
Reflections on Kant and Karma

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ABSTRACT

Adding to growing debate about the role of rebirth in Buddhist ethics, Dale S. Wright has recently advocated distinguishing and distancing the concept of karma from that of rebirth. In this paper, I evaluate Wright's arguments in the light of Immanuel Kant's views about supernatural beliefs. Although Kant is a paradigmatic Enlightenment critic of metaphysical speculation and traditional dogmas, he also offers thought-provoking practical arguments in favor of adopting supernatural (theistic) beliefs. In the light of Kant's views, I argue we can assuage most of Wright's worries about the traditional concept of rebirth and better identify the outstanding philosophic questions on which the debate between traditionalists and reformers rests. I conclude by expressing doubts about whether the karma controversy can be settled at a general level; I argue that it can be adequately discussed and resolved only within particular Buddhist traditions.

INTRODUCTION

In line with growing skepticism about the necessity of retaining the concept of rebirth in Buddhist ethics, Dale S. Wright has recently advocated distinguishing and distancing the Buddhist concept of karma from that of rebirth; Wright thinks we should develop and adopt a *rebirth independent concept of karma* (“RIK” for short).¹ In so doing, Wright opposes traditionalists who defend the importance and viability of the traditional doctrine of rebirth, and, by extension, a *unified concept of karma and rebirth* (“KAR” for short).² Although sympathetic to Wright’s conclusions, I think traditionalists can assuage the specific worries that Wright raises about KAR, and that advocates of RIK, such as Wright and me, face challenges of our own. In this paper, I aim to show how these conclusions follow from reflection on (Western) Enlightenment debates about theistic supernatural beliefs, in particular Immanuel Kant’s arguments in favor of such beliefs. In short, I argue that the debate between traditionalists and reformers cannot be settled by general considerations, like those of which Wright makes use, because the debate hinges on philosophic issues that are a matter of debate between and within different Buddhist traditions.

The discussion that follows is divided into four parts. In parts I and II, I distinguish three types of reason one can provide for or against a supernatural belief, and roughly sketch Kant’s *practical* arguments in favor of adopting beliefs of that type. In part III, I evaluate some of the worries

Wright has recently advanced about KAR, and reconsider his critical questions in the light of Kant's arguments. Finally, in part V and my conclusion, I summarize my conclusions about Wright's arguments and briefly explain why I doubt there can be a *general* solution to the debate about karma.

I

Wright's recommendation—that we should remain agnostic about rebirth and develop and adopt RIK—is based on his discussion of four critical questions about the traditional doctrine (i.e., KAR). For the most part, Wright's reasons for rejecting KAR are *practical*, rather than empirical or philosophic (Wright 2005:89-91). In this respect, his arguments *against* supernatural beliefs are similar to Kant's arguments *in favor of* supernatural beliefs; Kant's are also based on practical, not philosophic or empirical, reasons. Before looking at their arguments, I will briefly characterize these three types of reasons.

Empirical reasons for adopting or retaining a belief are provided by empirical evidence that the belief is true. The following empirical reasons, for example, could be used to construct an argument in favor of belief in rebirth: (a) there is evidence that some spiritually advanced practitioner has true beliefs about the past, (b) she claims that her beliefs are a result of direct insight into her past lives, and (c) there is evidence ruling out each plausible alternative explanation of how she has the relevant information about the past.³

Philosophic reasons to adopt or retain a belief are provided by demonstrations that the belief is true in virtue of conceptual truths. In other words, philosophic reasons are based on what one might call “conceptual evidence.” A nice example of an argument (in favor of belief in rebirth) built on philosophic reasons is found in the Dalai Lama’s early work, *Opening The Eye of New Awareness* (Dalai Lama 1999:24-28). He there argues, very roughly, for the dualism of the mental and the physical on conceptual grounds, and then argues that, given some additional premises including the claim that mental effects must have mental causes, such dualism supports belief in rebirth.⁴

Finally, practical reasons for adopting or retaining a belief are provided by arguments that adoption or retention of the belief in question has significant practical (e.g., moral, ethical, or prudential) consequences. In other words, arguments that appeal to practical reasons rest on claims about whether *having* the relevant belief would be good or bad for believers or whether people ought to have or not have the belief. Two of the most famous practical arguments for theistic beliefs, for example, are Pascal’s wager and William James’s “will to believe” argument. These arguments are often understood as turning on the claim that it is good for people to have certain supernatural beliefs, in the sense that it would be prudent for people to have them. James, for example, is often taken as arguing that we should adopt supernatural religious beliefs because doing so is conducive to our mental health.⁵

In this paper, I will assume that the karma and rebirth debate cannot be settled by appeal to empirical or philosophical reasons. I do so in part because I think this assumption is common ground for many participants in the debate (especially by reformers, who favor RIK). Like Kant, most participants hold that belief in rebirth is *supernatural* and *metaphysical*⁶ precisely because it cannot be justified by empirical reasons (which typically justify beliefs about physical or natural aspects of the world) and, again like Kant, but perhaps for different reasons, they doubt that philosophic speculation can discover reasons that will settle metaphysical disputes.⁷ In any case, since Wright marshals practical reasons against KAR, even those who reject the assumption I am making have reason to be interested in my discussion.

