

Penultimate draft. Please cite only published version.

Forthcoming: in Gordon Davis (ed.), *Ethics without Self, Dharma without Atman: Western and Buddhist Philosophical Traditions in Dialogue* (Springer).

Non-Self and Ethics: Kantian and Buddhist Themes

Are persons best understood as a series of happenings, or as having a kind of unity that merits the appellation “self”? Or to put the question another way: Is the self explainable entirely by reference to temporal units constitutive of it, or are these units better understood as temporal parts of a whole? In recent discussions of the nature of the self in Western philosophy, the distinction between constructionist and non-constructionist views marks these two options.¹ A constructionist like Derek Parfit argues that because the self is not united over time in any deep metaphysical way, it is not real, and a person is just the subject of experiences.² This view of persons is said to have moral implications because if persons aren’t discrete wholes but merely a series of happenings, then it seems arbitrary to privilege the happenings in one series rather than another. It is morally problematic to concern myself with my own future states over others’ future states; they are not really mine.

Christine Korsgaard, a non-constructionist, challenges Parfit’s un-argued assumption, that it is only legitimate to treat future experiences as mine, and so serving as reasons for me, if

¹ As Marya Schechtman puts it: “Constructionist accounts view persons as constructs out of temporal parts, while non-constructionist accounts see these parts as abstractions from a unified person.” In “Diversity in unity: practical unity and personal boundaries,” *Synthese*, 162(3), 2008, 405-423, 406 .

² Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 223.

metaphysically authorized.³ Her Kantian position, acknowledging the significance of the practical standpoint denies that we are forced by the dictates of metaphysics to give up on the pragmatic unity of the self. Selves, she argues, are united by the unavoidable activity of practical reason; in deliberative choice we ask ourselves how to proceed and in doing so we adopt reasons for action and simultaneously create a (more or less) united self. There are practical reasons for regarding myself as the same person who will occupy my body in the future: in order to act, it is practically necessary that I identify with some inclinations and not others, and in so doing I forge a connection between present and future selves. The unavoidable standpoint of choice thus provides grounds for commitment to a unified sense of self over time; the experience of deliberative choice is not the experience of something happening to oneself. One's reasons are themselves expressions of value that shape and connect present and future selves. Self-creation of this sort is simply a consequence of our nature as practically rational beings.

This distinction in Western philosophy's analysis of the self can also be seen in discussions of Buddhist views of the self which seem to be based on, or reject, an entirely metaphysical analysis of the nature of the self. In the next section, I will make a case that a distinction of this sort underlies two ways of understanding the doctrine of no-self: as a contemplative strategy, and as a metaphysical fact. I will not defend one view over the other, though I will offer some support for the contemplative strategy interpretation, aligning it with the practical standpoint. I will argue that within Kant's accounts of the self and ethics, we find something like the contemplative strategy in his duty of self-knowledge and his recognition of the existential significance of the individual's

³ Christine Korsgaard, "Personal identity and the unity of agency: A Kantian response to Parfit," in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 363-397, 371.

struggle to see and understand herself clearly. I will conclude by taking up some objections grounded in the claim that the Kantian emphasis on agency is inimical to the no-self doctrine. I hope to demonstrate that comparative studies of the nature of the self and ethics should go beyond metaphysics to address the standpoint of the agent who must choose how to think and act. Once we bring to the comparative project the relevance of the standpoint of action, Kantian affinities are illuminated, as are under-discussed aspects of Buddhist moral psychology.

I. No-Self and Norms within Buddhist Thought

In all versions of Buddhist philosophy the nature of the self is a fundamental philosophical teaching, often drawn upon to understand practical matters, including how we should conceive of and respond to particular situations. The doctrine of no-self is the view that there is no self that is permanent, unchanging, or that identifies the essence of a person. The Pali Canon's "Anattalakkhana Sutta"⁴ defends a form of anti-essentialism by pointing out that the five aggregates that constitute the basic parts of a person are impermanent, cannot be controlled, and so do not provide evidence of a stable self and thus cannot properly be considered "mine". What appears to us as a self is multiply conditioned by other factors, and so the belief in an essential self is a kind of delusion. According to Peter Harvey, in early Buddhism the no-self doctrine is a rejection of the conception of self present in Brahmanical Upanishads and in Jain texts. He claims that it is a mistake to interpret the doctrine as explicitly asserting that there is no self, as this way of conceptualizing it short-circuits the process of coming to fully understand the doctrine: "the not-Self teaching is not

