

mundane and supramundane, even life and death. O'Halloran is gone from this world. Aoki is elderly in Japan. Morton is still learning to enjoy life in this world. They will not meet in this world, and yet they have already met here in these pages, and we are invited to join their stories of oneness. What kind of "oneness" is that?

### Note

1. Anne Klein describes her own experience of studying Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayan region in a similar manner, as an honorary "male" (Klein 2008).

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## CHAPTER 8

### KANT, BUDDHISM, AND SELF-CENTERED VICE

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Immanuel Kant famously identifies an ethically good agent as one who treats people as ends in themselves and never as mere means. The intuitive appeal of this ideal—and of Kant's secular articulation of its content and justification—does much to explain the continued popularity of Kantian ethics. However, even if we agree that the ideal of treating people as ends and never means is attractive and fits our intuitions about important cases, we should not assume that this ideal is best articulated within a Kantian framework. It may turn out that while Kantians should be thanked for getting us to appreciate the ideal, we must move to a different framework (for example, a broadly virtue ethical or utilitarian one) to best articulate it. In fact, that is the view for which I will argue here: the Kantian conception of treating people as ends in themselves and not mere means (hereafter "treating people as final ends") is inadequate and Buddhist philosophy has resources—in particular its teachings about the self and the related conception of oneness—that can help us construct a viable alternative.

The idea that an ethically good agent is one who treats people as ends in themselves and never as mere means is appealing for a number of reasons, but centrally because it yields intuitive results when we think about the ethical excellence of those who admirably inhabit their identity-defining roles. Good parents, friends, and teachers, for example, help their children, friends, and students flourish and their motivations are not merely instrumental. They want those they love (or to whom they are devoted) to live good human lives—to actualize their human potential, we might say—and they either want this for

its own sake or for the sake of those they love. Conversely, lackluster or deplorable parents (or friends or teachers) are often less than good because they either treat their kids as mere means or fail to adequately treat them—or their human potential—as ends in themselves. It is morally bad, for example, when a parent pushes his kids to accomplish things in order to buttress his self-esteem or otherwise “feed his ego”; and there is something morally wrong with the neglectful parent who doesn’t help his daughter develop rationally and morally because he is too focused on his career. In the former case, we could say that the parent treats his child as a mere means. In the latter, he fails to treat her (or her human potential) as an end in itself.

Moral philosophers who agree that the ideal of treating people as final ends is appealing will want to develop a philosophic conception of that ideal. First, we want a positive account of the ideal of treating people as final ends. Following Kant, I will assume that the ideal calls on us both to reach out to others in a positive way (to treat others as ends in themselves) and to exercise self-restraint in our interactions with others (to never treat them as mere means). Roughly, and again following Kantians, we can say that the ideal calls on us to act with both *love/devotion* and *respect*. Giving an account of these two aspects and their interplay in different contexts is certainly a complicated affair and will minimally involve giving some account of the distinctive features of persons to which the well-motivated respond when they act with love and respect and a characterization of those modes of apt responsiveness to persons. Kantians, for example, typically focus on our powers to engage in rational reflection and end-setting and hold that well-motivated agents respect these or the dignity that they ground, and Kantians understand love as a practical attitude requiring us to adopt other people’s happiness as an end.

Second, an account of the ideal of treating people as final ends will provide some account of the main negative motivations or vices that are ruled out by our ethical ideal. It will explore common or salient cases in which we fail to treat people as ends and are responsible for those failures, and explain how positive motivation can rationally overcome the problems present in these negative ones. For example, Kantians typically focus on failures to treat others with respect that are the result of self-conceit and they then explain how respect rationally strikes down self-conceit. Third, a conception of treating people as final ends should tell us something about the scope and normativity of the ideal. Does the ideal require that we treat all people as ends or only some? And are we morally obligated or rationally compelled to treat people as ends or is it merely an appealing ideal that one could reasonably reject in order to pursue other ideals (or one’s own good)?

In this essay, we will be focusing on the first two tasks, and I will be assuming that common sense cases involving parents, friends, and teachers provide paradigm instantiations of the ethical ideal in which we are interested. I will

assume that a conception of treating people as final ends is adequate only if it yields plausible results in most, if not all, of these paradigm cases, and I will be mainly concerned with the positive aspect of the ideal that calls on us to treat others as ends in themselves by acting out of love or devotion. With this framework as a background, I argue that Kantian conceptions are inadequate and that we should look to traditions such as Buddhism when constructing a plausible alternative.