Finally, before turning to Kant's practical arguments in favor of supernatural (theistic) beliefs, I note that empirical and philosophic arguments like the ones mentioned above could not, by themselves, convince us to adopt a conception of *karma* and rebirth. Although they purport to support belief in rebirth, they do not speak to the question of what determines the "quality" of one's next life.⁸ By way of contrast, the practical arguments we will consider do aim to support belief in KAR and to do so while accepting the assumption that supernatural beliefs cannot be adequately justified by appeal to empirical or philosophic reasons.

II

Kant's arguments for supernatural theistic beliefs, which occur most prominently in his first two *Critiques* and in his late work *Religion Within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*, are also practical in a broad sense, but have two distinct features. Kant argues, roughly, that we should adopt certain supernatural beliefs because, first, we have a moral obligation to pursue certain ends, and, second, pursuit of these ends is rational only if we have the relevant supernatural beliefs. The first distinctive feature lies in the fact that Kant offers an *independent* argument, i.e., one that does not depend on the theological beliefs in question, for the claim that we have a moral obligation to pursue certain ends; the second feature lies in the claim that it is (morally) *necessary* for us to pursue certain ends and that it is *necessary* that we adopt the beliefs. Sketching the argument in a bit more detail will help bring these features into better focus.

We can more fully summarize Kant's argument as follows: (1) because we are finite rational agents, we have a duty to be moral; (2) being moral involves commitment to realizing the highest good and perfecting our own moral character; and (3) intentional pursuit of the realization of the highest good and the perfection of our moral character is rational only if we have certain supernatural beliefs; therefore, (4) we should adopt the relevant supernatural beliefs.

To understand, let alone evaluate, this argument, one needs to understand what Kant means by "highest good"

and “moral perfection,” but before getting to that, I want to further highlight the *structure* of his argument. We can schematize the premises as follows: (1) because of R, we have a duty to be M; (2) being M necessarily involves commitment to H and P; (3) rational pursuit of a commitment to H and P is possible only if one adopts beliefs in set S. This skeletal restatement allows us to emphasize three points, one about each premise: (1) as mentioned above, the ground of the “should” in the first premise is independent of the supernatural beliefs mentioned in the conclusion; (2) commitment to the relevant ends (H and P) is a necessary aspect of being the way the first premise asserts we should be; (3) adoption of the beliefs in S is necessary for us to rationally pursue the ends identified in the second premise. In short, Kant argues we should adopt the beliefs because they are *necessary* for us to pursue ends which we must pursue in order to live up to an ideal we *should* live up to *for independent reasons*.

The first feature mentioned above—that Kant offers an independent argument for the claim that each and every human being has a duty to be moral—keeps his arguments from being circular.⁹ That is to say that he argues in favor of theistic supernatural beliefs without assuming any theological facts. The commitment to offering an independent argument for morality reflects Kant’s belief that morality is grounded in necessary, universal features of reason, *not* in religion or any contingent facts about human nature.¹⁰

The second feature mentioned—that Kant’s argument rests on claims about what is *necessary* for us to pursue and

believe—distinguishes his arguments from mere wishful thinking, i.e., thinking that leads us to believe something because doing so is part of one way of satisfying a want. In contrast to Kant's argument, wishful thinking rests on the fact that the relevant beliefs play a (often *replaceable*) role in realizing conditions that are sufficient, but often *not necessary*, for us to satisfy some want (where such satisfaction may not be something that we *must* attain). In short, wishful thinking lacks the rational necessity of Kant's argument.

With these features in mind, one naturally wonders what Kant's independent argument for morality is, and how he justifies his claims about necessity. For our purposes, however, these interesting questions are worth pursuing only if doing so will help shed light on Wright's contribution to the karma debate. With that criterion in mind, I suggest we put aside questions about Kant's independent argument, and focus on the question of why Kant thinks that, given a commitment to being moral, it is *necessary* for us to adopt certain supernatural beliefs.¹¹

Kant claims that pursuit of the highest good and the perfection of our moral character are morally *necessary*, and that rational pursuit of these ends *requires* us to adopt supernatural beliefs. In order to understand, at least roughly, why he makes these claims, we need to consider what Kant means by "highest good" and "moral perfection." To start with, we can roughly define the highest good as the state of affairs that is obtained when each person's happiness is *proportionate* to his or her degree of virtue. Interpreters dis-

agree about the details of Kant's view—for example, about whether Kant ran together two (secular and religious) conceptions of the highest good in his work—but we can safely leave such exegetical details aside; for our purposes, we can think of the highest good as a utopia in which the happiness one enjoys is proportional to the quality of one's moral or ethical character.¹² Thus, when Kant claims one is committed to promoting the realization of the highest good, he is claiming we have a duty with rich socio-political content.