⁴ "The Characteristic of Nonsself," in trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 901-903. SN 22.59 (PTS: S iii 66).

a bald denial of Self, but a persistent undermining of any attempt to take anything as “Self,” and thus be attached to it. It is a contemplative strategy to induce, in the end, a letting go of everything.”⁵

This “contemplative strategy” view of the doctrine subordinates ontology to pragmatics. The point of the doctrine is to advance a method of coming to see more clearly the absence of an essential self in one’s experience; the ethical implications are therefore primarily existential. On this interpretation, no-self is a technique of perception,⁶ it endorses metaphysical quietism about the self, and is more like practical reasoning (reasoning aimed at what to do) than theoretical reasoning (reasoning governing belief). This quietist interpretation of the doctrine accords with the Buddha of the Pali Canon’s refusal to answer the question whether or not there is a self⁷ when asked outright, and with the *Majjhima Nikaya*’s description of the person inappropriately caught in either the conviction that she has a self, or the conviction that she has no-self as in a “thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views.”⁸ When Vacchagotta questions the Buddha as to whether or not the soul and body are the same the Buddha

⁵ Peter Harvey, “Theravada Philosophy of Mind and the Person,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, eds. William Edelglass and Jay Garfield, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 267.

⁶ Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu argues for anatta as a “technique of perception” in “No-self or Not-self?”, in *Noble Strategy* (Valley Center, Ca.: Metta Forest Monastery Publisher, 1999), 71-4.

⁷ “Ananda (Is There a Self?)”, in trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1393-4. SN 44.10. By “quietism” I refer to the position in contemporary analytic philosophy that rejects the development of substantive philosophical theories, proposing instead that philosophical inquiry at best rids us of confusion, but does not provide knowledge.

⁸ “All the taints,” in trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 3rd edition (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), 91-96.

replies only that the speculation that soul and body are the same or different is a fetter of views beset by suffering - speculation is something that the Buddha has “put away”.⁹

But while Early Buddhism advised against deeper inquiry into the nature of the self, all Mahayana texts are not steadfastly quietist. Scholars of Buddhism tell us that Asvaghosa’s *Buddhacarita* is among the first extant Buddhist texts to explicitly claim that there is no self.¹⁰ Santideva’s metaphysics of no-self in the *Bodhicaryavatara* offers a clear statement of no-self: “The notion ‘it is the same me even then’ is a false construction, since it is one person who dies, quite another who is born.”¹¹ According to Santideva, the impersonal badness of suffering shows the irrationality of valuing my own suffering over the suffering of others’ and helps us to see that we stand in the same relation to our future self that we stand in relation to others. For good reason this position has been compared to Derek Parfit’s analysis of the self. As my philosophical focus is not whether the move beyond quietism is legitimated or required, but is rather how the analysis of the doctrine is shaped by the standpoint (theoretical or practical) brought to bear on the analysis, I will bypass these metaphysical and interpretive issues. Is the anatta doctrine completely explained by the (so called) metaphysical facts, or does it allow, or even require that the question of whether or not the self is real be addressed from the standpoint of practical reason?

⁹ “Aggivacchagotta Sutta,” in trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 3rd edition (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), 590-602.

¹⁰ Richard Robinson, Willard Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, 5th edition. (Toronto: Wadsworth Publishing, 2005), 91.

¹¹ Santideva, Excerpt from the *Bodhicaryavatara* in William Edelglass and Jay Garfield eds., *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 388-399.

To see the relevance of this distinction consider Charles Goodman's view that a proper and complete understanding of the no-self doctrine leads to a theoretical, metaphysical stance which imposes constraints on ethical practice, and requires a consequentialist meta-ethic.¹² Goodman understands the doctrine to reject the reality of all composite entities, including persons, the relations between parts and whole being a function of how they are conceived by minds. Composite things can be said to exist as conventional truths, as they feature usefully in our lives, but selves and other composite entities "do not exist from the perspective of ultimate truth."¹³ Goodman's interpretation of the doctrine rejects metaphysical quietism, claiming no self as a metaphysical truth. Like Parfit, he holds that consequentialist ethical implications follow from this metaphysical fact. Because there are not ultimately any experiencers it cannot matter who experiences particular benefits and burdens, so we can ignore the distributive effects of our actions and simply maximize the good.¹⁴

