishida explores the possibilities of interweaving—or, better, inter-centering—the old Kantian idea of a kingdom of ends-in-themselves. In this way he creates a new frame of reference within which historical and ethical agencies are to be conceived. Employing the Leibnizean conception of a monad, but giving it a more Buddhist and existentialist turn, he writes:

Existence originates itself by expressing itself; and yet it expresses itself by negating itself and expressing the world. The monads are thus co-originating, and form the world

through their mutual negation. The monads are the world's own perspectives; they form the world interexpressively through their own mutual negation and affirmation. Conversely, the concrete matrix of historical actuality that exists and moves through itself enfolds these monadic perspectives within itself. It transforms itself by having the monads as its centers.⁵³

In describing the existential monads as “interexpressive,” Nishida is creatively adapting the traditional Buddhist idea of “dependent co-origination” (Skt: *pratītya-samutpāda*; Pāli: *paticcasamuppāda*), which holds that all entities and actions are mutually affected by each other in a common network of belonging together. This concept has important implications for moral philosophy. In particular, when applying Kant's categorical imperative, it means that one should think in terms of universalizing across rational *actions* rather than across enduring, substantial *agents*. Thus, insofar as a specific act meets the formal requirement that it can consistently be willed as establishing a universal law for all actions of a similar kind, it is morally justifiable. If it fails to meet that criterion, it is immoral. Moreover, Nishida also argues that a series of acts linked together in a causally continuous chain constitutes a historical dimension, so that each link in the chain bears a measure of responsibility for developments in subsequent links.⁵⁴ In this way, the existential monad, co-originating the world simultaneously with other monads, can and must assume moral accountability for her actions. Indeed, it evidently follows that an existentially “co-originating” individual would be responsible not only for perpetually improving her own moral character but also for furthering the moral development of all others that her actions affect.

At this juncture, however, a traditional Western Kantian might wish to raise several objections, including the following: First of all, what of Kant's claim that one must postulate a single noumenal being within each rational agent in order to give meaning to the idea of a person's continued moral progress in this life and (possibly) the next? If a person were not to conceive of her actions today as having an effect on her enduring soul's ethical disposition in the future, how could she assume responsibility for developing and improving her moral character? Further, does the notion of co-originating monads within a dynamically evolving world do justice to the deontological requirement of assuming unique accountability for one's own actions? Or is the sense of personal autonomy fatally diluted by recognizing the reciprocal influences of each action on all affected others? Finally, can a Buddhist conception of dialectical intersubjectivity provide sufficient support for the unqualified duty to respect other persons as ends in themselves? Or does giving up a substantial view of selfhood inevitably tend to dissipate the obligations of respect?

These are difficult and challenging questions, deserving careful treatment in a future publication. Although it would be going beyond the bounds of the present essay to explore them in depth, a couple of pertinent observations are in order.

1. Even Kant, despite his strong emphasis on the importance of personal autonomy in ethical decision making, recognizes the considerable influence that moral agents can exert on one another. Indeed, it is because of people's tendency to affect each other's moral development that he acknowledges an obligation to take this

potential influence into account when deciding how to act. Kant holds that “it is my duty to do nothing that could, according to human nature, tempt another person to do things that would later cause his conscience to afflict him—this being the true meaning of ‘scandal.’”⁵⁵ Thus, Kant implicitly allows for a certain degree of “co-origination” among voluntary actions, without supposing that this abrogates personal autonomy and responsibility.

