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Abstract

This article is an evaluation of Christian views about Buddhism based on Paul Williams' *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism* (2002). Studstill focuses specifically on five Christian claims about Buddhism: (1) Buddhism prevents the recognition of objective reality and objective truth, (2) Buddhism promotes egoism, (3) Buddhism encourages immorality, (4) Buddhism is quite possibly irrational, and (5) Buddhism is excessively pessimistic. Studstill critically examines Williams' defense of these claims and concludes that each is either false or highly problematic. As a corrective to Williams' errors about Buddhism, Studstill clarifies Buddhist views regarding suffering and egoism, the transformation of consciousness, the realization of truth, and the cultivation of altruism and compassion.

1 Introduction

In *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism*,[1] Paul Williams forcefully articulates and defends a Christian critique of Buddhism.[2] According to Williams, Buddhism is psychologically and morally damaging to its adherents. Williams maintains that Buddhism encourages egoism and immorality. He also argues that Buddhism is excessively pessimistic, quasi-irrational, and divorced from any contact with objective reality, objective truth, or objective moral standards. For the most part, claims motivated by strong, sectarian religious commitments seldom qualify as critical and informed scholarship. Williams, however, is an accomplished scholar and authority on Buddhism. He has written what many consider one of the best overviews of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition: *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*.[3] His Christian analysis therefore constitutes a serious interpretation of the Buddhist tradition that merits the attention of Buddhologists, comparativists, and philosophers of religion.

1. Paul Williams, *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism* (Edinburgh; New York: T & T Clark, 2002).

2. Williams' critique is 'Christian' in the sense that his arguments echo a general perspective on Buddhism associated with some Christian writers, not in the sense that his arguments necessarily reflect a Christian consensus about Buddhism. For the sake of convenience, I use the term 'Buddhism' to refer (primarily) to core doctrines and practices of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

3. London; New York: Routledge, 1989.

Randall Studstill, 'Buddhist Egoism and Other Infelicities,' *Ars Disputandi* [http://www.ArsDisputandi.org] 8 (2008), 18–50.

This article is an evaluation of Williams' Christian interpretation of Buddhism. I examine five of Williams' claims about Buddhism: (1) Buddhism prevents the recognition of objective reality and objective truth, (2) Buddhism promotes egoism, (3) Buddhism encourages immorality, (4) Buddhism is quite possibly irrational, and (5) Buddhism is pessimistic. My goal is to demonstrate significant problems with each of these claims. As a corrective to Williams' errors, I also seek to clarify fundamental aspects of the Buddhist view.

Most of this article is about Buddhism, but occasionally I discuss Buddhism in relation to Christianity, and vice versa. By comparing the two traditions, my approach reflects the structure of Williams' own analyses and arguments. Williams' goal is to demonstrate Christianity's superiority to Buddhism, and so his claims about Buddhism are often made in the context of a comparison of the two traditions. My response to those claims has naturally tended to take the same comparative form. This approach has implications beyond Buddhism. It encompasses the broader question: how plausible is Williams' thesis of Christian superiority?

2 Buddhism and the Recognition of Objective Reality and Objective Truth

As Williams observes, Buddhism is subjectivist, that is, it gives primacy to experience(s). He cites various aspects of the Buddhist path as examples of Buddhist subjectivism. He points out that the goal of Buddhism – *nirvāṇā* – is experiential in nature. He also notes that Buddhism recommends the cultivation of experiential, meditative states as a means of realizing *nirvāṇā*. Williams argues that this concern with experience(s) entails a corresponding disassociation from objective reality and objective truth. As Williams puts it, "subjectivism is prone to losing all sense of the objectivity of truth."[4] Specifically, the subjectivist finds it "very difficult . . . to gain access to the real world of the Other—God—or indeed the other—such as the objective existence of tables, chairs . . . or fellow human beings."[5] Subjectivism encourages an orientation to experiences, and experiences are essentially private and therefore exclude objective reality. According to Williams, objectivity can only be founded on a belief system that posits the objective reality of God, persons, world, and things in the world. As he puts it, "only in Being Itself, i.e. necessary being, in other words God, can the objectivity of the everyday world be grounded."[6] Two claims are being made here: (1) Buddhist subjectivism prevents the recognition of objective reality, defined as God, persons (as ordinarily perceived), and things (as ordinarily perceived); (2) Buddhist subjectivism prevents Buddhists from recognizing objective reality or

4. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 18. Williams' phrasing is somewhat confusing. Obviously, Buddhists believe in objective truths, e.g., The Four Noble Truths, *anātman*, etc. I assume Williams means to say 'subjectivism is prone to losing all sense of objective truth.'

5. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 151.

6. Ibid., p. 18.

truth in any sense whatsoever. In the next two sections I consider the plausibility of each of these claims.

2.1 Subjectivism, God, and common sense realism

Williams rejects subjectivism because it undermines the recognition of the objective existence of God, persons, and things—i.e., it is incompatible with theism and common sense realism.[7] The argument presumes that both theism and common sense realism are true. Unless God exists, it hardly matters that Buddhist subjectivism alienates Buddhists from the 'objective God.' Likewise, Williams' concern that Buddhism undermines the identification of ordinary appearances as 'objective realities' only makes sense if ordinary appearances are in fact objective realities. Williams' argument appears problematic given that his premises concern highly contested, ultimate metaphysical/epistemological issues. It is by no means clear or obvious that either theism or common sense realism is true. Rather, modern discourse in philosophy, cognitive science, sociology, and psychology justifies a good deal of suspicion regarding both positions. In order for Williams' critique of subjectivism to be persuasive, it must include a convincing defense of theism and common sense realism. Does Williams present such a defense?

Williams' arguments in favor of theism are guided by modest goals: he only wants to show the rationality of theism, not the truth of theism.[8] If we assume for the moment that his arguments are successful, a demonstration of the rationality of theism hardly justifies a rejection of subjectivist systems because they deny (among other things) the objective existence of God. Williams' critique of subjectivism presupposes the *truth* of theism; all Williams has (possibly) shown is the rationality of theism. With respect to theism, Williams fails to provide the kind of support his unequivocal rejection of subjectivism requires.

Williams' critique of subjectivism also presumes the truth of common sense realism. Does Williams give us convincing reasons to accept this epistemological premise? In *The Unexpected Way*, Williams does not appear to make any serious attempt to support common sense realism. Instead, he directs the reader[9] to a defense of common sense realism in his book *Altruism and Reality*.[10] Specifically, he refers to his critique of the Buddhist doctrines of *anātman* (no-self) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness). *Anātman* and *śūnyatā* are doctrines strongly opposed to common sense realism. Apparently, Williams believes that his critique of *anātman* and *śūnyatā* constitutes an indirect argument in favor of common sense realism.

Williams' analysis of *anātman* and *śūnyatā* successfully identifies significant

7. I use 'common sense realism' as a descriptive term for the intuitive and implicit epistemology associated with ordinary experience, i.e., the automatic, unreflective interpretation of ordinary appearances as objective realities.

8. See Williams, *Unexpected Way*, pp. 32-34.

9. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 202.

10. Paul Williams, *Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998).

philosophical problems with both doctrines.[11] Buddhists reduce things and persons to their constituent parts, and conclude from this analysis that the 'thing' or 'person' does not ultimately exist. As Williams points out, however, the Buddhist negation of a 'whole' through the reduction of that 'whole' to its constituent parts presupposes the whole's existence. Parts are "parasitic" on the whole;[12] the very analysis of wholes in terms of parts affirms the whole's existence. Williams also discusses various problems raised by the attempt to explain persons as a collection or series of mental events. He demonstrates the inadequacy of *anātman* as an explanation of the person and shows that the mental events associated with the person must be constrained by some type of unifying principle. This unifying principle entails (at least in some rarified sense) the true existence of the self.[13]

Even though Williams' analysis is sound, it does not support common sense realism and justify a rejection of subjectivism. Given that *anātman* and *śūnyatā* are opposed to common sense realism, Williams reasons that if (1) *anātman* and *śūnyatā* are false, then (2) common sense realism is true. The second proposition, however, is not logically entailed by the first. Demonstrating (for example) the necessity of a unifying principle presupposed by the Buddhist analysis of 'a self' or 'whole' is not equivalent to demonstrating the objectivity of either the self or things as these ordinarily appear. *Anātman* and *śūnyatā* may be problematic, but this does not signify in any necessary sense that persons or things (as ordinarily construed) are objectively real. Williams rejects Buddhist subjectivism because it prevents Buddhists from recognizing the objective reality of things as ordinarily apprehended. Williams, however, fails to support the premise that justifies his position, i.e., the premise that ordinary appearances *are* objective realities.

2.2 Subjectivism and knowledge

Williams is critical of subjectivism (and hence Buddhism) not only because it excludes what he believes are objective realities (God, self, world). Williams thinks subjectivism excludes objectivity in general. Subjectivist systems orient the

11. That said, I disagree with Williams' (and probably most Madhyamikas') interpretation of emptiness. If I understand Williams correctly, he interprets a statement like 'the mountain is empty and therefore does not exist' to mean that 'the mountain' is a mental construction superimposed over a vacuum (Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, p. 120). However, denying the existence of the mountain (or any part/aspect of the mountain) does not necessarily mean that nothing exists. It simply affirms that mountains do not exist. As Williams recognizes, Buddhists attribute the apparent existence of 'the mountain' to conceptual construction. But this neither affirms nor denies claims regarding the existence or non-existence of anything at all (except in the sense that emptiness negates the ultimate existence of any distinguishable entity). Emptiness, then, is consistent with the claim that 'something' (that is not a 'thing') ultimately exists. This 'something' is not a mountain. At the same time, the false appearance of the mountain really does arise, and in this sense the mountain is conventionally real (*saṃvṛtisatya*). Asanga's (4th century CE) Yogācārin approach to emptiness (described in his *Bodhisattvabhūmi*) appears consistent with these remarks. See Janice Dean Willis, trans., *On Knowing Reality: The Tattvārtha Chapter of Asanga's Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), pp. 16off.

12. Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, p. 128.

13. Ibid., pp. 148-149.

person to their own subjective experience. For Williams, an orientation toward experience(s) leaves the person with no foundation, either with respect to what is real, what is true, or what is good. Williams seems to find this orientation objectionable primarily due to its privacy. Because experience is private, it is cut off from anything objectively real or true.

While Williams' reasoning appeals to common sense, its soundness depends on the assumption that subjectivity and objectivity are mutually exclusive. Williams seems to consider this assumption a self-evident truth. This view is unwarranted, however, since there is no self-evident or necessary reason to suppose that subjective experience excludes objectivity. This is true on principle, given that there is no logical basis for a necessary distinction between subjectivity and objectivity (subjectivity, after all, is an objective characteristic of the human condition). It is also supported by plausible scenarios that call into question a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. For instance, it seems likely that disciplined, introspective attention on (subjective) experience would yield insight into the objective nature of the mind or objective causes of suffering. Williams' presupposition that subjectivity and objectivity are mutually exclusive is, at minimum, problematic.