In fact, Kant thinks this ideal state can be realized only if human beings *unify* by *voluntarily* reforming their religions, so that each one gives prominence to a pure, moral core, understood, roughly speaking, in accordance with Kant's moral philosophy.¹³ Bearing this in mind, one can begin to understand Kant's argument that intentional effort directed at realizing the highest good requires us to believe that God exists, that he will help the highest good to be realized, and that the correct proportion between happiness and virtue will be guaranteed by the assignment of just deserts in the afterlife:

Since by himself the human being cannot realize the idea of the supreme good inseparably bound up with the pure moral disposition, either with respect to the happiness which is part of that good or with respect to the union of the human beings necessary to fulfillment of the end, and yet there is also in him a duty to promote the idea, he finds

*himself driven to believe in the cooperation or the management of a moral ruler or the world, through which alone this end is possible.*¹⁴

Kant also thinks that we should adopt supernatural beliefs because we have a moral duty to try to perfect our moral character. To sketch what he means by this, we need to (very) roughly summarize what one might call Kant's theory of human nature. Basically, Kant thinks that, as a matter of natural necessity, each human being is motivated to pursue his or her own happiness, understood as a life that enjoys the largest ratio of pleasure to pain possible. He also thinks each human being is motivated, by reason alone, to be moral. Now Kant thinks that, at a most fundamental level, each human being either (1) wills to be moral *even if* being moral requires the sacrifice of his or her happiness, or (2) wills to be moral, but *only if* being moral does not conflict with pursuit of his or her happiness. In short, some people have a categorical commitment to morality, while others only have a contingent commitment to morality. From Kant's point of view, that is just to say that some people are actually moral, and others, who may appear to be moral (when morality and happiness dovetail in the right way), are actually immoral.

With this distinction in mind, we can roughly explain what Kant means by perfecting one's moral character. As mentioned, to be truly moral means to be categorically committed to morality at a fundamental level, but Kant doubts we can know ourselves well enough to know our fundamental

commitments.¹⁵ As a result, he thinks we have to make an effort to become so committed by regularly re-committing (in an ordinary sense) ourselves to morality and working to act as morality demands. Kant thinks that, at best, we might be able to see our behavior *improving* as a result of such efforts, and that that will provide some evidence for the positive moral quality of our fundamental commitment.

This is where the need to adopt supernatural beliefs comes in. Roughly, Kant thinks we need to believe that God exists to make it intelligible that someone can tell what our fundamental commitment is, and to believe that we can in principle become fully moral even if our lives are cut short or if we do not appear to be improving fast enough to have a chance to become perfectly moral. In the latter two cases, Kant invokes the Christian idea of grace, but, unlike Augustine, does not think that it comes gratuitously; instead, he thinks that *if we try as hard as we can to improve ourselves and see continuous improvement, we are entitled to hope that God will gracefully help us to reach the moral ideal toward which we are struggling.*¹⁶ In sum, Kant thinks we should adopt supernatural beliefs because otherwise we cannot understand how it is possible for us to achieve moral perfection or realize the highest good (in our lifetime).

Admittedly, many of the details of Kant's actual arguments have been left unclear or have been slightly caricatured and we have ignored questions about why we should believe we have moral obligations to pursue the ends Kant suggests, but our rough overview will suffice because we are not primarily

interested in *evaluating* Kant's arguments.¹⁷ Instead, we are interested in seeing how the general structure of, and basic ideas behind, Kant's argument can shed light on the karma debate and Wright's critical questions about KAR. Finally, before moving on to those topics, I note that even this rough sketch of Kant's views raises doubts about some of the criticisms that proponents of virtue ethics have lodged against Kant's ethical theory (for instance, that it suffers from undue focus on acts instead of character).¹⁸

III

With Kant's practical arguments in favor of supernatural beliefs in mind, we turn to Wright's four critical questions about karma. The first question Wright asks concerns the (traditionalist) motivation for adopting a unified concept of karma and rebirth, and he focuses on the possibility that people adopt KAR because it satisfies their "sense of justice." In other words, Wright thinks that (at least some) people believe in KAR because, first, they believe that happiness *should* be coordinated with virtue (e.g., bad people should not enjoy worldly success, and good people should not suffer), and, second, belief in KAR allows them to think that the world is as it *should be*.