2. In one of his less famous but still very significant works, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” Kant affirms that there is another kind of moral progress, one that is (or should be) operative in human history as a whole rather than just on the individual level. The reason for entertaining this hypothesis is that individual human beings are so short-lived that there is no possibility of any single person’s ever completing the project of creating a morally perfect world. And yet we are all duty-bound to continue trying. Therefore, Kant concludes, “Since Nature has set only a short period for [human] life, she needs a perhaps unreckonable series of generations, each of which passes its own enlightenment to its successor in order finally to bring the seeds of enlightenment to that degree of development in our race which is completely suitable to Nature’s purpose.”⁵⁶ Here we have the ideal of a *collective and continuing moral enterprise*, to which everyone belongs as a cell does to a larger organism, and to which we are all obliged to contribute. This way of understanding moral endeavor does not require a substantial view of the self, nor—as far as it goes—does it necessitate any postulation of personal immortality. Whether Kant or those who continue in his tradition would be inclined to extend analogous arguments in order to postulate the imperishability of the human race is another fascinating topic that cannot be pursued here.

The brief indications above concerning the main features of Buddhist ethics will have to suffice for our present purposes. Although many problems remain and details require fleshing out, it appears at least *prima facie* plausible that Buddhism, and in particular Nishida’s theory of “interexpressive action,” can meet the primary regulative needs of practical reason—including the need for a critical conscience—without supposing the existence of a substantial, eternally perduring self as the bearer of moral predicates.

Conclusion

What I have sought to demonstrate in this essay is that Kant’s moral argument for postulating personal immortality fails, and that it does so primarily on account of a limited religious and cultural perspective. We have seen that there may be alternative conceptual (but non-cognitive) models that are significantly different from the Western notion of an immortal soul, yet that satisfy all the important moral requirements made by Kant’s postulation of the highest good. Granted, the two Buddhist models that I have sketched above are themselves subject to criticism, just as Kant’s model is. It is important to bear in mind that, when dealing with transcendent entities beyond the reach of human experience, no theory or symbolic paradigm is likely to be free of ambiguities. Fortunately, it suffices for the purposes of practical reason if

any of these models, Western or Eastern, can serve to provide decent people with a genuinely motivating, even if somewhat vague and cloudy, vision of a continuing moral purpose. While Kant's moral ideal of a kingdom of ends in themselves, together with the postulate of personal immortality, may provide one feasible and worthwhile way of representing humankind's ultimate moral destiny, it is not the only way.

If Kant's religious postulates are not morally necessary in the sense of being the only feasible alternatives, substantive modifications of his original thesis may be needed. Yet it should be possible to preserve what is most valuable in his moral theory. Although some may choose to adopt perspectives on the afterlife derived from other cultural traditions, such as the Buddhist ones, still the essential core of Kant's argument may be amenable to creative adaptation. Nishida, as a sophisticated Buddhist thinker who is thoroughly familiar with Kant's philosophy, provides an important example of this adaptive process.

In the end, perhaps it is death itself that, in an existential sense, provides meaning to life, just as life in turn gives meaning to death. The two appear to be reciprocally related, and this may be the underlying, sustainable core of Kant's theory of immortality. As long as each concept gives a transcendent significance to the other (which to that extent remains a moral postulate), and as long as neither one is completely exhausted by its limited role in the phenomenal world, perhaps both can serve as potential fulcrum points for practical thinking about ethics and the ultimate meaning of human existence.

Notes

1 – Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 2–3. Kuehn cites as evidence Arthur Warda and Carl Dreisch, *Briefe von und an Johann Georg Scheffner* (Munich and Leipzig, 1916), vol. 2, p. 184; also Johann F. Abegg's reminiscences of a conversation with Pörschke in his *Reisetagebuch von 1798* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1976), p. 147.

2 – I employ the designation "noncognitive" here in a more restricted sense than some other English-language philosophers have been accustomed to do. When A. J. Ayer or R. B. Braithwaite, for example, labeled value judgments or religious beliefs as "noncognitive," they meant that these merely express people's emotional attitudes, and therefore involve no rational commitments whatever. Such a view (which in my opinion would be better described simply as "non-assertoric") bears no resemblance to Kant's argument strategy, nor is that what "noncognitive" will mean in the following pages.