Williams' critique of subjectivism's epistemological implications faces another, more serious objection. The claim that subjectivism has uniquely negative effects on a person's capacity to recognize objective truth or reality is untenable given the global epistemic insensitivity associated with ordinary experience. Ordinary experience is characterized by the taken-for-granted assumption that ordinary appearances are objective realities. We assume that common sense realism – the 'objective reality' of persons and things as they appear to ordinary experience – is directly validated by ordinary perception and experience. This assumption is false. Phenomenological reflection reveals that 'the world' and the ontological commitments it presupposes (the existence of 'matter' or 'substance') are not immediate givens and are never direct objects of experience. We do not perceive 'stuff'; we perceive a succession of color patches and other sensory impressions (tactile, auditory, etc.) that are interpreted as 'stuff.' If 'matter' is not a direct and immediate given, 'the given' must be experiential in nature—a succession of experiential events or representations.[14] The world (as ordinarily construed) must be an interpretation of those events. This interpretation may – or may not – be justified. In either case, the 'world' remains a second-order interpretation of the immediate and primary given of experience.

The primacy of experience does not entail solipsism. Neither does the constructed nature of ordinary appearances mean that everything is nothing more than hallucination. The distinctive characteristics of sensory apprehensions (e.g., they are relatively predictable, non-malleable, etc. in comparison to thoughts and feelings) suggest that appearances are constrained by an objective, extramental state of affairs (Kant's *noumena*) that impinges on experience. In some

14. This is true regardless of what 'the given' may (or may not) represent or what reality may (ontologically) turn out to be or include.

(philosophically problematic) way, appearances even represent objective, *noumenal* reality.[15] But since the appearance of 'things' results (to some significant degree) from the constructive processes of the mind, the objective 'thing-in-itself' (*noumenon*) must be distinguished from *phenomenal* appearances.[16] We experience *phenomena*—appearances resulting from a mediated/constructed encounter with *noumenal* reality. Though there is necessarily some degree of semantic[17] continuity between *phenomena* and *noumena* (otherwise, negotiating the environment would be impossible), objective reality (the *noumenal*) is never an object of ordinary perception. The unconscious and automatic interpretation of appearances as 'objective reality' is therefore a process of ongoing misapprehension.

This epistemic distance from the *noumenal* is one facet of an epistemological dilemma associated with ordinary consciousness. A second facet concerns our ignorance of this dilemma: we are not only ignorant of the objective nature of 'things,' we are ignorant of our ignorance. We suffer from an epistemic blind spot that makes it difficult to ever realize the counterintuitive insight that makes recognizing ignorance possible.[18] This condition derives from the hermeneutical circularity of our epistemological situation. Experiential content is (to some significant degree) a construction of cognitive/mental processes, and this content in turn reinforces those processes. The result is that the content of experience – including the perceived 'world' – takes on a quality of self-evident objectivity. So while (in objective terms) the mind's constructive activity is implicated in all experience and conceals objective reality, one aspect of this concealment is the epistemic occlusion of the concealing process itself. The seamless, self-reinforcing interdependence of mind and experience gives ordinary appearances the aura of objectivity and hides the processes that suppress awareness of objective reality. This makes it difficult to ever appreciate the true nature and scope of our own ignorance. The 'realness' and naturalness of the world as ordinarily experienced is so compelling that it becomes almost impossible to conceive of alternative perceptual and interpretive possibilities. In the context of ordinary experience, it becomes almost impossible to entertain counterintuitive insights regarding the

15. Having said this, there is a common tendency to associate materiality with the *noumenal*—to think of the *noumenal* as 'stuff' that exists distinct from subjective experience. Such reifying and dualizing notions occur based on the interpretation of the *noumenal* using concepts associated with *phenomenal* appearances; they entirely distort the significance of the *phenomenal-noumenal* distinction. I would argue that the *noumenal* is the indeterminate background *and* reality of both the subject and object poles of experience, evocatively referred to as *tathatā* ('thatness' or 'suchness') in Mahāyāna Buddhist sources.

16. For Kant as well as for most cognitive scientists, this gap is part of what makes knowledge possible. The mind's constructive processes are what impose order on the meaningless chaos of the *noumena*. I take the opposite view: mental constructs collapse a meaning-rich field into the relatively limited and impoverished level of epistemic sensitivity associated with ordinary experience.

17. Throughout this article, I use the term 'semantic' in the broadest sense, to designate meaning in general or the manner in which we construe meaning, both in its explicit and background dimensions.

18. I use the term 'ignorance' in a perceptual and hermeneutical sense—the way we misperceive the world and fail to appreciate its meaning.

nature of self and reality.

These remarks have direct implications for Williams' position on the epistemological implications of subjectivism. To reiterate, ordinary experience is characterized by misapprehension and ignorance. Experience is an outcome of the processes and factors that comprise the cognitive system or mind. Mind and experience are therefore mutually self-reinforcing variables in a semi-closed, hermeneutically circular system. Three overlapping conclusions follow: (1) ignorance is a general outcome of the total set of interrelated processes and variables comprising the cognitive system; (2) the assumptions implicit in ordinary experience manifest this ignorance; and (3) experience is epistemologically constrained regardless of whether or not a person is oriented toward 'the world' or her own experience.

Williams thinks that subjectivism is an epistemological problem while an objectivist[19] orientation away from experience and toward the world is a means of recognizing objective reality.[20] Williams fails to recognize that ignorance is an outcome of the interrelated processes and factors that comprise the operations of the cognitive system.[21] This ignorance manifests regardless of the orientation of a person's attention. A rejection of experience in favor of an orientation toward 'the world' in no way alters the conditions that inhibit epistemic sensitivity.

If Williams' 'turn' to a common sense understanding of objectivity is misguided, how is objective reality recognized? My remarks above suggest one answer to this question. Knowledge of objective reality requires a transformation of the cognitive system and a corresponding qualitative transformation of experience—a transformation that effects enhanced modes of epistemic sensitivity. Since any project within the domain of the known is constrained by the epistemic limitations of ordinary cognition/experience, insight into reality may depend on a transformation of the cognitive system that alters those epistemic parameters.

A discussion of the conditions associated with this transformation is beyond the scope of this article.[22] Suffice it to say here, transformation occurs through the internalization of concepts and the engagement of practices that in various ways upset the ordinary functioning of the cognitive system and make possible its self-organization. Because the cognitive system encompasses multiple elements

19. 'Objectivism' and 'objectivist' are my terms – not Williams' – for the type of belief system that he advocates as the condition for the recognition of objective truth and objective reality, altruism, and moral behavior. Objectivism posits the objective reality of God, person, things, and world. Person, things, and world are objectively real in the form that they appear to ordinary experience. Objectivism, then, combines monotheism with common sense, or naïve, realism.

20. Objectivism as an orientation toward God may facilitate the recognition of objective truth, but not for the reasons Williams imagines. See my Concluding Remarks.

21. For a detailed discussion, see Randall Studstill, *The Unity of Mystical Traditions: The Transformation of Consciousness in Tibetan and German Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 105–124.

22. For discussions of how this cognitive transformation occurs in the Dzogchen (*rDzogschen*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and the German mysticism of Eckhart, Suso, and Tauler, see Studstill, *Unity of Mystical Traditions*.

and processes, the potential means of upsetting the system are diverse. Sustained introspective (subjectivist) attention on experience may help bring about non-ordinary states of consciousness and new insights into the nature of reality. Likewise, selfless activity on behalf of others may bring about or facilitate such transformation. In response to Williams, the important point to emphasize is that there is no necessary correlation between recognizing objective truths and either introspective or extrovertive modes of attention. The essential condition of epistemic awakening has nothing to do with an orientation toward an 'objective' world. Rather, embracing common sense realism as the 'answer' to the problem of truth merely perpetuates the waking trance of ordinary experience.

Williams criticizes Buddhism because he believes that its subjectivist orientation excludes the possibility of recognizing objective reality. This criticism is based on false epistemological assumptions. Ignorance is a general characteristic of ordinary experience regardless of orientation. Moreover, there is no necessary relationship between subjectivist and objectivist orientations and the recognition of objective reality or truth. The relationship between subjectivism or objectivism and the intensification or alleviation of ignorance depends on the form each orientation takes. Because of the nature of the cognitive system and the conditions of its transformation, subjectivist tendencies may either perpetuate ignorance (e.g., fantasy) or help awaken epistemic sensitivity (e.g., meditative concentration). Likewise, the implicit objectivism of common sense realism may be the semantic background for either transformative behavior in the service of others or destructive behavior that intensifies egoism and ignorance. Williams' correlation of ignorance and its alleviation with subjectivist and objectivist orientations leads to a false understanding of both the problem and its solution, and false conclusions regarding the epistemological implications of Buddhist subjectivism.

3 Buddhism and Egoism

According to Williams, Buddhism is egoistic. Buddhist egoism, Williams argues, is derived from Buddhist subjectivism. Subjectivism gives primacy to experiences. This concern with experiences is indistinguishable from an egoistic preoccupation with self. Because Buddhism is subjectivist, it must also be egoistic. Objectivist systems (such as Christianity), on the other hand, undermine egoism because they orient the person *away* from experience/self and toward God, the world, and other persons. Are Williams' arguments persuasive? The issues surrounding Buddhist egoism are best approached against the background of a general understanding of the nature and causes of egoism. For this reason, I begin this section with a general discussion of egoism before considering Buddhism's egoistic (or non-egoistic) implications.

3.1 Generative conditions of egoism

Since egoism is more or less a universal human trait, it must have at least some causes independent of the doctrines and practices of any particular religious

tradition or cultural system. These causes are so self-evident or obvious that mentioning them borders on tautology. Nevertheless, stating the obvious is necessary because (1) Williams has apparently overlooked some of the obvious causes of egoism,[23] and (2) identifying the factors that cause egoism helps to clarify the mechanisms that undermine egoism.

The fundamental, causal condition of egoism is common sense realism—believing 'self' and 'world' are objectively real in the form that these ordinarily appear. The common sense realist experiences herself as a separate and vulnerable individual in a real and unpredictable world. This predicament generates fear and insecurity (however subtle and/or suppressed), which in turn promotes self-regarding and self-protective attitudes and behaviors. Egoistic self-concern is a natural consequence of being a 'self' in (what is believed to be) an objectively real world.