Wright concludes, rightly to my mind, that reasons for believing in KAR that are of this type are only reasons in an anemic sense (Wright 2005:80-81, 89). Wishful thinking like this can be used to *rationalize*, in the pejorative sense, belief

in KAR, but it does not provide any justificatory reason for holding the belief. This thinking is wishful because, unlike Kant's argument, it does not rest on an argument that we, morally or ethically speaking, are committed to bringing about justice; it just rests on the thought that it would be a better world if justice were to be obtained.

Wright's doubts about appeal to the sense of justice are re-enforced if one asks whether this sense is something one can accept or justify on Buddhist grounds. One might argue, for example, that a compassionate person should not follow Wright in endorsing the idea that a corporate criminal ought to pay for his crimes by losing the things that make him happy. After all, that idea seems to be related to a retribution-based way of thinking that many Buddhists hope to let go of as a result of their commitment to non-attachment.¹⁹ At minimum, it is hard to see how there could be positive Buddhist arguments in favor of the idea that some *ought* to suffer or be unhappy.

In any case, although I agree with Wright's skepticism about the sense of justice serving as a basis for adopting KAR, I think there are other, more defensible motivations for adopting KAR. Here, Kant's practical argument serves as a useful guide; Buddhists might adopt KAR because of the role it plays in their moral or ethical outlook. In considering this issue, I think it is helpful to distinguish between *entry uses* of a concept, where a concept is used in an argument or practice that leads to adoption of an ethical outlook, and *articulation uses*, where a concept is used to articulate or act

from an outlook that is adopted.

Entry uses of the concept of rebirth, for example, include classic Tibetan meditations (aimed at motivating adoption of the Awakening Mind) on the fact that each living being has been kind to us in the past and on the fact that each living being has been our mother in the past.²⁰ The most obvious articulation use of rebirth, on the other hand, is implicit in the Mahāyāna vow to save all sentient beings, which is, arguably, a core aspect of Buddhist ethical outlooks of that tradition. If the scope of this vow includes, for example, beings alive before the person making the vow was born, then seriously intending to carry out the vow is rational, and perhaps makes sense, only if the person making the vow believes in rebirth.²¹ Another prominent (possible) articulation use is the Shin Buddhist belief in the possibility of being reborn in a Pure Land as a result of Amida's action.²²

In the discussion that follows, I restrict discussion to articulation uses of KAR, because I doubt that entry uses can ground a Kantian-style argument. Let me briefly explain. Although practices like the Tibetan meditations mentioned are entry uses of rebirth, it is doubtful that even people who advocate those practices would claim that engaging in them is *necessary* for raising the Awakening Mind—this is reflected in their advocacy of other meditations, which do not implicitly rely on the belief in rebirth, and which aim at the same end. I believe that most entry uses are similarly best thought of as sufficient *but unnecessary* means for adopting an ethical outlook, and, insofar as that is true, they will not pro-

vide a good basis for a Kant-style argument, which hinges on claims about the necessity of adopting the relevant supernatural belief.²³

Turning now to the question of how to build a Kant-style argument in defense of KAR, it helps to recall that Kant's argument has three main steps. First, one argues, without relying on supernatural beliefs, that one *should* adopt a certain moral or ethical outlook. Second, one argues that that outlook *requires* pursuing certain ends or goals. Third, one argues that pursuit of those ends or goals *requires* adoption of supernatural beliefs. Following this outline we can sketch a Buddhist argument as follows: first, acceptance of some set of core Buddhist beliefs (including, for instance, the Four Noble Truths) *commits* one to an ethical outlook (perhaps characterized by a set of virtues including, for example, nonattachment, compassion, and generosity); second, adoption of that outlook *requires* one to vow to save all beings or try to achieve personal liberation; third, one can pursue the goal of saving all beings or achieving personal liberation *only if* one believes in KAR. As we noted when discussing the structure of Kant's arguments, the validity of this argument hinges on the necessity suggested in the three steps (to avoid wishful thinking), and on the independent nature of the first step (to avoid circularity).

In thinking about the *plausibility* of a Buddhist analogue to Kant's argument, there are three general questions to ask. First, one must ask *which* beliefs are basic to Buddhism, because that determines the type of ethical outlook that

can be commended in the first step of the argument; here there are obviously disagreements within and between the different Buddhist traditions. Second, one must ask about the scope and nature of the impact one is ethically committed to (trying to) have on other living beings, and about the nature and difficulty of achieving the relevant impact.²⁴ In addition, one must ask about what one should be trying to achieve in one's own case and on the difficulty of so doing.²⁵ In each case, disagreements arise within and between different Buddhist traditions, often, but not always, because of differences on the first question. Third, once one has settled on a view about what beliefs count as basic Buddhist beliefs, and determined the ends one must, ethically speaking, pursue, one needs to ask whether one can understand how these ends can be attained even if one does not believe in KAR.