A possible source of ambiguity in interpreting Kant may derive from the circumstance that the English language uses a single word, "know," to express two meanings that the German keeps distinct. *Wissen* means "to know" in the sense of theoretical knowledge or cognition of facts, whereas *erkennen* means

“to know” in the sense of perceiving something, realizing a state of affairs, or accepting a truth. Thus, *Wissen* (knowledge) is a subspecies within the broader German concept of *Erkenntnis* (recognition or apprehension). English translations can be misleading if they substitute the more specific for the broader meaning.

In describing Kant’s theory of practical *Erkenntnis* as a kind of “non-cognitivism,” I am referring to his suggestion that one can—in a meaningful and rational way—recognize (*erkennen*) an idea, judgment, or proposition as valid and perhaps even necessary, without thereby claiming to have theoretical or factual knowledge (*Wissen*) of the same. See Lewis White Beck’s illuminating discussion of this point in his Translator’s Introduction to the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. xvi n. 15. As Beck observes, “Kant . . . claims that the legitimate belief in these postulates is objective and rational, though not cognitive. . . . What is unique in Kant’s view is precisely the point that ‘rational’ is not restricted in meaning to ‘cognitive.’” It is in Beck’s sense, then, and not in that of Ayer, Braithwaite, et al., that my use of this term should be understood.

- 3 – This broadly stated and potentially controversial claim may require some explanation. While each of the named thinkers has leaned heavily on Kant’s pioneering work in exploring the possibilities for a noncognitive approach to metaphysics, they have also diverged from Kant in significant ways. A few sentences about the respective intellectual debts of each to Kant’s noncognitivism are in order.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) appropriated Kant’s idea of a non-cognitive but dynamically ordered system of religious concepts, whose ultimate justification consisted not in their supposed objective “truth” (which to him was undemonstrable) but in their uplifting effect on the religious person’s spiritual life. For more on Schleiermacher’s relation to Kant, see Falk Wagner, “Aspekte der Rezeption Kantischer Metaphysik—Kritik in der evangelischen Theologies des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 27 (1) (1985): 25–41, esp. pp. 28–31.

Almost a century later, William James (1842–1910) offered a vigorous defense of what he called the “will to believe”—a pragmatic way of justifying belief in personal, cultural, or religious ideals, even in the absence of sufficient evidence—provided that they significantly enhanced people’s motivation and sense of purpose in life. James owed to Kant the key insight that certain fundamental beliefs and values, including religious ones, derive their justification not from any acts of cognition based on either deduction or observable evidence, but rather from the positive role they can play in a committed person’s life. For a brief treatment of James’ “evolutionary Kantianism,” see Thomas Carlson, “James and the Kantian Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 363–383.

Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) took over Kant’s conviction that ethics is fundamentally grounded in a non-theoretical mode of intentionality that is irreducible to knowledge. Lévinas regarded cognitive experience as reductive because it treats all its contents as mere phenomena within the scope of the individual subject’s own field of consciousness. In seeking to avoid this distorting character of cognition, his approach was based on a kind of postulated relationship, or an *as if* manner of orienting oneself to the transcendent, which alone makes *thinkable* (although scarcely *provable*) a genuine encounter with the Other. For a useful discussion of Lévinas’ debt to Kant, see Diane M. Duncan, *The Pre-Text of Ethics: On Derrida and Levinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), esp. pp. 11–13, 38–68, 145–163.

- 4 – Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1919), p. 71.
- 5 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 114; *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, vol. 5 of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Paul Natorp (Berlin: Königliche Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Walter de Gruyter Verlag, 1902–1938), p. 110. The German edition of Kant’s collected works will henceforth be cited as *Akademie Ausgabe*.
- 6 – After distinguishing between the two possible senses of *das höchste Gute*, Kant makes clear that he will use this term to mean *das vollendete Gute*, not *das oberste Gute*. Thus, he avoids a potential source of ambiguity. To the English-speaking ear, however, the expressions “highest good” and “supreme good” are virtually indistinguishable, even after the terms have received different stipulative definitions. Accordingly, in the following pages I shall generally refer to *das höchste Gute* as “the consummate good,” as the latter term in English has fewer misleading connotations.
- 7 – Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Stephen Körner, *Kant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and Thomas Auxter, “The Unimportance of Kant’s Highest Good,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979): 121–134.
- 8 – Allen W. Wood, *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 69–99; see esp. pp. 95–96.
- 9 – *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.
- 10 – A. G. Nuyen, “Kant on God, Immortality, and the Highest Good,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32 (Spring 1994): 121–132.
- 11 – *Ibid.*, pp. 131–132.
- 12 – Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 90.