Patterns of typical human behavior indicate that common sense realism is the intuitive ontology of virtually all persons. Regardless of whether or not persons are aware they are common sense realists, they *act* in the world based on the assumption that 'self' and 'object' (as ordinarily apprehended) are objectively real. This is true notwithstanding a person's religious or intellectual convictions. Some religious believers may, for example, claim that 'everything is an illusion' or 'everything is Brahman.' Such persons (with perhaps a few, rare exceptions) still behave as if 'the world' is objectively real in the form that it ordinarily appears. Actions, not words, are a person's true profession of faith. For most people, professed creed barely competes with the immediate and compelling 'facts' of 'objective reality': the sense of being a real, separate, and vulnerable self whose survival and well being depend on conditions in (what is taken for granted as) a real world. Since common sense realism causes egoism, the universality of common sense realism as the *de facto* belief system of almost all persons entails that almost all persons are egoistic. The internal narratives of most persons are dominated by a central concern: the self and what the self wants, needs, fears, etc.

3.2 Buddhism and egoism

Is Buddhism egoistic? Before proceeding, the question requires clarification. We are not asking 'are Buddhists egocentric?' Since we are all functioning, common sense realists (regardless of intellectual convictions otherwise), we would expect that Buddhists (like everyone) will be egoistic for reasons independent of (though not necessarily excluding) the influence of their tradition. If Buddhists

23. Williams claims that the only necessary condition for egoism is the capacity to make a distinction between self and other (Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, pp. 110–111, 144). Williams' analysis is flawed because he fails to realize that there has to be an interpretive component accompanying this distinction. The person has to make the distinction *and* believe that the 'self' that constitutes one pole of the self-other dichotomy is her true identity. To rephrase this in slightly different terms, one may recognize a distinction between self and other and yet remain unidentified with the 'self' that constitutes one pole of the self-other dichotomy. It is this identification with self that plays a crucial, causal role in the creation of egoism, not the mere capacity to distinguish self and other.

behave egoistically, this is not evidence that Buddhism is egoistic. The question 'is Buddhism egoistic?' concerns the impact of Buddhist doctrines and practices on the egoism that is the default condition of most persons. In other words, how do Buddhist doctrines and practices affect a pre-existing egoistic orientation? How does Buddhism affect the factors that generate this egoistic orientation?

According to Williams, "all concern with experiences implicates egoity."[24] Since Buddhism is concerned with experiences (i.e., it is subjectivist), it therefore promotes egoism. At first glance, the claim is plausible. A desire to gain special, non-ordinary, positive types of experiences appears egoistic. The individual seems to be grasping after certain types of experiences for the sake of her own gratification. However, the essential orientation of Buddhism is therapeutic. The goal of Buddhism is the cessation of suffering. In the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, the Buddha states, "Formerly I, monks, as well as now, lay down simply anguish and the stopping of anguish."[25] From a Buddhist perspective, suffering is caused by craving (the Second Noble Truth).[26] Craving is an expression of egoism—we crave persons, things, and circumstances in order to secure the self's well-being. 'Craving causes suffering' may just as well be expressed 'egoism causes suffering.'[27] The desire for permanent, unconditioned well being – the complete cessation of suffering (*nirvāṇā*) – therefore requires the eradication of egoism. Ironically, if a person is absolutely committed to 'feeling good,' Buddhism demands that she confront and eradicate all traces of egoism. Buddhism's essentially therapeutic

24. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 58. When Williams claims that "all concern with experiences implicates egoity," I interpret him to be specifically referring to a grasping thirst to attain unique, sensually satisfying, non-ordinary states of consciousness. If Williams' statement is interpreted literally, it is somewhat puzzling. Phenomenologically speaking, human beings are loci of experiences. Someone who lacked any concern with experience(s) would seem to suffer from an unusual and tragic form of dissociative psychopathology. A person who lacked any concern with *positive* experiences in particular would seem to suffer from strong masochistic tendencies. All normal, psychologically healthy human beings (even Christians, I suspect) engage in activities with the intent to gain pleasant sensations: listening to music, appreciating the aesthetic beauty of the liturgy, watching a film, drinking a glass of wine, having sex, etc. A person may also be concerned with the quality of her experience because she is in pain. If someone suffering from bone cancer asks for a shot of Demoral, should she be told she is egoistic because she desires a pain-free, narcotic-induced experience? Likewise, if all persons suffer to some degree, is it reasonable to reduce the desire to be free of suffering to nothing more than an egoistic search for pleasant experiences?

25. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.140, in I. B. Horner, trans., *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, Vol. I The First Fifty Discourses (Mūlapaṇṇāsa) (Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 2007 [c1954]), p. 180. My phrasing is not intended to imply that the Pali Suttas are necessarily accurate records of the utterances of the historical Buddha. For my purposes, the important point is that the contents of primary texts such as the Suttas reflect the beliefs and values of Buddhists.

26. See, for example, *Dhammapada* 16.216: "From craving springs grief; from craving springs fear. For him who is wholly free from craving there is no grief; whence then fear?" Acharya Buddharakkhuta, trans., "Dhp XVI Piyavagga Affection," `http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.16.budd.html`.

27. Śāntideva (8th century C.E.) makes the link between egoistic self-concern and suffering explicit in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. See, for example, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8.129 in Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, trans., *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* [by Śāntideva] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 99.

orientation turns out to have non-egoistic implications. A closer examination of Buddhist doctrine and practice demonstrates how the Buddhist path functions to undermine egoistic tendencies.

3.3 Undermining egoism

Egoism is self-concern grounded (at least in part) on belief in a self and common sense realism. It follows that egoism is undermined through the cultivation of attitudes and virtues that oppose or subvert self-concern and the factors that cause self-concern. Egoism is also undermined through practices that increase epistemic sensitivity by developing the ability to sustain mindful attention. Such practices yield insight into the causes of egoism and the causal relationship between egoism and suffering. Immediate insight into the painful consequences of egoism naturally leads to the avoidance of egocentric attitudes and behaviors.

A consideration of Buddhist doctrines and practices from this perspective suggests that Buddhism undermines egoism. Aspects of Buddhism that support this conclusion include:

- the internalization of views—such as *anātman* ('no-self') and *śūnyatā* ('emptiness')—that undermine common sense, objectivist views about the reality of the self and things in the world (as described above, such common sense views fuel self-regarding attitudes and behaviors);

- analytical contemplative practices that yield (according to Buddhists) experiential confirmation of the illusory (or empty) nature of self and things;

- the internalization of a belief system that posits an unconditioned ultimate truth or reality, e.g., *dharmdhātu* ('sphere of reality'), *tathatā*, ('suchness'), *śūnyatā* ('emptiness'), etc. (discriminations of 'the desirable' and 'the repellant' fuel attachment, aversion, and ongoing self-involvement; belief in an unconditioned truth or reality undermines those discriminations[28] and consequently reduces egoistic self-concern);

- the cultivation of attitudes and the performance of behaviors that run counter to the interests of the ego, such as compassion toward those who threaten or harm the self or a commitment to service toward others that inconveniences the comfort or safety of the self;[29]

28. The correlation between belief or insight regarding an unconditioned reality/truth and the cessation of discrimination seems to be suggested by Asanga (4th century C.E.) in his *Bodhisattvabhūmi*: "coursing in this supreme understanding with insight into Suchness, [the bodhisattva] . . . sees all dharmas as they really are, i.e., as being absolutely the same. And seeing everywhere sameness, his mind likewise, he attains to supreme equanimity." Willis, *On Knowing Reality*, p. 155.

29. See, for example, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6.123–127 in Crosby and Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, pp. 61-62.

- the meditative cultivation of states of empty, interiorized awareness or states of mental quiescence, with mindful attention to sensory impressions (to the degree that beliefs – implicit or reiterated in persons' ongoing internal narratives – help define the dualism of self vs. world that serves as a condition of egoism, such empty states of consciousness and/or 'mindful attention' weaken dualism and undermine egoism).

Meditation – the last item on this list – is central to Buddhist soteriological theory because it generates (Buddhists believe) insight (*prajñā*) into the way things actually are. This insight automatically neutralizes egoism since it involves (among other things) 'seeing' that the self that is the basis of egoistic self-concern does not ultimately exist. Non-linear dynamics further suggests that meditation may enhance epistemic sensitivity by prompting the self-organization of the cognitive system.[30] The repeated suspension of ordinary cognitive processes through meditative concentration and/or mindfulness seems to have a cumulative effect on the system of cognitive factors and processes that construct ordinary appearances. At some point, after years of daily meditative practice, this effect crosses a critical threshold, disrupting the cognitive system and initiating a naturally unfolding, qualitative transformation of experience—a transformation the Buddhist tradition associates with enlightenment.

Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* provides another example of the ego-subverting potential of the Buddhist path. The text can be understood as an extreme form of cognitive psychotherapy: substituting the beliefs that guide a person's ordinary, egocentric responses to others (oriented around self-protection) with beliefs that encourage a completely open, unguarded, unprotected attitude. For example, enemies should be viewed as treasures and worshipped as "the true Dharma."[31] While such an ideal may be rarely realized in practice, the ideal is part of the tradition with the potential to transform those few who take it seriously.[32]

The nature of Buddhist doctrine and practice suggests that Buddhism has the potential to undermine egoism. It also suggests that different types of attitudes and behaviors may function to undermine egoism, including subjectivist attitudes and behaviors. Against Williams' claim that only objectivist systems subvert egoism, it appears that there is no necessary or intrinsic correlation between

30. The phase transitions that occur in non-linear, dynamical systems are sometimes cited as a model for understanding qualitative shifts in the cognitive system. See, for example, Allan Combs, *The Radiance of Being: Complexity, Chaos, and the Evolution of Consciousness* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1995), p. 61.

31. *Bodhicāryavatāra* 6.107, 111 in Crosby and Skilton, *The Bodhicāryavatāra*, pp. 59–60.

32. In *Altruism and Reality*, Williams identifies certain philosophical problems entailed by some of Śāntideva's arguments. Assuming Williams' arguments are correct, these problems have no necessary bearing on how Śāntideva's teachings affect the Buddhist who internalizes them and tries to live them. For example, Williams may be correct that the concept of 'free-floating pains' is entirely incoherent when analyzed philosophically (see, for example, Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, pp. 140–144). But there is no necessary correlation between the accuracy of Williams' critique and the actual, behavioral effects of the idea of 'free-floating pains' when internalized by a Buddhist. The idea of free-floating pains may be philosophically incoherent yet still promote the development of altruistic attitudes.

objectivist or subjectivist religious systems or practices and the intensification or reduction of egoism. Just as both introspective and extrovertive modes of attention can serve egoistic ends, attitudes and practices that undermine the ego may take either subjectivist or objectivist forms.

3.4 Meditation and egoism[33]

Williams finds Buddhist meditation compelling evidence of Buddhist egoism. Meditation exemplifies the Buddhist's egoistic search for positive experiences and sensations.[34] Williams depicts the Buddhist meditator as a hedonistic sensualist, concerned with nothing more than the gratification of personal desires for positive, pleasurable, and weird experiences and sensations.[35] Since the goal of Buddhism is the cessation of suffering, Williams is correct that Buddhist meditators are indeed concerned with positive experience(s). Does this observation justify reducing Buddhist meditation to an egoistic search for pleasurable experiences?