However, we can agree with Goodman that we lack warrant for belief in an essentialist, non-composite view of the self without granting the necessity of the metaphysical claim or its normative consequences. The metaphysical interpretation of the no-self doctrine does entail that harms cannot *ultimately* be regarded as *mine* or *theirs*, but does not entail either that harms should be diminished,

¹² It should be noted that not all Mahayana approaches to the no-self doctrine are put in straightforwardly metaphysical terms. Some, relying on the doctrine of upaya, or skillful means, introduce a comprehensive strategy which acknowledges that teachings of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas will be adapted to the capacities of the hearers in order to be effective and of benefit.

¹³ Charles Goodman, *The Consequences of Compassion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁴ He writes: "Once we bring to bear on ethics the teaching that there are no metaphysically important differences between different sentient beings, it cannot ultimately matter whether harms are compensated by benefits to the same beings or to others; nor can it ultimately matter who it is that carries out a harmful action." Goodman, 97.

or that the good should be maximized. From a theoretical stance, we might just give up on the notion of ethical obligations; if there are no agents there can be no sensible talk of moral responsibility, and no moral good that ought to be promoted.¹⁵ Similarly there is no logical entailment from the truth of no-self to indiscriminate concern for all states of affairs. Those committed to diminishing suffering are likely to find it helpful to develop a diminished sense of the self, but the commitment is not forced upon us by metaphysics. Buddhist ethics supports the claim that the internalization of no-self will lead to the development of compassion, but we should not assume that the justification for compassion lies entirely in the logic or metaphysics of no-self.¹⁶ The question of what ought to be believed, or attended to in thought, cannot be fully answered without acknowledging the practical standpoint. Recall that in Kalamas Sutta, the Buddha responds to the Kalamas' expressed confusion over the differing doctrines advanced and criticized by visiting Brahmins and contemplatives by telling them to focus on what they find to be skillful and unskillful in their experience and to avoid supposing that doctrine is authoritative.¹⁷

It should be clear that the contemplative strategy interpretation of the doctrine, while not

¹⁵ I am not here claiming that Goodman cannot account for moral responsibility, just claiming that nothing about the good is entailed by the metaphysical reading of the no-self doctrine.

¹⁶ Owen Flanagan makes this point in his, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2011), 131.

¹⁷ "Now look you, Kalamas. Be ye not misled by report or tradition or hearsay. Be not misled by proficiency in the collections, nor by mere logic or inference, nor after consideration reasons, nor after reflection on and approval of some theory, nor because it fits becoming, nor out of respect for a recluse (who holds it). But, Kalamas, when you know for yourselves: These things are unprofitable, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the intelligent; these things when performed and undertaken, conduce to loss and sorrow – then indeed do ye reject them, Kalamas." "Kalama Sutta," trans. F.L. Woodward, *Anguttara-Nikaya*, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2000), pp.171-172, PTS: A i 188.

denying the significance of metaphysics, nonetheless denies that metaphysics alone settles the issue. The agent, faced with the question of what she is to do, how she is to think about what is likely to happen, or what has happened, faces a choice. No-self forms of thinking about how a situation is being perceived and how it should be responded to, are means for identifying and reducing stress and suffering. On the contemplative strategy view, what will be of interest is whether the sense of self is skillful or unskillful with respect to recognizing and responding to suffering, and the question of what is skillful or wholesome (kusala) is not the same as the question of whether or not the self is metaphysically real. There are clearly times when it would be unskillful for a person to see herself as simply a series of happenings and not as an agent. For example, in the wake of the uncomfortable feeling one might experience after having lied out of self-interest, it would not be skillful to take refuge in the sense of oneself as simply having been subject to a dishonest experience. We are notoriously prone to describing ourselves and our experiences as happenings when we are trying to avoid responsibility, so the question of when it is appropriate to relate to one's experiences as a series of happenings without self-identification is rather complicated.

If the arguments of this section are convincing it should be clear that the practical standpoint is significant in a discussion of the no-self doctrine, that it supports the contemplative strategy interpretation, and that the doctrine of no-self *per se* does not support consequentialist ethics.