We can roughly divide these questions into two groups: those that concern the other-regarding dimension of a Buddhist ethic, and those that concern its self-regarding dimension. These questions are obviously too complicated to adequately pursue here, but by considering Wright's other questions about KAR, we will bring the questions into better focus. To that end, I will next consider two of Wright's questions that help us reflect the role that belief in KAR plays in enabling or disabling us in our pursuit of other-regarding Buddhist ethical commitments (like those reflected in the *Bodhisattva* vow and Kant's commitment to realizing the highest good). After that, we will turn to Wright's last ques-

tion in order to reflect on whether belief in KAR might be necessary if we are to rationally pursue the self-regarding dimension of a Buddhist ethic.

Wright's second critical question is based on the worry that belief in KAR threatens to sap people's motivation to struggle for socio-political justice and to work to end poverty and suffering. He suspects some people who believe in KAR do not struggle for positive social change or resist injustices, and instead console themselves with the thought that problems will be "solved" and wrongs will be righted by the process of karmic rebirth. Wright worries that this leads people to be apathetic about others' poverty and suffering and to "acquiescence to oppressive neighbors, laws, and regimes" (Wright 2005:81).

Wright is clearly right that *some* people have taken consolation in supernatural retribution, by believing either in KAR, or in divine retribution, and we should do what we can to keep that from happening. Nonetheless, lapsing into apathy is not an inevitable result of belief in KAR. A reflective Buddhist who endorses KAR, for example, would wonder about the (individual) karmic implication of being apathetic, and would likely conclude that it is not good. After all, what other than one of the defilements could lead one to look past others' suffering and embrace consolatory thoughts? If this is right, belief in KAR might well *bolster*, not sap, motivation to engage in social and political action aimed at helping the poor and suffering, and combating oppressive neighbors, laws, and regimes. Even if one worries about how many

Buddhists are reflective in the rough sense indicated, this line of thought tells in favor of promoting education about the right way of understanding KAR, not rejecting KAR altogether.

In addition to the fact that KAR, rightly understood, might bolster motivation to be socially and politically active, there is the possibility that adoption of some such supernatural belief is *necessary* if we are to intentionally pursue the other-regarding ends we embrace as Buddhists. As we have seen, Kant argues that in order to pursue the ends that we (morally) must, we have to have certain supernatural beliefs—he did not think we could pursue the realization of the highest good, where happiness is proportional to virtue, in the absence of such beliefs, in part because he did not think that we could otherwise believe that such a goal was obtainable as a result of collective action. Before further considering a Buddhist analogue to this argument, I want to note that the basic line of thought behind it is not confined to the study.

As James Cone explains in his book *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, Martin Luther King came to face a problem of the exact sort Kant identified. King's youthful hope to see actual social and political progress in his time foundered on the Watts riots, Vietnam, and his experiences of working with whites, and he was able to maintain his efforts to contribute to collective, progressive social action only because he held supernatural religious beliefs of the type Kant advocated. Without those beliefs, he would have been unable to believe that progress toward justice was

possible, and rationality would have counseled him to stop struggling toward a seemingly unobtainable goal (Cone 1992, especially chapter eight).

The possibility of constructing a Buddhist analogue to Kant's argument depends on two factors identified earlier: the scope and nature of the impact that a Buddhist thinks he or she *should* have on others, and the level of difficulty there is in achieving the relevant impact. These issues cannot be fully discussed here because of their empirical complexity, and because, as mentioned, the relevant factors vary too much between and within Buddhist traditions, but some general observations can be made.

At least some Buddhists have thought that they should adopt an ethical outlook that includes a commitment to helping all living beings to attain liberation. Even if the scope of this goal is narrowed to human beings alive at a given time, rational pursuit of the goal is likely to require working for socio-political change, as some contemporary discussions of engaged Buddhism suggest. Now if Buddhists such as the ones we are discussing are right that they have good reason to adopt the ethical outlooks they do, then, given the difficulty of having any impact on socio-political institutions, especially in times of war, at least some Buddhists may reasonably conclude that they have reason to believe in KAR. Otherwise, they would have to conclude that it is irrational to try to do what they should.²⁶

This discussion of socio-political action leads us to another of Wright's critical questions about karma: whether

karma itself should be conceived individually or socially. Wright convincingly (to my mind) advocates the social view, pointing out, for example, that the individual view is hard to defend in light of characteristic Buddhist attacks on the idea of a permanent, independent self and related beliefs about interdependence (Wright 2005:85-88). But I think Wright moves too quickly when he concludes that belief in KAR encourages us “to conceive of our lives in strictly individual terms, as a personal continuum through many lives, rather than collectively, where individuals share in a communal destiny, contributing their lives and efforts to that collective destiny” (Wright 2005:89).