- 13 – Chin-tai Kim, “A Critique of Kant’s Defense of Theistic Faith,” *Philosophy Research Archives* 14 (1988–1989): 359–369. I have modified Kim’s terminology somewhat, while preserving his meaning.
- 14 – Kim writes that, for Kant, “The metaphysical possibility of moral action and moral perfection, formerly ruled out as irrelevant to the legislation and justification of morality, suddenly becomes an object of postulation, a quasi-theoretical act, simply because it comes to be valued” (“A Critique of Kant’s Defense of Theistic Faith,” p. 366).
- 15 – Kim, “A Critique of Kant’s Defense of Theistic Faith,” p. 367.
- 16 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 149–150; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5 : 144–145.
- 17 – Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960), pp. 5 and 7 n; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 6 : 6, 7.
- 18 – See the *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 126–128; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5 : 121–125.
- 19 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 127; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5 : 123.
- 20 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 142; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5 : 137. See also *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), p. 619 (B 808): “We can propound a transcendental hypothesis . . . that all life is, strictly speaking, intelligible only, [that it] is not subject to changes of time, and . . . that if we intuit ourselves and things *as they are*, we should see ourselves in a world of spiritual beings, our sole and true community with which has not begun through birth and will not cease through bodily death—both birth and death being mere appearances.” *Akademie Ausgabe*, 3 : 508.
- 21 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 126; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5 : 122; emphasis mine.
- 22 – J. J. MacIntosh, “The Impossibility of Kantian Immortality,” in *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 19 (1) (March 1980): 219–234.
- 23 – Kim, “A Critique of Kant’s Defense of Theistic Faith,” p. 368.
- 24 – Patrick Shade, “Does Kant’s Ethics Imply Reincarnation?” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 33 (3) (Fall 1995): 347–360. Despite his provocative title, Shade nowhere discusses the idea of *recurrent* incarnations in a series of successive embodiments (as in Hinduism and Buddhism). Rather, his argument simply purports to show that the idea of some kind of sensuous condition after death is a necessary postulate on Kant’s own terms. This continuation of a postmortem sensible existence, however, might equally well consist of one single “life” or of a series of such “lives.” Shade cites T. M. Greene and John Silber as having anticipated his argument for the necessary postulation of a sensuous existence after death. See their introductory essays to *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, pp. lix and xcvi–xcvii, respectively.

- 25 – “We cannot, after all, know (in the sense of the first *Critique*) that we have had a [noumenal] revolution in the cast of mind (*Rel* 46). What we know is the *empirical* character of our endless progress to holiness. Moreover, Kant gives us no reason to think that, while this distinction can be drawn, moral progress is possible without the phenomenal self” (Shade, “Does Kant’s Ethics Imply Reincarnation?” p. 354).
- 26 – Shade, “Does Kant’s Ethics Imply Reincarnation?” p. 354.
- 27 – *Vorlesungen über Metaphysik und Rationaltheologie* (Lectures on metaphysics and rational theology), based on lecture notes transcribed by Kant’s students between 1788 and 1790, edited by Karl Heinrich Ludwig Pölitiz, published in Kant’s *Werke*, in *Akademie Ausgabe*, vol. 28, pt. 1 (*Vierte Abteilung: Vorlesungen*, vol. 5, pt. 1), pp. 296–299.
- 28 – Kant, *Vorlesungen über Metaphysik und Rationaltheologie*, p. 296.
- 29 – *Ibid.*, p. 298.
- 30 – *Ibid.*, p. 299.
- 31 – Kant always insists that natural impulses to altruism and benevolent feelings toward others cannot be regarded as having a moral foundation. See his statement in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*:

To be kind where one can is a duty, and there are, moreover, many persons so sympathetically constituted that without any motive of vanity or selfishness they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy and rejoice in the contentment of others which they have made possible. But I say that, however dutiful and amiable it may be, that kind of action has no true moral worth. It is on a level with other inclinations, such as the inclination to honor, which, if fortunately directed to what in fact accords with duty and is generally useful and thus honorable, deserve praise and encouragement but no esteem. For the maxim lacks the moral import of an action done not from inclination but from duty. . . . (*Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck [Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959], p. 14; *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, in *Akademie Ausgabe*, 4:398)

Later in the same work Kant adds:

Everything empirical is not only wholly unworthy to be an ingredient in the principle of morality but is even highly prejudicial to the purity of moral practices themselves. For, in morals, the proper and inestimable worth of an absolutely good will consists precisely in the freedom of the principle of action from all influences from contingent grounds which only experience can furnish. (*Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 44; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 4:426)

See also the *Critique of Practical Reason*, bk. 1, chap. 3.

- 32 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 78; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5:76.
- 33 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 79; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5:76. Some readers may wonder whether there are not two potentially distinct conceptions of

morality operative here: (a) morality as experienced by rational, but sensuously conditioned, creatures; and (b) morality as such, including that pertaining to some hypothetical, nonsensuously conditioned beings. A careful reading of the passage just cited makes clear, however, that this for Kant is a distinction without a difference. For morality, as opposed to holiness, involves the awareness of an obligation to transcend the conditioned character of one's own volitional nature—to surpass oneself, as it were. If the practical reason were the sole determining ground of volition, it would always will what is in accordance with duty. In effect, such a being would be a holy will: one for which the question of moral development—indeed, morality as such—would no longer be an issue.

- 34 – *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 127; *Akademie Ausgabe*, 5:122–123. In formulating this idea of a perpetual striving as the only manner of relation to perfection appropriate for finite creatures, Kant may have been influenced by Christian Wolff. See the latter's *Vernünfftige Gedanken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit* (1720), ed. Hans Werner Arndt, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. J. École, J. E. Hofmann, M. Thomann, and H. W. Arndt, 1. Abteilung: *Deutsche Schriften*, Band 4 (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1976), pp. 31–32. Wolf there writes:

Because the greatest perfection is unique to God and cannot be attributed to any creature, so it is also not possible that a person, even when employing all his powers, should ever attain to the same [perfection]. Hence, he can achieve nothing more than to progress from one [particular] perfection to another, and increasingly to avoid imperfections. And this is the highest good to which a person can attain; and hence the highest good of the human, or his blessedness, is rightly understood as an unhindered progress (*Fortgang*) toward greater perfection.

- 35 – Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 368; see *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, vol. 3 of *Werke, in Zwanzig Bänden: Theorie Werkausgabe*, 20 vols., ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971–1978), pp. 446–447.
- 36 – Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 235–341; see *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), pp. 250–360.
- 37 – See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 240, and *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 255.
- 38 – For a different reading of Kant's relationship to Eastern philosophies, see Martin Schonfeld, "Kant's Thing in Itself, or the Tao of Königsberg," *Florida Philosophical Review* 3 (1) (Summer 2003): 5–32, esp. pp. 11–16. Schonfeld traces the development of the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationalistic ethics to the encounter with Chinese philosophy (p. 12). The Chinese influence, he argues,

passed from Confucian and Taoist sources via Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and his Jesuit colleagues down through Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), Christian Wolff (1679–1754), and Georg Bernhard Bilfinger (1693–1750). While Schonfeld makes an interesting case for some cross-cultural affinities, in my opinion he somewhat exaggerates their significance. He admits that Kant personally knew very little about Chinese philosophy, the alleged transmission of Confucian and Taoist ideas having been unconscious and indirect. Moreover, it is one thing to be mildly influenced by alien perspectives and quite another to shake oneself free of deeply ingrained ideas from one's own cultural tradition. It is my contention that Kant never succeeded in freeing himself from Western assumptions about the nature of a possible afterlife.