II. The Self in Kantian Thought

In this section I will argue that the limits Kant places on theoretical knowledge of the self, along with his moral duty to understand the empirical self, can be seen as structurally similar to the contemplative strategy interpretation of the no-self doctrine. Kant's focus on the empirical sense of

self that accompanies action coheres with the Buddhist recognition that the senses of self that we inhabit are deeply important aspects of our moral development.

Roughly put, Kant is famous in Western philosophy for seeing a way beyond theories of the mind and world which resulted in problematic gaps between the world and our ideas of it. If in perception we are acquainted with subjective representations of the world, then the world may be entirely other than we perceive it. Moreover, if what we are aware of is only our ideas, then we aren't actually aware of the world at all. Kant attempts to navigate a bridge which respects that we are both subjects (experiencers of the world) and objects (parts of the world governed by natural laws). He holds that a representation is an object of subjectivity that is represented as empirically real and transcendently ideal. From one standpoint it makes sense to say that the world as perceived by us is real, and from another it makes sense to say that the world as perceived by us is ideal.¹⁸ Kant demands that we acknowledge that our minds shape our experience and his critiques are attempts to determine the limits of what we can know.

In brief, Kant holds that it cannot be known whether the self as a persistent, independent thing, is ultimately real. To know this one would have to be able to have access to things in themselves (the noumenal) without the mind's intervention, and this is impossible.¹⁹ Knowledge of events in the realm of experience (the phenomenal) is possible if it respects that it is a description of the realm of appearances. Our experience is the experience of a "thinking thing", the existence

¹⁸ Jay Garfield discusses the similarities between Kant's transcendental idealism and Vasubandhu's Cittamatra Idealism in "Western Idealism through Indian Eyes," in his *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152-169.

¹⁹ By contrast, the Buddhist position is that it is both possible and desirable to attain access to a dimension unfabricated by the mind.

of the self being known in relation to its thoughts which are “its predicates”, and this is the limit of our knowledge of a persistent self. In his discussion of whether the soul is substance in the Paralogisms, Kant writes: “Through this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = *X*. It is known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever, but can only revolve in a perpetual circle, since any judgement upon it has always already made use of its representation.”²⁰

Kant argues that it must be possible for the “I think” to accompany one’s representations, for in the absence of the “I think” there would be representations “which could not be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me.”²¹ For the representations to be representations, a unification within consciousness seems required; the “transcendental unity of apperception” operates as a unifier that makes coherent conscious experience possible, making that experience mine. In this sense we can think of a self which transcends our empirical experience - to this extent a unified self is part of our experience. It could be that there is a substantial self (though we cannot know this) and Kant claims, while the phenomenal realm indicates that we are governed by natural laws, unfree, and without a substantive self, it is not self-contradictory to suppose that there might be free causality in the noumenal realm. Kant’s position thus respects a distinction between ultimate and conventional truths.

The relationship between noumenal and phenomenal selves is nonetheless a vexed part of

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), B404/A346.

²¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, B131-2.

Kant's philosophy. In places Kant himself makes claims about the noumenal which seem to overstep his own limits to the bounds of knowledge. For example, he brings Christian assumptions to his analysis of the highest good (the ultimate end advanced by moral conduct), when in the *Critique of Pure Reason* he claims that the convergence of happiness "distributed in exact proportion to morality....is possible only in the intelligible world, under a wise Author and Ruler."²² The attempt to secure a kind of eternal justice of happiness in proportion to virtue, seems to privilege one of a number of metaphysical possibilities. The question of whether Kant's considered judgement is that highest good is brought about by God in another, non-natural world, or that the highest good it is brought about in the natural world through human efforts is debated within Kant scholarship.²³ While Kant clearly recognizes the importance of identifying our limited knowledge about the self, both in life and death, his own discussion, unsurprisingly, is conditioned by his cultural context. It is worth noting in the context of comparative philosophy, that one of Kant's few references to non-Western philosophy is a criticism of its failure to respect the limits of what can be known concerning the self through eternity, and the highest good.

In a rare instance of cross-cultural reflection, Kant remarks on a type of no-self view in Chinese philosophy, in his essay "The End of All Things." The remark is made in passing in a satirical essay whose indirect target is religious censorship, and in which Kant promotes a liberal Christian position, one that circumscribes what can be known about the afterlife and eternity. Brooding over unknowable final ends leads to mysticism, Kant writes, wherein "reason does not

²² *Critique of Pure Reason*, A811/B839.