Wright may be right that, historically speaking, these tendencies have been correlated with belief in KAR, but that does not show that the latter inevitably leads to the former. On the contrary, I think that advocates of KAR can embrace the truth in Wright’s discussion by acknowledging that one’s behavior in this life impacts on the way others behave in this life, and that their behavior (for which one is, arguably, partly responsible) is something that impacts on their future rebirths. Consequently, one is in part responsible not only for the quality of one’s own rebirth, but for others’ as well. This line of thought could easily be extended to argue that one is responsible for one’s impact on social and political institutions. In addition, a defender of KAR could argue that how one impacts on others (directly or indirectly) determines, in part, one’s own rebirth—as perhaps suggested by earlier remarks about how reflection on KAR could bol-

ster one's commitment to progressive socio-political action. In any case, these arguments suggest that one *can* adopt a social view of karma and KAR at the same time; at minimum, Wright's contention that adoption of KAR encourages adoption of an individualistic view of karma needs further elucidation and defense.

To this point, we have focused on the other-regarding aspect of a Buddhist ethical outlook, but there are also self-regarding aspects of such an outlook. Although the means to attaining liberation is a matter of dispute in the Buddhist tradition, there is general agreement that, roughly speaking, individual Buddhists should try to liberate themselves and reform their characters. Nonetheless, there is no agreement on the conditions that must be in place for an individual to achieve this goal or on whether every individual can achieve liberation in one lifetime, and whether individuals can achieve liberation by means of their own efforts alone. Given Buddhist beliefs about dependent origination, for example, one might assume that liberation depends on conditions outside an individual's control.

This brings us to the last of Wright's critical questions about karma: whether the rewards for virtuous behavior should be conceived of as internal or external to the practice of virtue. According to Wright's terminology, a reward is internal if it necessarily results from the behavior in question, and it is external if it only contingently results from the behavior (Wright 2005:82). His main concern is to argue that we need not believe that worldly happiness and suffer-

ing are internal rewards of ethical and unethical behavior respectively. To this end, he rightly points out that no necessary connection of that type occurs in every single life, and that if one believes that unethical conduct is the *sole* cause of worldly unhappiness, one might lapse into blaming the victim of injustice or a disaster instead of trying to right what is wrong or relieve suffering.²⁷

Even if he is right about worldly happiness and suffering being external rewards for ethical and unethical behavior, Wright's discussion need not raise problems for a believer in KAR. Wright is right that one way of holding onto belief that worldly happiness and suffering are internal rewards is to adopt *one* version of KAR, according to which the ethical quality of one's action in one life determines one's worldly happiness in the next. But this fact, and the fact that this is what some Buddhists actually believe, is no reason for concluding that belief in KAR encourages one to "focus our hopes on external rewards for our actions, like wealth and status in a future life rather than on the construction of character in this one" (Wright 2005:89). A more reasonable worry is that the people Wright has in mind might develop bad karma as a result of focusing on the construction of character in this life *but only because of* the worldly rewards doing so promises in future lives. In any case, defenders of KAR can assuage any such worries by advocating a conception of karma and rebirth according to which ethical qualities of one's character are transmitted across lifetimes, while denying that karma determines one's future worldly happiness or suffering.

After arguing that worldly happiness and suffering are external rewards, Wright asserts that there actually are two types of internal rewards of ethical behavior: “it shapes your character and helps determine who or what you become,” and, “it helps shape others and the society in which you live—now and in the future” (Wright 2005:84). Wright might be right that these things *usually* result from ethical behavior, but it is unlikely that they are internal rewards—that is to say, they do not follow *necessarily* from ethical behavior. After all, the impact my current behavior has on my character, on others, and on my society would seem to depend on contingent physical and social facts. Wright does not consider, for example, whether certain physical conditions, say severe brain damage or bad social surroundings, could undercut the tendency of ethical behavior to positively impact future character and the society in which one lives.

Finally, some Buddhists might reasonably hold that the struggle to achieve personal liberation is a struggle for a goal that is, at least in theory, in reach only if one believes in KAR. The viability of such an argument depends on whether a Buddhist ethical outlook commits one to achieving personal liberation, and on the difficulties that stand in the way of such a commitment. Once again, we come to see that whether or not there is a convincing argument for KAR depends on issues that have been long debated in and across different Buddhist traditions.