- 39 – See the selection of passages gathered together under the title “The Theory of No-Soul,” in *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 280–289. This Buddhist doctrine is often compared to David Hume's nominalistic conception of empirical “bundles” of experience that together make up the so-called “self.” More recently, Derek Parfit has put forward a similarly reductionistic account of personal identity. Unlike either Hume or Parfit, however, Buddhism has traditionally emphasized the role of karma, understood as a natural law of moral retribution, in constituting the series of *skandas* that aggregate into an individual's experiences.
- 40 – Though usually translated as “liberation” or “enlightenment,” *nirvāṇa* literally means “extinction,” meaning the extinguishing of illusions as well as a false sense of self. Over the centuries, a wide range of theories about the true nature of *nirvāṇa* has developed, but a common motif in all has been the denial of the existence of an eternal soul. See, for example, the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* (c. 400 C.E.), trans. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 68–70 (Skt. pagination, pp. 77–79).
- 41 – For a book-length examination of these topics, see Gereon Kopf, *Beyond Personal Identity: Dōgen, Nishida, and a Phenomenology of No-Self* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001). In addition to treating Buddhist views from early Buddhism to Mahāyāna to Zen, Kopf offers comparative analyses of some predominant Western conceptions of personal identity, including those of Leibniz, Locke, Reid, Noonan, Parfit, Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and of course Kant. With respect to Kant, Kopf mainly discusses the abstract character of the transcendental unity of apperception and the impossibility of knowing the noumenal self as shown in the paralogisms (pp. 30–33, 41, 45–47). However, he devotes but a single sentence to Kant's argument from the standpoint of practical reason for the postulation of an enduring self (p. 32).
- 42 – See *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 350: “The proposition, ‘The soul is substance,’ may . . . quite well be allowed to stand, if only it be recognized that this concept does not carry us a single step further, and so cannot yield us any of the

usual deductions . . . as, for instance, the everlasting duration of the human soul in all changes and even in death. . . .” On the other hand, Kant also affirms (in the second edition): “Yet nothing is thereby lost as regards the right, nay, the necessity, of postulating a future life in accordance with the principles of the practical employment of reason, which is closely bound up with its speculative employment” (B 424). Taken together, these two passages make clear that the practical employment of the concept of immortality is based on the unprovable, but (in Kant’s eyes) irreplaceable, conception of the soul as *substance*.

- 43 – *Dhammapada* XXVI: 28, trans. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 184. This early Buddhist scripture contains many sayings and discussions that traditionally are attributed to Gautama Buddha himself.
- 44 – Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Second Series (London: Rider and Co., 1974), p. 64.
- 45 – *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, p. 115 (Skt. pagination, p. 133). See Suzuki’s discussion in his Introduction, which emphasizes the centrality of self-reliance in Buddhist religion and ethics, pp. xviii–xix. This Mahāyāna text in the Vijñānavādin tradition does, to be sure, also embrace the paradoxical idea that such absolute self-reliance must be supplemented and supported by the grace of the Buddha. But the apparent contradiction disappears when one realizes that, according to this school of thought, the universal Buddha-nature is immanent within all beings.
- 46 – See Kitarō Nishida, “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview” (*Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*) (1945), in *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987), p. 48: “I have nothing to add,” he writes, “to Kant’s formulation [of general ethical reasoning], since it well clarifies what is ordinarily meant by the moral consciousness.”
- 47 – Kitarō Nishida, “The Intelligible World” (*Eichiteki sekai*) (1928), in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness: Three Philosophical Essays*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966), pp. 114–115, 126–134.
- 48 – Nishida, “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview,” p. 49; “The Intelligible World,” pp. 122, 139–141.
- 49 – Nishida, *Intelligible World*, pp. 95–96, 114–118, 126. See also *An Inquiry into the Good (Zen no kenkyū)* (1911), trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 60–61; cf. Keiji Nishitani’s comments on this passage in his *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaki and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 85.
- 50 – Nishida, *ibid.*, pp. 81, 118, 126, 138. As early as his *Inquiry into the Good* Nishida is already raising arguments against an excessively individualistic conception of personhood. “The sphere of consciousness is never limited to