²³ Andrews Reath, for example, clearly distinguishes "secular" and "theological" interpretation of the highest good as presented across Kant's works. "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 26(4), 1988, 593-619.

understand either itself or what it wants, but prefers to indulge in enthusiasm rather than - as seems fitting for an intellectual inhabitant of a sensible world - to limit itself within the bound of the latter.”²⁴ Here Kant describes as “monstrous” what he takes to be Lao-Tzu’s conception of the highest good as nothingness itself: “that it consists in *nothing*, i.e., in the consciousness of feeling oneself swallowed up in the abyss of the Godhead by flowing together with it, and hence by the annihilation of one’s personality.” He suggests that the pantheism of the Tibetans and other oriental peoples arises from this commitment to nothingness and to the conviction that the self is ultimately reabsorbed into the whole, and remarks that “in consequence from its philosophical sublimation *Spinozism* is begotten.”²⁵ It is, perhaps, ironic that Kant charges this non-Western philosophy with disregarding the legitimate bounds of reason out of a desire for a blessed end of all things, an eternal tranquility, when his own conception of the highest good as happiness in proportion to virtue is fraught with Christian assumptions.

To return to the main line of discussion, for the purpose of demonstrating a parallel between Kantian and Buddhist metaphysics of the self, it will suffice here to note that Kant’s argued for position is clear, we cannot know anything of the constitution of the soul “so far as the possibility of its separate existence is concerned” nor can we know whether we exist as substance or as accident.²⁶ I am not here advancing a defense of Kant’s metaphysics, neither am I arguing that Kant’s metaphysics is entirely analogous to Buddhist metaphysics. As all comparative projects are

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, “The End of All Things,” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), AK 8: 335.

²⁵ See the Spinoza chapter in this volume for a discussion of related issues.

²⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B420.

shaped by specific interests, it is worth clarifying some disanalogies as well.

Kant claims to have determined the limits of our knowledge of the self, but the Buddhist view of no-self does not make this claim. On the contemplative strategy interpretation it is claimed that an essential self does not exist, but it is not claimed that from the theoretical standpoint we see the limits of what is knowable. Rather, it claims that we are unwise to engage in deep metaphysical speculation about the nature of the self beyond a certain point, and instead wise to find repeatedly in our own experience the impermanence and instability of the self, the suggestion being that metaphysical speculation obstructs a better understanding of the nature of the self. So Kantian and Buddhist commitments to quietism concerning the ultimate truth about the self have different grounds, and different aims. This difference, while noteworthy, should not lead us to overlook the remarkable similarities, which arise from a shared commitment to the standpoint of agency. Neither for Kant, nor for contemplative strategy accounts of no-self is the question of the nature of the self to be fully determined by its metaphysics. On both views, the nature of the self found in experience demands attention and critical scrutiny. To this topic I now turn.

III. Kant's Contemplative Strategy

If we think of the contemplative strategy version of the no-self doctrine as a process in which one engages in order to free oneself from delusion, to see things more objectively in order to promote right action, then we find a clear parallel in Kant's duty of self-knowledge. As outlined in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, an agent's two basic ends are self-perfection and the happiness of others. The duty of perfection involves the cultivation of one's natural predispositions so that one's will and

understanding are developed in order to satisfy the requirements of duty.²⁷ Of Kant's specific duties to the self, the first duty is to develop self-knowledge. It is a wide duty to seek moral perfection: “*know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself,*”...in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart – whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure or impure.”²⁸ This moral self-knowledge provides the start of all human wisdom and is aptly described by Kant as hellish but necessary.

As Kant understands us, we are by nature dissemblers who, even when we attempt to scrutinize our hearts, do not get easy or direct access to our own motives; we are prone to ‘discovering’ what we have ourselves put on view.²⁹ Our vulnerability to the opinion of others makes it impossible for a true self to be revealed and because our capacity for empirical self-knowledge is deeply limited, Kant is not entirely optimistic about our prospects for self-knowledge. Still, despite his pessimism, Kant does not renounce self-knowledge but understands it to be a necessary condition of moral development; it is a practical not a theoretical pursuit.