IV

I have argued that Wright's questions, about the motivation for adopting KAR, the danger of KAR promoting apathy, and about whether KAR conflicts with a social conception of karma or reformist ideas about the ethical behavior's role in guaranteeing worldly happiness, can all be answered by advocates of KAR. I do not think his worries provide us with reason to reject KAR and adopt RIK. But I also do not (yet) see reason to adopt KAR. We have considered how to construct a Buddhist argument for KAR, modeled on the Kantian argument for supernatural beliefs, but have concluded that the plausibility of such an argument depends on issues that are subject to debate within and between Buddhist traditions. Left with no conclusive argument for or against KAR, I still favor developing RIK because I believe that when there are no conclusive philosophic or empirical reasons for or against adopting a belief and there is no argument that, ethically speaking, you should adopt it or refrain from so doing, one should hold back from belief. I put this all in the first person, because I think this result, especially the principle expressed in the last sentence, depends on views about grounds for adopting beliefs that may be distinctive to the (Western) Enlightenment, and which I cannot adequately defend here.²⁸ Nonetheless, I suspect that it, like the assumption that the karma and rebirth debate cannot be settled by appeal to philosophic or empirical reasons, is accepted and thought of as common ground by most advocates of RIK.

Those who agree with me and favor adopting RIK face a worry that we can express as follows: if I am a Buddhist, I believe (metaphorically speaking) that I live in a burning house, and, given a social conception of karma, one might say I share this house with all other living human beings and *my* failure to get out is helping to keep others inside as well. Given this situation, it seems that, ethically speaking, I *must* try to escape (if I see any way of doing so) and, perhaps, help others escape as well. But what if the prospects of my own escape or my ability to help others escape are not only dim; what if I cannot even understand how it is *possible* to achieve these goals in my lifetime?

In general, when one is faced with a bad situation and reflection reveals no plausible method of escaping it, rationality threatens to counsel acceptance and, if not resignation, then reasonable adaptation instead of denial. In the case at hand, however, belief in KAR makes the possibility of escape intelligible and allows me to rationally pursue the Buddhist path, so *if* our situation is as bad as this description suggests, and we are ethically committed to escaping the burning house, then it appears we should adopt KAR or some other supernatural belief.²⁹ This highlights the fact that a full defense of RIK depends on showing that this is not what our situation is like, and, by the same token, it shows that a full defense of RIK can only be made from within one Buddhist tradition at a time.

CONCLUSION

I conclude, then, that there is simply no single answer to the question of whether *Buddhist* ethics can get by without KAR; the answer depends on debates about whether our situation is bad enough to threaten despair, and although I am optimistic that it is not that bad, the viability of that conclusion depends on a variety of ethical, psychological, and social issues, on which the various Buddhist traditions differ and sometimes disagree. It depends, for example, on the nature and scope of the other-regarding dimension of one's ethical outlook, on the nature of the personal goal that one must pursue on ethical grounds, and on the difficulty of achieving the ethical goals one needs to pursue. Consequently, I think Buddhists in each tradition need to work out their views on these issues and then ask whether they are justified in believing in KAR, and whether they can get by with RIK. Finally, despite my doubts about developing a general *solution* to the karma debate, I note that reflections like Wright's (and mine) are useful insofar as they provide general guidance that can help those working in particular traditions to identify the issues on which their particular answers will depend.³⁰

NOTES

1. In a more scholarly vein see, e.g., Wright (2005), and King (1994); in a more popular vein see, e.g., Batchelor (1998), and Hagen (2003:42-46). [Return to text.](#)

2. See, e.g., Punnadhammo Bhikkhu's review of Batchelor's *Buddhism Beyond Belief*, available on the web at: <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/book/020-buddhism.htm>, and Thurman (2005a). As Thurman notes on pages seven to nine, his arguments for KAR are similar to Pascal's wager. For critical discussion of Pascal's wager, which I think raises serious doubts about Thurman's argument, see Wood (2002:73-79). [Return to text.](#)

3. For a good assessment of empirical arguments for life after death see Braude (2003), and for a review of S. Pasricha, see Braude (1992). [Return to text.](#)

4. He may now support a more restricted form of dualism, allowing for the "reduction" of the mental to the physical in the case of gross mental states, but denying it when it comes to subtle ones, e.g., attention or awareness. See Goldman (2003:206). [Return to text.](#)

5. For a good overview of James's argument and the relevant secondary literature see, Jordan (2005). [Return to text.](#)

6. I should note that the word "metaphysical" derives from the order that was given to Aristotle's works; "meta" means *after*, and the book called *Metaphysics* was so named because it was placed *after* the *Physics*. Of course since "meta" also means *beyond*, and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* contains discussion of matters that are reasonably thought to be beyond empirical resolution, my emphasis in the text is not wholly inappropriate. [Return to text.](#)

7. I take it that Wright is alluding to the assumption I am making when he characterizes his target audience as Buddhists who are "educated in the world of science and favorably disposed to contemporary standards of truth." See Wright (2005:89). [Return to text.](#)