One problem with Williams' claim should be obvious to anyone who has ever tried to meditate: meditation does not feel good.[36] It may induce pleasurable sensation at some future time, usually after years of daily practice. But the immediate results of meditation are far from pleasurable. Meditation provokes mild to (in some cases) extreme discomfort. Ken Wilber states that

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33. In this section I examine the possible egoism of meditation in relation to laypersons and lay-Westerners as practitioners. My analysis of the motives behind meditation relies on making inferences about motivation based on the actual performance of meditation in contexts where meditation is neither demanded nor expected. Given the discomfort that meditation involves (discussed below), performing the practice over an extended period of time is highly suggestive evidence regarding the motivation of the meditator. This approach, however, does not necessarily apply to the members of monastic communities. In a setting where everyone may be expected to meditate and where being a monk or nun may take on the significance of a livelihood or a profession, the motives behind meditative practice may be purely prosaic, and no more or less egoistic than going to work in the morning.

34. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 75. Doctrinally conceived, the goal of Buddhism (*nirvāṇā*) is intrinsically non-egoistic, given the Buddhist belief that *nirvāṇā* involves the realization of no-self (*anātman*). This has nothing to do with the actual egoistic or non-egoistic implications of *anātman* in practice, or the egoistic or non-egoistic motives of the Buddhist on the path. The goal of the Buddhist path may be non-egoistic – doctrinally conceived – yet the Buddhist's motives may be thoroughly egoistic. Whether or not this is in fact the case is one of the issues investigated here. Williams argues that *anātman* is compatible with selfishness on the grounds that selfishness requires nothing more than the ability to make a distinction between self and other (Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, pp. 110–111). Since *anātman* does not negate the recognition of the self-other distinction at the level of conventional truth, *anātman* does not alter the basic condition that gives rise to selfishness. Williams' analysis is unpersuasive. If 'I' know that 'I' do not ultimately exist, then I also know I have nothing to defend, protect, or preserve. Even if I can still make a conventional distinction between self and other, *anātman* eliminates the basis of self-cherishing.

35. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 75.

36. I do not refer to forms of meditation used by some psychotherapists to induce relaxation; these may indeed induce almost immediate, pleasurable states of relaxation. The contemplative and meditative practices associated with religious traditions are of a significantly different type with respect to method, orientation, and immediate affective consequences.

> If you're doing meditation correctly, you're in for some very rough and frightening times. Meditation as a 'relaxation response' is a joke. Genuine meditation involves a whole series of deaths and rebirths; extraordinary conflicts and stresses come into play. All of this is just barely balanced by an equal growth in equanimity, compassion, understanding, awareness, and sensitivity, which makes the whole endeavor worthwhile.[37]

According to bDud 'joms gling pa (19th century), the "signs of progress" in Dzogchen (*rDzogs-chen*) meditative practice include

> the feeling that all one's thoughts are wreaking havoc in one's body, speech and mind, sharp pains in the heart, agony experienced throughout one's entire body, various physical illnesses, paranoia, insomnia, depression, aggravated mental afflictions of craving, anger, and so forth, speech impediments, respiratory ailments, anxiety, and hallucinations.[38]

A Zen practitioner gives the following report of his first attempt to practice meditation:

> [W]hen the sesshin began ... it turned out to be something I had never imagined. It was, as a matter of fact, torture. [...] [S]itting with my legs crossed in the lotus posture [was] excruciating. ... Feeling that death itself could not be worse, I told myself: "All this pain comes from zazen, and you can escape it if you wish. But if you were dying and in agony, you would be unable to escape the suffering, so bear this pain in the same spirit and die if need be!" I fought this torment with every ounce of strength.[39]

Anne Lamotte's remarks about meditation are appropriate here as well:

> Have you ever tried meditating? For me it's about as pleasant as coming down off cocaine. My mind becomes like this badly abused lab rat, turning in on itself after one too many bouts with Methadrine and electroshock and immersions into ice water, and I can't get into some fantasizing and mindfucking fast enough.[40]

These testimonies suggest that meditation is anything but comfortable. This point is reinforced by the fact that so few meditate, even in religious traditions in which meditation is strongly recommended (if not required) for spiritual progress.[41] If meditation were pleasurable, most people would spend much of their available

37. Quoted in Combs, Radiance of Being, p. 231.

38. B. Allan Wallace, "Psychological Maturation and Spiritual Awakening in Tibetan Buddhism" (paper presented at the National Conference of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, California, November 22–25, 1997), p. 8.

39. In Philip Kapleau, ed., *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 234.

40. Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 163.

41. This poses a problem for Williams' identification of meditation and Buddhist egoism. Williams cites meditative egoism as evidence supporting his general claim that Buddhism is egoistic. Even if meditation were egoistic, the point says little about Buddhists in general since

free time doing it, especially considering the fact that meditation (unlike so many of the other things people do for fun and pleasure) is essentially free.[42] Apparently, lab rats that are able to stimulate the pleasure centers of their brains (via implanted electrodes) by pushing a lever spend all their time pushing the lever. Human beings, in this sense, are not that different from rats. If meditation were fun, we would all be 'pushing the lever.' The fact that so few meditate is strong evidence that meditation is not pleasurable.

Even though meditation is not immediately pleasurable, Williams might argue that it is still egoistic. The Buddhist meditator may not be seeking sensual gratification, but she nevertheless believes that meditation will be pleasurable at some future time. Buddhist motives are therefore egoistic because the Buddhist meditator seeks to gain pleasurable experiences in the future.

Though plausible, this argument is weak. Considering the discomfort that meditation involves, the only way a person could meditate based on an egoistic desire for future, positive sensations would be if that person had a deep faith in the Buddhist view combined with an extraordinary capacity for delayed gratification. In other words, the meditator would have to be (1) absolutely sure that this path would eventually lead to 'pleasurable sensations' and (2) willing to endure a good deal of boredom and discomfort while waiting an indefinite period of time to experience those 'pleasurable sensations.' Very few people – Buddhists included – satisfy these criteria. Moreover, it does not seem likely that a true, pleasure-seeking egoist would delay gratification in this way. If a person's motivation is nothing more than pleasure, she will naturally follow the path of least resistance and seek the most convenient and immediate sources of pleasure available (restrained perhaps by the desire to avoid prison). Meditation is hardly the path of least resistance. To turn a Taoist virtue on its head, it is 'swimming upstream' all (or almost all) the way.

The Christian critic of Buddhism may concede that the Buddhist meditator does not derive egoistic gratification from cultivating pleasurable experiences. She may nevertheless argue that the meditator seeks and gains a subtle form of ego-gratification from cultivating a self-image as a meditator. Though there is probably some truth to this claim, it fails to support the thesis that meditation is an egoistic search for personally gratifying experiences. The fact that so few

few Buddhists meditate. As Paul Griffiths points out, "meditational practice in Buddhism has always been, in actuality if not in theory, a strictly virtuoso affair (that is, not many people actually do it and those who do are almost all male, celibate, and monastic)." Paul J. Griffiths, "Indian Buddhist Meditation," in Takeuchi Yoshinori, ed., *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 34. See also Jeff Wilson, "Meditation: A Rare Practice," Tricycle Blogs, comment posted December 30, 2006, `http://www.tricycle.com/blog/jeff_wilson/3723{}-1.html` (accessed October 3, 2007).

42. When someone tells me they enjoy meditation, I sometimes ask how often they do it. The answers I get are usually along the lines of 'now and then,' 'once a week,' 'a couple times a month,' 'I've been too busy lately to meditate,' etc. Avoiding pleasurable activities is inconsistent with human nature. We human beings find time to do the things we enjoy—especially if they are free. (People are busy, but they invariably find the time to watch T.V.) Claiming to enjoy something one almost never does is in itself testimony to our capacity for self-delusion.

meditate demonstrates that the ego-gratification gained by being able to think of oneself as 'a meditator' is outweighed by the discomfort and sheer boredom of the practice. If the benefits gained by the ego did not come at a significant cost, many more people would be meditating. Again, egocentric motives are insufficient to sustain meditative practice; to whatever degree egocentric motives may be involved in the practice (in relation to projecting a spiritual self-image), the presence of these motives fails to support Williams' claim that meditation is practiced for egoistic reasons.

If egoism can not sustain a meditative practice, what can? The inspiration to meditate on a daily basis over the course of several decades (at minimum) seems to derive from three factors: (1) a strong sensitivity to suffering, (2) a sense that the alleviation of suffering does not lie in satisfying any particular desire or condition, and (3) the conviction that meditation addresses the root causes of suffering (ignorance and craving). These conditions are the foundation that makes it possible to sit through the discomfort of meditation over an extended and indeterminate period of time. It is certainly possible that a person could be under the false impression that meditation is fun and *begin* a meditative practice based on the motivation to enjoy pleasurable experiences. He or she might indeed start meditating for hedonistic reasons, in search of pleasurable experiential states. However, considering the discomfort the practice involves, it is doubtful anyone motivated by such a desire would sustain the practice for any significant period of time (unless, as I noted above, they have great faith in the Buddhist view and are capable of long-term, delayed gratification). If a desire for pleasure cannot sustain the practice beyond the first few sessions, it is misleading to characterize meditation in general as a search for pleasurable sensations and experiences.

3.5 Buddhist concern with 'positive experiences'

According to Williams, Buddhism is egoistic because it is essentially about positive experiences. The claim appears undisputable, given that the goal of Buddhism is escaping suffering, and this involves positive states of consciousness. However, a close examination of the Buddhist tradition suggests the issue is more complex than Williams recognizes. The Buddhist concern with positive experiences is a response to suffering and only makes sense in the context of the Buddhist view of suffering. An accurate understanding of the Buddhist view of suffering demonstrates the implausibility of Williams' claim that a Buddhist concern with positive experience(s) is egoistic.

From a common sense perspective, painful and uncomfortable psychological states are caused by physical injury or undesirable, environmental conditions. The worse a person's circumstances, the more she will suffer; the better her conditions, the less she will suffer. If one is able to effectively manage one's environment and realize ideal conditions, one may reach a state in which suffering is negligible or almost non-existent. This view of suffering is often associated with a common sense 'philosophy of suffering' that goes something like this: suffering is a problem, but this problem is not excessive or chronic. Suffering

does not pervade every aspect of human life. Life is characterized by both pain and pleasure, and the appropriate human response to suffering is to accept some suffering as natural, avoid suffering if possible, and maximize whatever pleasure one can.

This view of suffering naturally initiates behaviors intended to maintain or change environmental conditions. However, given that environmental conditions are often difficult to change, the common sense view of suffering also motivates behaviors that function to (1) distract attention from suffering, (2) numb awareness of suffering, and/or (3) generate pleasurable sensations and/or psychological states independent of environmental conditions. (Often the same activity can perform more than one function. Alcohol and narcotics in particular may simultaneously function to numb pain and generate pleasurable sensations.) Persons also respond to suffering by disassociating from immediate, felt sensation and redirecting attention into fantasy (where one can 'realize' ideal conditions and thereby influence one's emotional state through the imagination).