Unlike most other thinkers in the Western tradition, Kant recognizes that it is dangerous to ignore or leave unchecked the empirical sense of self accompanying one's deeds. He promotes the development of an honest picture of oneself in action, one that counters the human tendency to exaggerated self-promotion. Accurate self-perceptions require that we observe our intentions and avoid self-identification with our “mere wishes” which provide a distorted sense of what we are like,

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), AK 6:386.

²⁸ *The Metaphysics of Morals*, AK 6:441.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert Louden, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), AK 7:133.

our “pious ejaculations” being a better indication of how we like to think of ourselves, than what we are actually like.³⁰ Self-knowledge is a practical endeavor aimed at ridding oneself of false senses of self and constructing increasingly skillful senses of self as they apply to the aim of moral action. While in Buddhism the aim is a selflessness that liberates one from suffering, for Kant the aim is an agency free of the conceit that interferes with clear moral vision, sound judgement, and dutiful action.

Although his detractors like to present Kant as a fetishist about duty, there is point in his emphasis on clear recognition of the ground of one’s action. It is morally dangerous, for example, to conflate the satisfaction of a basic duty with the feeling that one has done something noble. It is important to keep a close watch on our intentions and aspirations as they are strongly influenced by the “dear self”³¹ and its improbably positive self-presentation. Moreover, Kant recognizes that awareness of one’s actions as selfless is morally fraught, when he criticizes moral enthusiasts (such as religious fanatics) who lose sight of their obligations, focusing instead on the perceived merit of their actions, and in so doing “flattering themselves with a spontaneous goodness of heart.”³² These moral enthusiasts conflate the required satisfaction of the demands of duty with the pathological feeling of moral prowess and thereby construct a false sense of their own magnificence that diminishes virtue. Hence, Kant warns against the “exhortation to actions as noble, sublime, and

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath, eds. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), AK 27:365.

³¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), AK 4:408.

³² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), AK 5:85.

magnanimous” when they are simply required.

For Kant, the self-knowledge which is our first duty is not theoretical knowledge regarding a metaphysical self, it is rather an internal self-accounting aimed at the production of a more authentic or autonomous self. Moral self-knowledge functions to remove the evil which is an obstacle to the natural development of a good will, and it helps both to destroy self-contempt and “egotistical self-esteem”. Of course Buddhist philosophy does not suppose that humans are innately evil, merely that we have defilements, and the details of the Kantian and Buddhist accounts of delusion differ greatly, as do their accounts of objectivity and right action. But it is noteworthy that for Kant “evil” is a kind of corruption of the person marked by the subordination of morality to self-conceit, and that it is “radical” in the sense that all other evils stem from it. Both within Buddhist and Kantian ethics, ethical agency requires the cultivation and purification of the mind and heart, and this requires self-knowledge.

Kantian self-knowledge promotes the demise of mental habits that obstruct morality. As a kind of contemplative strategy it involves forms of recognition and de-identification with what might be thought of as deluded, or unskillful self-conceptions (including self-aggrandizement, righteousness, self-conceit, magnanimity, and so on). A more refined self-conception is constructed over time by identifying with the thought of giving others their due, obedience to the moral law, and sympathy for the plight of others. This sort of moral development is social and includes attention to, and refinement of, character traits through emotional development. The conditional duty to develop sympathetic feelings (joy and sadness), for example, is described by Kant as a means of promoting benevolence by utilizing our natural tendencies to sympathy with others in order to achieve what “the representation of duty alone would not accomplish”. He explains that it is “a duty

not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or debtor's prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist."³³ Clearly Kant recognizes that moral emotions shape an agent's experience for good or ill and that they need to be cultivated accordingly. In Buddhist thought vices are tied to misperceptions or wrong view, a failure of right thinking which promotes suffering. Interestingly, Kant identifies the vice of envy as a kind of misperception. It "is a propensity to view the well-being of others with distress, even though it does not detract from one's own" and so envy counts as a kind of malevolence, grounded in the mistake of comparing one's well-being with that of others, instead of acknowledging one's own intrinsic worth.