the individual person," he writes, "for the individual is no more than a small system within consciousness. We usually regard as central the small system that takes bodily existence for its nucleus, but if we regard the great system of consciousness as central, then this great system is the self, and its development is the fulfillment of that self's will. This is what we find in people of religion, scholars, and artists" (Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, p. 28). See Nishitani's comments on this passage, in his *Nishida Kitarō*, p. 89. In his later work, Nishida would continue to develop his theory of the self in terms of his dialectical logic of the *basho*.

- 51 – "The Intelligible World," p. 126. Although this essay is primarily formulated in terms of his own adaptation of Kantian philosophy, Nishida also incorporates some terminology drawn from Husserl's phenomenology. The key distinction between the noesis and the noema is a case in point. Unlike Husserl, however, who uses the concept of "transcendence" to describe the intentional character of the noema as positing an existence beyond consciousness, Nishida maintains that there is another kind of "transcendence" in the opposite direction, toward the noetic pole of subjectivity. Such transcendence in the direction of noesis provides a noncognitive awareness of the intelligible Self, and even beyond that Self offers a glimpse of the Universal of absolute nothingness.
- 52 – Gereon Kopf, "Temporality and Personal Identity in the Thought of Nishida Kitarō," in *Philosophy East and West* 52 (2) (April 2002): 230. Alternatively, one might render 絶対の今 as "the absolute now" and 絶対の現在 as "the absolute present," but Kopf explains that he prefers the modifier "nonrelative," since it indicates something that "transcends even the relativity between the absolute and the relative" (p. 237).
- 53 – Nishida, "The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious World-view," p. 58. Nishida's philosophical conception of the concrete matrix of historical actuality does not, however, preclude him from occasionally expressing the idea that aspects of a single personality might in some sense be preserved. When his five-year-old daughter Yūko suddenly died of bronchitis in 1907, Nishida was heartbroken. His moving testimonial, "In Memory of My Deceased Child," includes a reference to Kant's conception of humanity as infinitely precious, but says nothing about immortality per se. Nishida then makes the following poignant suggestion: "Even if she is not remembered or her death mourned by many, the clear memories chiseled in our hearts, and the grief that strikes us parents to the bone, must comfort her." The implication seems to be that the connection with his daughter will always remain "present" in and through the dialectical fusion of identities wrought by his love for her. Nishida concludes by calling upon the redeeming power of faith in Amida Buddha (the transcendental Buddha of Infinite Life): "In this kind of realization, we touch life eternal" (quoted in Michiko Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002], p. 95).

- 54 – Nishida, “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious World-view,” p. 53. Again, note that while Nishida explains his conception of the existential monad primarily in terms derived from Western philosophy, one can clearly see the influence of Buddhist doctrines at work. In Buddhist teaching, as we saw, the co-originating psychophysical *skandas* replace the erroneous notion of a substantial self. These *skandas*, moreover, are linked in their development by the principle of karma, which determines their temporal unfolding according to each aggregate’s moral deserts.
- 55 – Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Tugendlehre*, in *Akademie Ausgabe*, 6:394; the translation is mine. The root meaning of the Greek word σκάνδαλον is “baiting a trap,” or entrapment; see *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p. 53.
- 56 – Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” trans. Lewis White Beck, in *On History* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 13; see *Idee zu einer Allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, in *Akademie Ausgabe*, 7:19.