Buddhists find this common sense view of suffering inadequate. They recognize, of course, that suffering is associated with undesirable conditions, the most prominent being birth, old age, disease, and death.[43] However, from the Buddhist perspective, *everything* is suffering[44] (or at least unsatisfactory), including pleasurable states. The claim is counterintuitive; it does not appear (to most people) that everything is suffering. What does the claim 'everything is suffering' mean?

According to Buddhists, suffering is caused by desire. Desire includes grasping after things, persons, and experiences. The causal relationship between desire and suffering is obvious. We suffer as a result of frustrated desire. We may also suffer from the anxiety of losing the object, when/if it is acquired. On a more subtle level, desire occurs as a more or less continuous, subliminal activity. This more subtle form of desire is generated by concepts that establish an individual's automatic interpretation of persons, things, events, and circumstances as either desirable (i.e., associated with happiness, well being, safety, etc.) or repellant (i.e., associated with abandonment, suffering, and death).[45] The individual holds these static concepts in the face of an ever changing environment. The tension between her static concepts of 'the desirable' and actual, fluctuating conditions generates

43. *Samyutta-nikāya* 5.420, in F. L. Woodward, trans., *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saṇyutta-Nikāya) or Grouped Suttas*, Part V (Mahā-Vagga) (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997 [c1930]), p. 357. See also *Dīgha-nikāya* 22.305, in T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II, 4th ed. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2002), p. 337.

44. Suffering (along with impermanence and no-self) comprise the Three Marks that characterize all conditioned phenomena. See *Dhammapada* 20.278, in F. Max Müller, trans., *The Dhammapada* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), `http://www.sacred{}-texts.com/bud/sbe10/sbe1022.htm` (accessed October 11, 2007).

45. Persons, things, or events that have no bearing on the self's well-being or survival trigger neither positive nor negative associations and consequently fall into a third, evaluative category: 'the irrelevant.' Since most of life has no immediate bearing on the self's well-being or survival, most of life becomes irrelevant, with serious and tragic consequences for a person's capacity to experience and appreciate life.

continuous desires (both subliminal and overt) that express an ongoing effort to manage the environment and 'self' in a way that maximizes safety and personal well being. This effort is inevitably associated with a chronic (if suppressed) sense of dis-ease as persons continuously seek to realize a static vision of 'the desirable' in the face of conditions that will inevitably change. In the very process of defining 'happiness' in conditional terms, persons establish a situation in which true well being is impossible.[46]

Ignorance plays an important role in the Buddhist account of suffering. Ignorance explains why the First Noble Truth is counterintuitive—why it may not appear that 'everything is suffering.' From the Buddhist perspective, ignorance makes us insensitive to the facts of our predicament. We have very little training in simply being aware of our immediate mental and emotional states, and we are ordinarily motivated to remain unaware since enhanced awareness entails greater sensitivity to suffering. Instead of awareness, we seek and are habitualized to distraction. Some cultural practices and activities have evolved as mechanisms to suppress discomfort. We pay money (in some cases, lots of money) to be less aware of our condition. The entertainment industry thrives on our willingness to do just that. Moreover, whatever discomfort does break through the barriers of ignorance and insensitivity tends to be taken for granted. We have experienced dis-ease for so long, it feels normal.

These remarks on the Buddhist understanding of the human problem clarify the role and significance of 'positive experiences' as the goal of the Buddhist path. The Buddhist path is a response to a chronic condition of pain. It is initiated by an awareness – however dim or inchoate – of this condition. This response to suffering does involve the cultivation of positive states. But given the Buddhist understanding of suffering, the Buddhist path must exclude an egoistic search for pleasant sensations and experiences. From a Buddhist perspective, seeking pleasurable states merely perpetuates a conditional conceptualization of 'the desirable' that is one of the causes of suffering. The Buddhist, then, seeks to feel 'good,' where 'good' is construed as the well-being that results from a transformation of consciousness in which the conditions of 'the desirable' vs. 'the repellant' are eliminated. Buddhists put this more simply by saying that the cessation of suffering requires the cessation of craving. In either case, 'feeling good' (as the goal of Buddhism) is a form of a radical, unconditional well being. This is something entirely different from 'feeling good' as Williams presents it (i.e., pleasurable sensations and experiences).

I have described the ideal and/or necessary conditions that motivate meditative practice and dedication to the Buddhist path in general. Whether or not individual Buddhists meet these conditions is a different issue. The conditions that sustain meditative practice are quite unique, which is why so few people (Buddhists or otherwise) meditate on a regular basis. From a Buddhist perspective, ordinary consciousness is characterized by egoism and ignorance.[47] Given

46. For a more detailed explanation, see Studstill, *Unity of Mystical Traditions*, pp. 105–113.

47. In Asanga's (4th century C.E.) *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, ignorance of Suchness is described as

the nature of our ordinary condition, to be adequately sensitive to suffering is itself a spiritual accomplishment. Buddhist teachers tend to spend so much time talking about suffering precisely because most persons lack an adequate sensitivity to suffering and therefore fail to be sufficiently motivated to solve the problem.

3.6 Independence as a Buddhist value

According to Williams, the Buddhist value of independence provides additional evidence that Buddhism is egoistic. As Williams observes, the paradigmatic model of the spiritual path in Buddhism is the solitary renouncer, whose ultimate ideal is complete independence from everything in this world, including independence from other persons.[48] From Williams' perspective, the fact that Buddhists value independence from others confirms Buddhism's self-involved, egocentric character. Williams contrasts Buddhist independence with the Christian emphasis on participation within a larger community (the Church as the body of Christ). Christianity stresses involvement with others and therefore encourages non-egocentric attitudes and behaviors.

Williams' argument presumes correlations between (1) independence and egoism, and (2) social involvement and a non-egocentric orientation. The presumption is false. Whether or not one's motives are egocentric or not has little (if anything) to do with whether or not one is solitary or socially involved. A person may be actively engaged with others, and yet purely motivated by a desire to manipulate others to satisfy her own desires. She may even be quite nice in how she goes about doing this. 'Niceness' (as distinct from compassion) is often behavior unconsciously motivated by an egocentric concern to manipulate others to act in a way that confirms one's self-image.[49] Social participation may simply be an opportunity to engage in egocentric behaviors.

Once this point is recognized – that there is no necessary correlation between social isolation and egoism – the egoism or altruism of a course of action is best evaluated in relation to the character of the individual. For example, if a person tends to be highly egocentric in her relationships with others, solitude may undermine her egocentric tendencies (or at least give those tendencies less occasion to be acted out in harmful ways). Likewise, abandoning community involvement may be an extremely uncomfortable, non-ego gratifying experience for some individuals. Again, solitariness per se is not an indication of egoism or an indication of its absence, except in the sense that most human behavior (solitary and communal) is marked by egocentric concern.

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the cause for "the eight kinds of discursive thought (*vikalpa*) [that] arise for immature beings." Among these eight are "discursive thought concerning 'I'" and "discursive thought concerning 'mine.'" 'I' and 'mine' are in turn the "root" of various "views," including egoism. Willis, *On Knowing Reality*, p. 167.

48. It is important to emphasize that the issue here concerns a 'paradigmatic model' or ideal of Buddhism, and not actual practice. In practice, few Buddhists have ever followed the path of the completely solitary renouncer.

49. The egocentric, manipulative nature of 'niceness' is reflected in the typically hostile emotional response to those who fail to reciprocate our own 'nice' behavior.

Williams misunderstands Buddhist independence in another sense: he fails to appreciate the significance of independence as a religious ideal of Indian renouncer traditions. Williams is correct that independence plays a role in Buddhism, especially early Buddhism. He errs when he claims that independence is what essentially characterizes the path and goal. The Buddhist path is first and foremost concerned with the elimination of suffering through insight (*prajñā*) into the insubstantial and unsatisfactory nature of 'things.' Once unsatisfactoriness is directly 'seen,' craving (the cause of suffering) naturally ceases. Williams understands this,[50] yet he does not situate independence within the general framework of Buddhist soteriology.

Buddhists maintain that clinging to conditioned, temporary things causes suffering. Liberation from suffering (the Buddhist goal) naturally involves realizing a state that is unconditioned—*not* dependent on anything in the world. (In Western, monotheistic traditions, this corresponds with orienting one's life to God rather than the world.) Buddhism's therapeutic orientation establishes 'the unconditioned' as the Buddhist's ultimate value or concern. If the unconditioned is what (ideally) matters, then the feeling tone and quality of experience should reflect that religious commitment. Emotional upset, following in the wake of concerns about conditioned things and experiences, manifests a person's alienation from the unconditioned; it constitutes a type of existential/behavioral atheism (regardless of a person's religious convictions).

The path of the Indian renouncer (or Christian ascetic) involves acting in opposition to the conditions that define one's separation from the unconditioned. It involves, for example, embracing discomfort (asceticism) for the purpose of purifying consciousness of the conceptual associations that define 'the good' in conditional terms (and therefore deny the true 'good' that is by definition unconditional). The Buddhist ideal of independence functions in a similar way. If the conditions that influence emotional life are associated with worldly involvement, the natural, Buddhist course of action (having embraced the unconditioned as a goal) is to renounce the world—to engage in behavior directly opposed to the conditions identified with one's predicament in *saṃsāra*. In Christianity, such renunciation is exemplified by the early Desert Fathers, who recognized that anxiety about the world and faith in God are mutually exclusive concerns. They therefore took a similar path as the solitary or semi-solitary yogi. In the Indian context, solitariness serves an additional function. In Indian meditative traditions, recognizing the unconditioned requires the ability to stabilize one's mind in meditative concentration. Minimizing worldly involvement diminishes worldly concerns, which in turn makes it easier to calm the mind and advance in meditation.[51]

Solitude (the cultivation of independence) is part of a path to realizing the unconditioned. It is not necessarily egocentric, and given Buddhist presuppositions, its efficacy as a means of realizing *nirvāṇā* makes sense. This does not mean

50. For lucid summations of the Buddhist view, see Williams, *Unexpected Way*, pp. 26–27, 60.

51. See, for example, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8.86–89 in Crosby and Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, pp. 95–96.

that there is a *necessary* relation between seeking social isolation and becoming liberated. Detachment ultimately has nothing to do with whether one is 'in the world' or not (to paraphrase Kṛṣṇa in the *Gita*, one may be 'in the world' and at the same time utterly detached, dedicating the fruits of one's actions to God). But from a pragmatic perspective, much of what defines the contours of the ego is acted out and perpetuated through one's interactions with others. Solitariness therefore becomes a Buddhist value, regardless of one's potential to realize detachment in any situation. Given the logic of Buddhist independence, Williams' critique is misguided. Not only is there no inherent association between independence and egoism, independence functions as part of a path leading to the cessation of egoism.