Kant's account of this phenomenal self is not naive; neither is it as sophisticated as its Buddhist counterpart. Kant fails to recognize that self-loathing is detrimental to morality, and overestimates the constructive capacities of the thought of duty.³⁴ Nonetheless, his account of the duty of self-knowledge has noteworthy Buddhist affinities. It is not easy to acquire, given self-conceit. It is not awareness of a permanent self, and it is skillful when it serves to diminish a sense of self that is an obstacle to duty and recognition of what is, for example, owed to others. The view that agents need to become aware of the sense of the self that accompanies our moral actions, and that it needs to be refined in order to promote objectivity and moral action is part of what motivates the contemplative strategy interpretation of the no-self doctrine. Whether or not there is a self from the perspective of the ultimate dimension is relevant to this project *only* to the extent that it is useful to

³³ *The Metaphysics of Morals*, AK 6:457.

³⁴ I have argued for this in "Kant and the Buddha on Self-Knowledge," in Stephen R. Palmquist (ed.), *Cultivating Personhood: Kant and Asian Philosophy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 695-708.

think of oneself in no-self terms.

IV. Self-Legislation and Self-Identity:

It might be objected that the Kantian focus on agency is difficult to square with Buddhist philosophy, that the contemplative strategy reading of the doctrine seems inconsistent with the Kantian focus on agency in two ways. First, even granting that Kant advances a distinction between the conventional and the ultimate, the Kantian appeal to synthetic *apriori* truths forces Kant and Kantians to commit to the noumenal as the real source of morality. If understood as a technique of perception, it seems that the no-self doctrine problematically divorces the phenomenal self from the noumenal in the activity of practical reason. If the ultimate self is the rational will, and free action is action governed by pure practical reason, then free, moral action is action governed by the intellect. This may be thought to be antithetical to a Buddhist conception of moral action, which does not hold reason in similarly high regard. Along these lines, Charles Goodman has argued that Kant's self must identify with the rational will, not with anything empirical, and that this seems to be at odds with Buddhist thinking which neither conceives of the ultimate self as reason, nor conceives of freedom as rule by reason.³⁵ However, it is not clear that Kant's conception of morality requires identification with the noumenal.

Julian Wuerth, for example, draws on an extensive range of Kant's writings to argue that Kant's own account of practical agency allows for free action from sensibility and does not equate

³⁵ Goodman, 201.

action that is not governed by pure practical reason with unfree, immoral action.³⁶ The issue is significant because if Kant holds that free, moral action is the action of the noumenal self (because it is governed by pure practical reason), then it is unclear how people can legitimately be held responsible for immoral actions, as they are unfree. As my purpose here is neither a defense of Kant's metaphysics, nor engagement with disputed ideas in Kant scholarship, I will set aside the issue of whether or not Kant's own position founders on its *aprioristic* metaphysics. The point of this Buddhist, Kantian comparison is not to claim that the theories have identical, unproblematic, metaphysics of the self, nor is it to claim that Buddhist ethics is structurally Kantian. Kant's account of the noumenal self and agency doesn't forestall a fruitful comparison with Buddhist thought. Indeed, the relation between the phenomenal and the noumenal is not unlike the relation between present selves tied by karmic consequences to future selves. So the first objection does not derail the Kantian, Buddhist comparison.

The second objection to the comparison I have presented is that the Kantian focus on agency as self-legislation in the phenomenal realm opposes Buddhist ways of thinking about ethics; Kant and Kantians understand practical reasons as law-like modes of self-causality, while Buddhist ethics encourages us to be wary of forming rigid identities, which must be after all, grounded in delusion. To see why this objection doesn't pose a problem for the Kantian, Buddhist comparison recall Korsgaard's Kantian position on personal identity. In response to the view that the self is best understood as a series of happenings, she argues that the lack of a deep metaphysical self does not

³⁶ Wuerth argues that thinkers like Henry Sidgwick and Christine Korsgaard have failed to properly mark Kant's distinction between *Wille* and *Willkur*, and that this has led to confusion about Kant's position. "Sense and Sensibility in Kant's Practical Agent: Against the Intellectualism of Korsgaard and Sidgwick," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 21(1), 2010, 1-36.

force the conclusion that there is no self. Firstly, the practical necessity of eliminating motivational conflict in this body provides a practical reason regarding myself as the same self in the future. Secondly, from standpoint of deliberative choice we require reasons which express commitments which shape the responses of our future selves. In this manner we are by nature self-legislating, and it is in self-legislation that we create identities; this defense of the self is consistent with the claim that the self is not metaphysically deep.³⁷