8. In the latter respect they fall short of establishing KAR in a way that is analogous to the way that the cosmological argument falls short of establishing that a *good* God, let alone the Christian God, exists. I should note that some empirical arguments, perhaps including those deployed by the Dalai Lama (1999:26-28), aim to do better in this respect, but I think that makes them even harder to accept than other empirical arguments. [Return to text.](#)

9. Although there may be types of circularity that do not undermine ar-

guments; see Wainwright (1995, especially chapter four). [Return to text.](#)

10. Owen Flanagan's response to the Dalai Lama, reported in Goldman (2003:67), is misleading insofar as it is taken to suggest that Kant thought the justification or content of morality depends on religious beliefs. On the contrary, it is *characteristic* of both Kant and contemporary Kantians to reject that thought. For an exemplary discussion of Kant's approach in its historical context see, J. B. Schneewind (1991). [Return to text.](#)

11. For a recent critical discussion of the debates about the question I am putting aside, see Wood (1999, part one). [Return to text.](#)

12. Good discussions (with copious references to Kant's work and other secondary literature) include: Marina (2000:329-355); Reath (1988:593-619); Engstrom (1992:747-780). [Return to text.](#)

13. Kant (1996, part three). This work is also often translated under the title *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. [Return to text.](#)

14. Kant (1996:6:139). (Academy Pagination, which is standard for most translations, appearing in the margins). [Return to text.](#)

15. I am avoiding the complicated details here; Kant actually thinks that what I am calling a "fundamental commitment" is an intention that exists in the noumenal realm, which we are, in principle, unable to gain access to through our experiences. For a thought-provoking overview (which I do not always agree with, of course) of the Kantian views I am summarizing here see Sussman (2001). [Return to text.](#)

16. See Kant (1996, Part I). I am simplifying things quite a bit in this summary by leaving out, for instance, complications that have to do with the distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal realms. [Return to text.](#)

17. For discussion of Kant's reasons for thinking that we are morally obligated to pursue the ends discussed, see Wood (1999, chapter nine), and the articles cited in endnote 12. [Return to text.](#)

18. I would argue that, given the recent popularity of claiming that Buddhist Ethics is a type of virtue ethics, Buddhist ethicists should respond to criticisms that Kant and Kantians have made of Western versions of virtue ethics, and to claims that most virtue-ethical criticisms of Kantianism rest on misunderstandings of Kant and Kantianism. See for example, Schneewind

(1990:42-63), Herman (1996), Wood (1996), and O'Neill (1996). [Return to text.](#)

19. Similarly, it is not obvious why someone unattached to pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness, would think that the virtuous *should* be happy. [Return to text.](#)

20. For a more scholarly, historical discussion see Williams (2000:177-179); for a more practical, contemporary discussion see Ven. Lobsang Gyatso (1997). [Return to text.](#)

21. I am ignoring other possible mechanisms such as belief in backward causation (either by the person making the vow, or some other being acting as a result of the behavior of the person making the vow). [Return to text.](#)

22. This is complicated by questions about how literally the talk of such rebirth is meant to be. My understanding and awareness of this issue, which is more meager than I would like, is particularly indebted to the discussion of Shinran in chapters five and six of Abe (1992, especially p. 202-210). [Return to text.](#)

23. For an interesting epistemic version of what I would call an entry use argument, which may have promising Buddhist analogues, see Wainwright (1995). [Return to text.](#)

24. Regarding scope, one might ask: must one save *all* other sentient beings, or can one narrow the scope to those beings one directly encounters in one's life? Shall one include non-human beings? Regarding the nature of the impact, one might ask: do we need to try to save other beings, only to help them, or merely to try to avoid harming them? At a very general level, these questions are often taken to divide Theravāda and Mahāyāna views. [Return to text.](#)

25. Zen and Pure Land traditions, for example, are often taken to give conflicting answers to the latter question. [Return to text.](#)

26. The story of the Vietnamese boy, Ân, described by Thich Nhat Hanh, suggests that some Buddhists may have adopted supernatural beliefs for reasons like those under discussion. See Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh (1975:41-44). [Return to text.](#)

27. Robert Thurman tries to put a more positive spin on the role of KAR in a disaster case. See Thurman (2005b). [Return to text.](#)

28. For defense of a principle of this sort (with which I am not, however, completely in agreement) see, for instance, Wood (2002, chapter one). [Return to text.](#)

29. This point raises an additional problem for proponents of KAR; even if they construct a sound analogue of Kant's argument for adopting supernatural beliefs, there may be more than one set of such beliefs that can preserve the rationality of pursuit of the relevant ethical ends. [Return to text.](#)

30. I would like to thank R. Gifford Howland, Howard Kaplan, William Kerr, and Cullen Padgett Walsh for helpful talks relating to this paper. [Return to text.](#)

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