Williams' critique is not restricted to independence as a Buddhist value. Independence is also associated with the goal of Buddhism— *nirvāṇā*. Attaining *nirvāṇā* involves realizing the unconditioned, and a consequence of this realization is independence from the world. Since *nirvāṇā* seems to entail a state of isolation and noninvolvement with others, Williams concludes that *nirvāṇā* is egoistic.

Williams' conclusion reflects an incomplete understanding of Buddhist independence. The liberated person is 'independent' in the sense that she does not emotionally react to conditions based on their apparent implications for the survival or well being of the self. From a Buddhist perspective, she has realized the unconditioned, and this realization establishes the meaning and emotional contours of her experience. Independence therefore has no necessary correlation with being socially isolated (or not) or enjoying things in the world (or not). On the other hand, there is a necessary correlation between independence and how one relates to others (on those occasions when one is socially engaged). Far from reflecting egocentric concern, Buddhists would argue that the independence of the liberated person is the basis for a genuine capacity to cherish and appreciate others, as well the foundation for ethical behavior. The liberated, independent person is not busily trying to manipulate her environment and other people to meet her own needs. Neither does she require others to confirm her self-image. The liberated person has realized a state of wholeness and is therefore free of subtle/unconscious or conscious agendas to use others. This wholeness manifests as a non-defensive, open posture toward others, which in turn becomes the occasion for greater empathy and compassion. Spontaneous and uncontrived service to others is the natural result of such an attitude. Far from encouraging egoism, independence promotes altruistic attitudes and behavior.

4 Buddhism and Morality

Williams claims that Buddhism promotes immorality.[52] He supports this view through a deductive argument. He distinguishes subjectivist and objec-

52. To my knowledge, Williams does not directly state that Buddhists are immoral. The claim, however, is unambiguously implied by his contention that morality can only be based on God (see Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 59). If this is true, then Buddhists – as atheists – are necessarily immoral.

tivist belief systems and makes logical conclusions about how each system affects behavior. Williams reasons that the Buddhist's subjectivist orientation toward her own experience would tend to exclude consideration of other persons (especially given the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, which entails that other persons do not ultimately exist). Buddhist subjectivism also provides no basis for establishing objective moral standards. Buddhism must therefore encourage immorality. Williams contrasts Buddhist immorality with the effects of objectivism on behavior. The Christian's objectivist orientation to God and other persons inspires moral behavior through the encounter with the objective Other/other. More importantly for Williams, an objective God can reveal his will and guidance through scripture and through his Church. In other words, an objective God serves as the foundation for objective moral law. According to Williams, morality requires such an objective foundation because moral law is contingent.

Observation suggests immediate problems with this analysis. Some objectivist Catholic priests may be highly moral while others sexually molest children; some subjectivist Buddhist teachers may sexually and financially exploit their students while others are genuinely dedicated to serving their students' spiritual needs. Examples of moral heroism and moral depravity may be found within both Christian and Buddhist communities. If Williams is correct that there are correlations between (1) subjectivism and immorality, and (2) objectivism and morality, these correlations are not necessary. Williams' explanation of morality appears to significantly oversimplify the relationship between religious belief systems and behavior.

This point notwithstanding, Williams would presumably argue that Buddhists *as a whole* are less moral than Christians. Williams repeatedly emphasizes that Buddhists are solipsists immersed in their own private subjectivity, unable to contact the objective Other/other or objective moral law. If Williams is right, examples of Buddhist immorality and Christian moral heroism should be plentiful, and we should likewise find that non-Buddhists as a whole are significantly more moral than Buddhists, since the common sense, intuitive ontology of virtually all people is objectivist.

Observation does not support Williams' position. There does not seem to be any significant difference between Christian and Buddhist behavior when considered from a moral perspective. Periods, movements, and/or individuals within each tradition may be compared and possibly evaluated as more or less moral. But in a general sense, no consistent pattern emerges regarding the relative morality or immorality of Buddhists and Christians. As John Hick notes, "There is no one religion whose adherents stand out as morally and spiritually superior to the rest of the human race."[53] Williams believes there is strong correlation between type of belief system (subjectivist or objectivist) and type of behavior (immoral or moral). However, Christian objectivists and Buddhist subjectivists are more or less equally moral (or equally immoral). Williams' subjectivist-objectivist dichotomy provides an inadequate conceptual framework for understanding morality.

53. Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, p. xxvi.

4.1 Buddhism and the cause of immorality

Neither morality nor immorality is adequately explained using Williams' subjectivist-objectivist dichotomy. It would seem unwise, then, to use these categories to analyze Buddhism's moral implications. A more promising approach to Buddhist morality begins by considering the general relationships among common sense realism, egoism, and morality.

As discussed above, virtually all people (regardless of religious affiliation) are common sense realists and (therefore) egoistic. This point clarifies the causal conditions of morality. Egoism is loosely correlated with immorality. Egoism does not necessarily entail behavior that overtly harms others, but it does increase the likelihood that a person will behave immorally. Egoistic self-concern limits one's capacity to consider the well being of others and therefore increases the likelihood of harmful behavior. In contrast, an absence of self-concern enhances one's capacity for empathy, increasing the likelihood that a person behaves with kindness and compassion. I argued in a previous section that Buddhism has the potential to undermine egoism: its doctrines and practices undermine the factors (associated with common sense realism) that support egoism. If Buddhism undermines egoism, it must also promote moral behavior.

4.2 Anātman and morality

According to Williams, the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (no-self) has particularly problematic effects on behavior. Williams argues that ethical action requires recognizing "the primacy and irreducible uniqueness of the person."[54] The Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* denies the self's primacy, if not its "irreducible uniqueness" as well. Buddhists believe that other persons do not ultimately exist. A non-existent person obviously can not be granted primacy. Williams concludes that *anātman* encourages immorality.

Williams' objections are reasonable. If others do not really exist, why care about them? And *who* exactly is doing the caring? These objections notwithstanding, there are plausible reasons to doubt Williams' conclusions concerning the moral consequences of *anātman*. An argument in favor of *anātman's* positive moral implications is suggested by the correlation between (1) a person's lack of concern for others, and (2) the probability that person will behave immorally toward others. (In other words, I am more likely to harm those I do not care about.) This lack of concern for others may be a consequence of excessive self-concern. Self-concern is established in dependence on a self. The doctrine of *anātman* (*no*-self) undermines belief in a self. It therefore undermines self-concern, a cause of immorality. From a Buddhist perspective, when *anātman* is recognized (not as a concept, but through direct insight), the foundation of self-concern is eliminated. There is no 'person' to protect, no self to serve as the basis of self-regarding interests and behaviors. With awareness no longer absorbed on personal concerns,

54. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 203. In *Altruism and Reality*, Williams makes a weaker argument. He asserts that *anātman* does not necessarily undermine egoism. See n. 23 above where I comment on Williams' reasoning.

the practitioner realizes an unguarded, open posture toward others. The *bodhisattva* is not busy reiterating and defending an identity and therefore becomes uniquely sensitive to the suffering of others. This sensitivity naturally inspires compassionate activity on behalf of others. True, Buddhists would maintain that persons do not ultimately exist. But an enlightened perspective does not preclude an awareness of persons as conventionally real loci of ignorance and suffering. Compassion and moral behavior are therefore compatible with the knowledge that the 'self' who suffers does not ultimately exist.

Mahāyāna sources reflect an awareness of the paradox of compassion by and for non-existent persons. According to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, "a bodhisattva . . . leads countless . . . beings to nirvāṇā. And yet there is no being who is lead to nirvāṇā, nor is anybody lead to nirvāṇā by anyone."[55] This paradox, however, does not alter Buddhist expectations that persons should behave morally toward others.[56] Buddhists may try to explain this paradox or simply accept it *as* a paradox (perhaps in the same spirit that Christians accept their own "divine mysteries"[57]). In either case, paradox does not compromise the necessity of a compassionate attitude and compassionate behavior. Given pervasive egoism, Buddhists (as a whole) will be no more compassionate than any other group. But an absence of compassion among Buddhists is not caused by the philosophical paradox of compassion for non-existent persons.

4.3 Buddhist morality and the 'contingency' of moral law

Williams claims that Buddhism is unable to provide a foundation for moral behavior because moral law or order is contingent. According to Williams, moral law is contingent because there is no necessary connection between goodness and happiness. As he puts it, "There is no contradiction involved in good deeds not producing happiness."[58] Because moral law is contingent, it is rational to consider God the non-contingent basis of moral law. The Buddhist, on the other hand, rejects the existence of God and therefore "must want to claim that it just happens to be the case . . . that things exhibit a certain order and part of that order is moral order."[59] Williams implies that this constitutes a significant weakness in the Buddhist view. Buddhism, because it denies (according to Williams) a non-contingent foundation of some kind, fails to provide a basis of moral action.

Williams' conclusion that Buddhism lacks an objective, moral foundation is based on the claim that moral law is contingent. This claim, however, is problematic. First, the fact that a possibility is not logically contradictory proves nothing about possibilities in the world. There is no logically necessary reason why logical possibilities correspond with real-world possibilities. Perhaps it

55. R. C. Jamieson, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom, Extracts from the Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* (New York, NY: Viking Studion, 2000), p. 24.

56. See, for example, Jamieson, *Perfection of Wisdom*, pp. 67–68.

57. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, pp. 146, 167.

58. Ibid., p. 41.

59. Ibid., p. 42.

is true that there is no inherent logical contradiction in the idea that goodness could lead to suffering. This in no way constitutes evidence concerning the actual relationship between morality and happiness. Second, there are strong arguments in favor of a necessary relationship between morality and happiness, i.e., arguments that moral law is not contingent. A major tenet of Buddhism is that clinging and attachment lead to suffering. Buddhists emphasize this connection in relation to the changing and unstable nature of things in the world. Since clinging ('I want . . . ', 'I need . . . ') is necessarily a form of self-interest, self-interest is identifiable with suffering. The corollary of this point is that there is a necessary correlation between detachment (cultivating attitudes and behaviors that run counter to self-interest) and happiness. This constitutes an argument for the non-contingent nature of moral law. It also indicates that Williams is mistaken when he claims that moral order from a Buddhist perspective "just happens to be the case."[60]

4.4 Summing up: Buddhism and morality

Williams' correlation of Buddhism with immorality is unconvincing. Immorality is not rooted in religious belief systems (Buddhist or otherwise), however much a religion might be conformed (consciously or unconsciously) to egocentric agendas and used to justify immoral actions. The underlying cause of immorality is the egoism resulting from the objectivism of common sense realism, which naturally motivates self-serving behavior. In opposition to the egocentric (and therefore immoral) tendencies resulting from common sense realism, Buddhist doctrine and practice has the potential to undermine egoism and thereby promote moral behavior.