On Korsgaard's Kantian view of agency, to determine your actions through self-legislation is to give expression to a way in which you value yourself, sometimes as a friend, or feminist, or parent, or perhaps as a citizen of the kingdom of ends.³⁸ These practical identities make our reasons apparent to us partly through self-awareness. To be a loyal, sympathetic friend, for example, is not to cold-heartedly apply the rule of sympathy in friendship to one's situation. Rather, it is to find oneself searching for a way of understanding of a friend's predicament and to have one's sense of self rebel against the inclination, say, to blame her for being foolish. A friend who lacked this sense of loyalty would not experience the tendency to blame as problematic; to invest in loyal friendship is to leave oneself open to finding oneself engaged in disloyal activities. Identities are created around the laws we give ourselves and may be morally skillful or unskillful ways of perceiving

³⁷ As Mark Siderits notes, the reductionist version of the no-self doctrine denies that persons are completely distinct existences but does not deny the distinctness of the causal series that a person may experience as herself. So it makes sense to designate one series as me and the other as you by reference to the relations between earlier and later parts of the series. *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 83.

³⁸ This form of identity is practical in that it marks "a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking." Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101.

ourselves. To think of ourselves as law-governed in this way is not to suppose that we are rule-bound extremists who lack the capacity to recognize how and when these practical identities conflict. To be a thoughtful citizen and parent, for example, is to be open to feeling the competing demands of those identities when they conflict, as they surely will.

Charles Goodman has objected to Korsgaard, arguing that her conception of self-legislation promotes a self that Buddhism cannot endorse, as her agents will be bound by their own rules even when they should clearly abandon them: “if I view a particular decision rule as expressive of my self, I will be unwilling to abandon that rule, and make decisions in accordance with another rule, even when switching decision rules would produce much better consequences.”³⁹ He sees the identities that naturally arise as we engage in self-legislation as obstructions to morality because he supposes them to be inflexible and dogmatically imposed. Goodman acknowledges that while the phenomenology of deliberation suggests that there is someone involved in choice, that long-term planning involves an extended sense of self, and even acknowledges that a functional unity of the person seems required for action, but goes on to assert that philosophers in the Buddhist tradition simply deny that the practical standpoint is the only or best way to live. By contrast, he writes, Buddhism demands “rejecting and abandoning the psychological processes that, for Korsgaard, help to constitute a persisting self.”⁴⁰ In this respect Buddhist philosophy and Kantian philosophy are clearly at odds. The alternative to the practical standpoint, he writes, is the enlightened state, in which there are no decisions: “In this state, there is theoretical cognition, or perhaps nonconceptual

³⁹ Goodman, 211.

⁴⁰ Goodman, 213.

intuitive insight, which clearly sees how things are.”⁴¹

But Goodman’s objection fails to recognize that the tendency to be caught by one’s identity and act badly as a result isn’t a problem merely for Kantian theory, it is a problem for all moral actors. This is what it is like to be a person, not what it is like to be a Kantian. All agents are prone to acting from false perceptions of their situation and of themselves. With this Buddhist philosophy is entirely in agreement. Furthermore, the appeal to the possibility of enlightenment does not defeat the Kantian position that an agentially constituted self (or series of selves) can be pragmatically vindicated and is unavoidable for natural, rational creatures like us. Because life for all non-enlightened beings includes the construction of selves, morality for non-enlightened beings involves identity creation, and this can be usefully illuminated by the contemplative strategy interpretation of the no-self doctrine. Kantian agency and self-legislation are not undermined by the doctrine of no-self.

In conclusion, I have argued that the standpoint of agency has a place in our comparative studies of the nature of the self, and that it underlies some of the tension between the contemplative strategy and the metaphysical interpretations of the no-self doctrine. It is important that the contemplative strategy view be part of our comparative discussion, not only because it has a plausible textual defense, but also because it accords with the existential heart of Buddhism’s soteriological project. The contemplative strategy interpretation of the no-self doctrine allows for clear parallels to be drawn between Kantian and Buddhist philosophy, specifically the importance of moral self-development by way of self-knowledge. Considered from the standpoint of agency, the doctrine of no-self illuminates aspects of moral psychology involved in the purification of the

⁴¹ Goodman, 212.

heart and mind that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.