5 The Rationality of Buddhist Agnosticism

Williams' critique of Buddhism goes beyond the negative moral implications of Buddhist subjectivism. He is also suspicious of the rationality of Buddhist agnosticism. While he states that both theism and Buddhist agnosticism are rational responses to common philosophical problems or facts about the human predicament,[61] his analysis seems intended to demonstrate a degree of irrationality in the Buddhist position, particularly when contrasted with what he considers the eminent rationality of theism.

Williams defends his conversion to Christianity in part by arguing that theism is rational.[62] By defending Christian rationality, he responds to a common, quasi-popular view that Buddhism is the 'rational' religion while Christianity is faith-based and therefore (relatively speaking) less rational. Williams' argument for the rationality of theism is based on the claim that the world, moral law,

60. Ibid., p. 42.
61. Ibid., pp. 32–33.
62. Ibid., p. 18.

and causal order are all contingent.[63] According to Williams, there is no logical contradiction implied by the possibility that the world could have been other than what it is. Therefore, the world could *in fact* have been other than what it is. Williams then reasons that it is rational, given the world's contingent nature, to ask: "Why is there something rather than nothing?"[64] Furthermore, why are things the particular way they are? According to Williams, the logical explanation for the existence of contingent being is non-contingent Being (God).[65] Theism, then, is a rational response to (and explanation for) the world and its contingent nature.

As noted above, Williams accepts the rationality of agnosticism (Buddhist or otherwise).[66] Faced with the contingent nature of the world, the Buddhist may rationally choose to leave the cause of the world unexplained. Williams seems to imply, however, that the theistic option is more rational than the agnostic. The theist rationally chooses to 'explain' the existence of the world with reference to non-contingent Being. Buddhist agnosticism, in contrast, leaves an "explanatory gap" with respect to the origin of the world.[67] While it may be rational to simply accept this gap, for Williams it is unsatisfying. According to Williams, "The existence of anything at all is something that demands an explanation."[68] Theism responds to this demand. Buddhism, on the other hand, remains silent. Williams suggests that this silence entails an inadequacy in the Buddhist perspective.

Williams notes two possible Buddhist responses to his critique. First, Buddhists claim that metaphysical speculation (e.g., speculation about non-contingent Being) is irrational because it is non-conducive to the alleviation of suffering.[69] Williams points out that the Buddhist rejection of metaphysical speculation is irrelevant to Christianity. Given Christian doctrine about the nature of God, it is impossible that God could be considered irrelevant to human life and salvation.[70] The Buddhist rejection of metaphysical speculation (which is rational in a Buddhist context) does not apply to Christianity. Second, some Buddhists might claim that they do, in fact, explain the world with reference to an ultimately real Mind.[71] In response, Williams argues that the term 'Mind' denotes thoughts or mental acts, which make this Mind contingent.[72] According to Williams, a contingent Mind cannot be considered an acceptable explanation of a contingent world. Contingent being can only be adequately explained with reference to what is non-contingent—and that is God.

63. Ibid., pp. 28, 40–41.
64. Ibid., pp. 27–28.
65. Ibid., pp. 31–33.
66. Ibid., pp. 32–33.
67. Ibid., p. 19.
68. Ibid., p. 29.
69. Ibid., p. 32. The Parable of the Poison Arrow in the *Cūla-mālunkya-sutta* (from the *Majjhima-nikāya*) is perhaps the most well known statement of the Buddhist position on metaphysical speculation. For one translation, see Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974 [c1959]), pp. 13–14.
70. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, pp. 26, 32, 71.
71. Ibid., p. 30.
72. Ibid., p. 30.

5.1 Rationality and theism

Williams questions Buddhist rationality by juxtaposing Christian vs. Buddhist responses to the contingency of the world. Buddhist agnosticism is found to be irrational when contrasted with the rationality of theism. Williams' arguments for the rationality of theism, however, are questionable. First, there are good reasons to doubt the claim that the world is in fact contingent. Williams' argument for the contingency of the world is based on a questionable deduction, i.e., because there is no logical contradiction implied by the possibility that the world could have been other than it is, the world *in fact* could have been other than the way it is. Therefore, the way the world actually is requires explanation, and the only rational explanation of contingent being is non-contingent Being (God). However, as I have pointed out above, logical possibilities have no necessary correlation with actual possibilities. The observation that there is no logical contradiction in the possibility that the world could have been other than it is does not constitute evidence that the world could in fact have been other than it is. From the perspective of common sense, alternative possible worlds may seem to be actual possibilities (and I assume this is consistent with a scientific perspective as well). But in this case, common sense is misleading since there is no necessary relation between the logical possibility of alternative worlds and the actual possibility of alternative worlds.

The intuitive, common sense impression that the world could have been different than the way it is may be juxtaposed with the Buddhist position on this issue. In Buddhism, common sense is often synonymous with ignorance and delusion. At the level of ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*), the world as it appears is an illusion.[73] 'Things' in the world have no being or essence as things. At the same time, illusory appearances are non-distinct from suchness (*tathatā*) or emptiness. In Nāgārjuna's classic formulation, "Samsara does not have the slightest distinction from Nirvana. Nirvana does not have the slightest distinction from Samsara."[74] This non-distinction between conventional and ultimate reality (i.e., between ordinary appearances and emptiness) entails that the world is non-contingently related to ultimate reality. If false appearances are indistinct from ultimate reality, then the form of those appearances is necessary. From this perspective, appearances are non-contingent. Since Buddhists reject Williams' presuppositions, his analysis of Buddhist rationality is both inaccurate and irrelevant from a Buddhist perspective. According to Williams, the existence of the world presents a problem because of its contingent nature. The rationality of

73. See, for example, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.5–6 in Crosby and Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, p. 115.

74. *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*, 25.19, in Stephen Batchelor, trans., *Verses from the Centre* [the *Mūlamadhyamakākarikā* by Nāgārjuna] (2000), `http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/verses2.htm#Investigation%20of%20Nirvana` (accessed September 23, 2007). The identification of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇā* is a philosophical challenge with soteriological implications, not a reduction of the sacred to the profane. See, for example, Malcolm David Eckel, review of *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Religion*, by Dan Arnold, *H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews* (March, 2007), p. 4, `http://www.h{}-net.org/reviews/showpdf.cgi?path=285081178648981` (accessed October 24, 2007).

theism consists in providing an answer to this problem. For Buddhists, however, there is no 'problem' in this sense. First, the world (as a collection of discrete things) has no being that requires explaining. Second, the appearance of a world is itself non-contingent.

Even if things do not ultimately exist, false appearances do in fact occur, i.e., they are conventionally real (*saṃvṛtisatya*). How do Buddhists explain the arising of such false appearances? As Williams notes, Buddhists generally attribute false appearances to conceptual construction (*vikalpa*); it is the mind's own conceptualizing, constructive activity that creates the illusory appearances of inherently existing things. Buddhists, it would seem, are at least partially correct about this. The difference between the perception of an infant and the perception of an adult may be attributed to the adult's categories and concepts that mediate and construct the adult's perception. An infant (presumably) does not perceive 'things'; prior to acquiring an extensive inventory of concepts, she experiences indeterminate color patches, tactile pressures, etc., none of which are interpreted as 'color patches' or 'tactile sensations.'

Though the claim that concepts play some role in constructing appearances appears indisputable, conceptual construction is inadequate as a complete explanation of appearances. If appearances were entirely the result of conceptual construction, what mechanism determines the ordered application of particular concepts to particular stimuli? The fact that concepts are applied to stimuli in ordered and regular patterns (generating, in turn, ordered and regular appearances) suggests that conceptual construction must be constrained by information conveyed by the *noumenal*. In other words, appearances of things arise through the combined influence of an ontological foundation and mental construction.

Though most Buddhist traditions seem to rely on mental construction as the primary explanation of ordinary appearances (justifying Williams' claim that Buddhism suffers from an explanatory gap), some Buddhist traditions explain appearances in relation to an ultimately real 'basis' or 'ground.' The Dzogchen (*rdzogs-pa chen-po*, 'Great Perfection') tradition of Tibetan Buddhism is a notable example. According to Dzogchen,[75] the experiential field of ordinary persons – objectified as 'self' and 'things' in a so-called 'world' – constitutes a collapsed symmetry transformation of 'the ground' (*gzhi*) or (as Guenther translates it) 'Being.' Guenther describes this symmetry transformation as a "crystallization" of Being's unfolding "creativity, play, and ornamentation."[76] Being's evolutionary potential includes the possibility of its own self-occlusion (ignorance), which manifests as a dualistic experiential context in which Being's meaningfulness is suppressed through the objectification of its qualities as 'self,' 'entities' and 'world.' This objectification is associated with the mind's constructive activity, though in an ultimate sense, mental construction (like everything) is an expression of Being's qualities and dynamics.[77]

75. I rely here on Herbert Guenther's interpretation of the tradition.

76. Herbert Guenther, *From Reductionism to Creativity: rDzogs-chen and the New Sciences of Mind* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), p. 193.

77. Guenther's entire corpus of work on Dzogchen is recommended. Selections from

As noted above, Williams alludes to this explanation. He refers to Buddhist claims about an ultimate Mind as the source of phenomenal appearances. He rejects the rationality of this explanation because 'Mind' implies mental events, and such events (he insists) must be contingent. He concludes that the contingent world cannot be explained by a contingent Mind. Though his reasoning is logical, Williams' objection is misplaced. Within the major world religions, naming ultimate reality is often considered problematic. Given the inadequacy of any term for ultimate reality, religions commonly rely on evocative and metaphoric language to refer to it. Ordinarily, 'mind' entails mental events. But this is not an ordinary context. This is another groping attempt by members of a religion to talk about what cannot be talked about. For some Buddhists, the term 'Mind' evokes a sense of what they consider ultimately real. Identifying Mind with 'contingent mental events' misconstrues the significance of Mind in a Buddhist context.

6 Buddhism as Pessimistic

Williams finds Buddhism excessively pessimistic. He acknowledges that Buddhism is optimistic in relation to its own presuppositions. As he puts it, Buddhism "show[s] a way out of the infinite series of rebirths;"[78] from a Buddhist perspective, it shows a way to eliminate suffering. For Williams, however, this optimism is outweighed by the pessimistic aspects of Buddhism—a pessimism exacerbated when Buddhism is contrasted with what Williams considers the optimistic outlook of Christianity. Williams emphasizes this difference as another reason he eventually chose Christianity over Buddhism. Williams' remarks seem intended to have more general implications: Buddhist pessimism is one more reason why Christianity is superior to Buddhism.

The claim that Buddhism is pessimistic is both common and understandable. Suffering is one of the Three Marks that characterizes all conditioned phenomena. Williams describes a Buddhist teacher who, looking out over the beautiful English countryside, sees only "death and destruction."[79] In addition, the goal of Buddhism assumes a pessimistic outlook, since *nirvāṇā* involves escape from a pervasively unsatisfactory world. Williams finds the Buddhist understanding of the ultimate fate of the individual person especially pessimistic.[80] The person who dies unenlightened is simply gone, since that particular stream of mental events (formerly known, for example, as 'Williams') reincarnates as an entirely different person or perhaps an entirely different life form (e.g., a cockroach in Peru). From

his work that discuss Being's unfoldment as 'world' include: Guenther, *From Reductionism to Creativity*, pp. 6–7, 189–193; Herbert Guenther, *Wholeness Lost and Wholeness Regained: Forgotten Tales of Individuation from Ancient Tibet* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 85, 90, 114; Herbert Guenther, *The Creative Vision: The Symbolic Recreation of the World According to the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition of Tantric Visualization Otherwise Known as The Developing Phase* (Novato, CA: Lotsawa, 1987), pp. 4–5. See also Jeremy Hayward, Foreword to Guenther, *From Reductionism to Creativity*, p. xiii.

78. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 20.

79. Ibid., p. 49.

80. Ibid., p. 15.

the Buddhist perspective, as Williams puts it, "this life will be the end for me and for all my loved ones. ... If Buddhism is right then finally ... our little lives count for virtually nothing."[81] Buddhist 'hopelessness' is even more extreme than Williams seems to recognize. According to Buddhists, enlightenment constitutes the extinction of individual identity. After enlightenment, the appearance of an individual personality may remain to external observers. But for the enlightened, any identification with individual identity has been extinguished. The fate of the individual is hopeless not only for the person who dies unenlightened. It is also hopeless for the enlightened (non-)person.

Williams contrasts this Buddhist pessimism with Christian optimism. From the Christian perspective, God created a good world—an optimistic belief clearly opposed to the Buddhist emphasis on suffering. In addition, the Christian view of the person is optimistic. In Christianity, unlike Buddhism, there is hope for the individual person as well as hope for all the people that person loves. According to Christianity, the individual person is valuable. And the Christian herself will live on in eternity along with her family and loved ones (assuming they are Christians).

Williams' comments on Buddhist pessimism face several objections. As I think Williams would concede, the pertinent issue concerning the First Noble Truth is its accuracy. If the First Noble Truth is true, it can hardly be considered pessimistic, especially if recognizing its truth constitutes the basis of attaining liberation from suffering. As far as I can tell, there is no way to adjudicate the question beyond individual subjective experience,[82] and therefore the point is non-debatable. One's individual experience in relation to this issue makes comparative assessments of pessimism and optimism almost irrelevant. From my perspective, the First Noble Truth seems true, and therefore it is rational for me to adopt it.[83] There is death and destruction (as well as beauty) in the English countryside, however much this realization may run counter to the tendency to romanticize and sentimentalize certain appearances (a tendency that Buddhists believe supports delusion and suffering).[84]

For Williams, Buddhist pessimism is primarily reflected in its understanding of the fate of the person. Williams is correct up to a point. From a Buddhist perspective, there is no hope for the individual. Williams' personal aversion to this view is, of course, another non-debatable issue. But for Buddhists, Williams' aversion to losing his identity is the real problem. According to Buddhists, the concern to preserve one's personal identity is in part the cause of one's suffering.

81. Ibid., p. 19.

82. This is exactly the kind of epistemological problem that Williams believes accepting the 'objective' authority of the Church resolves. However, accepting any source of authority is still a choice one makes in the context of one's own subjectivity. In other words, assigning authority to any particular text, institution, or person falls within the domain of the subjective.

83. Unlike Williams, I have no epistemological objection to the possibility of accessing objective reality and objective truth through subjective experience.

84. In my case, I learned this from a biologist as we walked among magnificent California redwoods. "Death and destruction" weren't his exact words, but they come pretty close.

The serious Buddhist practitioner would (in theory) recognize this. She would see how self-concern and attachment to the ego lead to suffering. She would also see how eradicating attachment to personal identity (among other things) eliminates suffering. Buddhists would argue that there is immense hopefulness in the claim that 'the self' can be extinguished. The corollary to this is that Christian 'optimism' is for Buddhists nothing more than self-delusion and unconscious masochism. Hoping to preserve one's personal identity is functionally equivalent to a desire to keep suffering. From the Buddhist perspective, Williams' optimism is a tragic form of ignorance that will only perpetuate his continued rebirth in *saṃsāra*.

In part, Williams attempts to support his argument for Buddhist pessimism by contrasting Buddhism with what he believes is the optimistic outlook of Christianity. 'Christian optimism,' however, is a debatable concept. From the orthodox Christian perspective, some significant portion of the human race will spend an eternity in hell.[85] The Christian gains the hope of personal and corporate bliss in heaven while millions, if not billions, suffer eternally. Christians as a group may enjoy the bliss of heaven, but this soteriological and eschatological scenario hardly seems optimistic for the human race at large. This may be contrasted with the Buddhist view that residence in a hell realm is not permanent (even if it may last for eons) and the view of at least some Buddhist traditions that all sentient beings have the potential to realize *nirvāṇā* and be free of suffering. Given these considerations, Buddhists might be forgiven for doubting Williams' claims regarding Christian optimism.

Williams tries to rationalize the extreme pessimism of the Christian doctrine of hell, but his arguments are unconvincing. He contends that hell is a free choice of the individual. According to him, there is perfect justice in God allowing people to choose hell if that is what they want. Is eternal suffering just punishment for a finite set of evil acts? From a Christian perspective, no human being asked to be created. Furthermore, human beings are created as limited and fallible creatures—it is impossible for human beings (given their limited cognitive powers) to grasp a consequence (hell) that lasts eternally. In addition, their will and capacity to choose the good are impaired as a consequence of original sin (which again, they are not responsible for), and their salvation, in some sense, is not even dependent on their choices but on God's grace. God, then, has placed human beings in a situation they did not ask for, with a very limited capacity for understanding, where they can potentially make a choice that will lead to their eternal damnation. Moreover, God knows (being omniscient) that many of his creatures *will* make that choice. How can such views be reconciled with a just moral order or a good and merciful God? How could a good God set up a situation in which eternal suffering is even possible, regardless of whether or not it is chosen by the individual? Williams asks the following: if a person repeatedly rejects God, at

85. See Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 230 n. 39, where Williams defends (based on Aquinas) the Christian doctrine of the eternity of hell. To his credit, Williams also entertains the entirely unorthodox view that everyone will eventually make it to heaven (Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 98).

what point is God justified in accepting that rejection?[86] The obvious answer to that question (and the only answer consistent with the goodness of God) is never. If God created me, I am (according to Williams) infinitely valuable.[87] As a human being, I exist in a condition of ignorance and sinfulness—to paraphrase Jesus, 'I know not what I do.' Given these circumstances, how could God *ever* accept my rejection and give up on me? The Christian doctrine of eternal damnation is so extremely pessimistic that the Buddhist First Noble Truth pales by comparison.

7 Concluding Remarks

Williams' claims about Buddhism are, in various ways, false or problematic. There is no self-evident justification for the claim that Buddhist subjectivism prevents the realization of objective truth or objective reality. Neither does Buddhism promote egoism and immorality. To the degree that its teachings are internalized and its practices engaged, Buddhism has the potential to undermine egoism and promote compassion and altruistic behavior. Finally, Buddhism is not irrational or excessively pessimistic (especially when compared to Christianity). As a Buddhologist, Williams is in a unique position to articulate a persuasive Christian critique of Buddhism. Williams fails to present such a critique. Though some Christians may find it convenient to view Buddhism as egoistic and immoral, this convenience is gained at the cost of an accurate understanding of Buddhism.

Williams' mistakes about Buddhism are relevant to Buddhist-Christian comparative studies. Williams insists on the radical dissimilarity of the traditions. He can hardly make a strong case for Christianity's superiority to Buddhism if Buddhism and Christianity are not fundamentally different. Williams' interpretation of Buddhism, however, is mistaken in several important respects. If Williams is wrong about Buddhism, might he also be wrong about the dissimilarity of the Buddhist and Christian traditions?

Buddhism and Christianity are, of course, very different. One posits the existence of a personal, omnipotent, benevolent, divine Creator while the other denies such a Creator exists. From a Buddhist perspective, reality is a field of interdependence, empty of any self-existent entity. Such doctrinal differences, however, do not necessarily exclude a deeper commonality. Buddhists and Christians – as human beings – find themselves common believers in the implicit objectivism of common sense realism. Both Buddhists and Christians experience themselves as real selves in a real world; they anticipate (while trying to avoid) eventual death. This situation naturally encourages strong tendencies toward self-regard and self-concern, and in the wake of that self-concern arise the desires and attachments that motivate our frantic attempt to be safe and 'manage life' in response to our vulnerability.

Both Buddhism and Christianity (through the influence of their core doctrines and practices) have the potential to transform this egocentric orientation – to develop the selfless, non-localized perspective of the saint or *bodhisattva*.

86. Williams, *Unexpected Way*, p. 80.
87. Ibid., p. 19.

Through different doctrinal systems, both Christianity and Buddhism undermine egoism. In Christianity, only God, not the self, matters. In Buddhism, only *nirvāṇā* matters, and attaining *nirvāṇā* requires following a path that runs counter to the immediate gratification of the ego. Though 'God' and '*nirvāṇā*' are different concepts, both encourage reversal of concern away from the self and an investment of concern in something entirely 'other.'

Ultimately, both traditions orient the believer toward the unknown. From the believer's perspective, the postulated referents of the terms 'God' or '*nirvāṇā*' are not concepts. Authentic encounter with God or realization of *nirvāṇā* therefore demands (at some point) going beyond concepts and images. This orientation to mystery nurtures a state of consciousness diametrically opposed to the ordinary processes of the mind that establish the self/ego in a so-called 'world.' (This is true regardless of whether or not God exists or *nirvāṇā* is a realizable goal.) Ordinary consciousness functions in dependence on the known. Both traditions, in their own ways, direct the believer to a state of unknowing—a state where the mind is pacified and emptied of the concepts that construct 'self' and 'world.' In this empty/open state, the interdependent system of factors that hold in place the ordinary, egocentric perspective unravels, allowing an evolutionary potential within consciousness to express itself. Both traditions, then, orient attention away from 'self' and 'world' and toward an unknown referent. Both have the potential to transform consciousness through this self-negating, open orientation. Both traditions share a deep, existential commonality that may ultimately outweigh the significance of their philosophical and doctrinal differences.

My primary goal in this article has been to correct some of Williams' mistakes about Buddhism. I hope my comments about Buddhism have broader, more general implications. Given the ordinary, egocentric orientation of human beings, the moment by moment choice to define the meaning of life in relation to a sacred reality – whether God, *nirvāṇā*, Brahman, or the Tao – forges a strong connection across religious traditions. This commonality is existentially significant. When comparing religious traditions, it is perhaps more significant than the doctrinal differences exclusivists tend to cherish and defend.