My basic argument against the Kantians hinges on an account of self-centeredness and the claim that to treat people as final ends we must overcome self-centeredness. This may strike some readers as an obvious truth, but I flesh it out and then argue that Kantian conceptions of treating people as final ends are problematic because they imply that self-centered people, who we intuitively think of as failing to treat others as ends in themselves, can be perfectly morally motivated. Part of the problem is Kant’s conviction that good moral motivation does not require any sort of contingent character or insight—any moral cultivation or improvement of the self. Roughly, he thinks that if we set our minds (or wills) to it we can immediately start treating others as ends in themselves, regardless of our past histories and the different forms of personal baggage that color our experiences, mental lives, and interactions. But reflection on cases involving vicious self-centeredness suggests otherwise. In addition, Kant’s general framework implies that we treat people as ends in themselves if and only if we respect their rational capacities for end-setting and fulfill our wide duty of beneficence, but someone who is viciously self-centered can successfully treat others with respect *and* fulfill that wide duty, so Kant doesn’t have the normative resources to support or elucidate the thought that self-centered people who fail to treat others as final ends exhibit defective human moral motivation. By extension, I argue that his account of motivational improvement (respect rationally striking down self-conceit) cannot be applied to all the relevant cases involving self-centeredness.

After making my case against the Kantian conception, I will turn to Buddhism and discuss the possibility that by appropriating certain Buddhist ideas we can construct a more viable, non-Kantian conception of treating people as final ends. In short, I think that Buddhist moral psychology provides us with a plausible framework for understanding self-centered vice and that by appropriating aspects of a Buddhist account of enlightened compassion we might be able to construct a more plausible conception of treating people as final ends.

### Self-Centeredness: Its Nature and Cost

To begin, I want to sketch out some aspects of human self-centeredness and discuss how various types of self-centeredness characteristically get in the way

of our treating our relational partners (friends, parents, and the like) as ends in themselves. First, we can usefully consider some points that P. J. Ivanhoe (2013) makes when discussing the senses and values of oneness in neo-Confucian thought, a tradition that was deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy. In the last sections of his paper, Ivanhoe distinguishes selfishness from self-centeredness and gives us a couple of examples of undue self-centeredness. In describing the distinction he plausibly suggests that self-centeredness involves taking "the self as the center of one's thoughts about the world." As examples, he mentions a generous woman who "thinks of her attitude and actions as expressions of her remarkable compassion toward the world," and parents who would insist on paying their child's tuition so that they can enjoy reflecting on what remarkably self-sacrificing parents they are. These examples are intended to show that selfishness and self-centeredness are distinct, because they show that one can be problematically self-centered while acting altruistically. I think they also suggest that self-centered people are characteristically concerned with the esteem or approval that they get or merit, but before getting to that issue, I want to reinforce Ivanhoe's contention that selfishness and self-centeredness are distinct by pointing out that sometimes our self-centered tendencies are bad for us.

For example, consider Bill, whose tendency to put himself at the center of his cognitive and emotional life is impeding his ability to found and maintain intimate reciprocal relationships. In virtue of how much it is costing him, we might rightly conclude that Bill's narcissistic tendencies are very bad for him; they are robbing him of valuable relationships that he needs to have in order to truly flourish. Because it is in his self-interest to become less self-centered, it seems implausible to think that he is being selfish if and when he falls into his old narcissistic patterns (for example, he does not notice when his wife Hilary is down after reading the new book about her that came out).<sup>1</sup>

In response to this case, one might claim that although Bill's self-centered focus on his own problems and his related failure to notice and respond well to others' struggles are not objectively in his self-interest, his focus can nonetheless be selfish if he is not cognizant of that fact—and if his failure to change is motivated by sensitivity to the subjective cost of his changing. This might be unconscious or conscious. For example, we can imagine Bill refusing to go to therapy because it will be time-consuming and impede his ability to go on some planned speaking tour. We may deny that he is making an objectively prudential decision here, of course, but that does not undercut the claim that he is selfishly choosing to stay self-centered. In fact, I think we should grant that in this case Bill is selfishly staying self-centered, but still resist the idea that being or staying self-centered is always selfish. To see why consider two more cases. In the first, Bill comes to see that the lack of close relationships is very bad for him and enters therapy. He is working to uproot or curtail his

self-centeredness in order to promote his good, but his old habits die hard. When they pop up, it is hard to see how they, or the behaviors they motivate, count as selfish. Second, consider the fact that some people are self-focused but have low self-esteem. They may even despise themselves and think they deserve to suffer. Some people like this "can't get out of their heads," as people say, because they are obsessed with the idea that they are bad or worthless, and when these people exhibit self-centered tendencies, these are almost never in their objective or subjective self-interest.

With these points out of the way, we now turn to some different aspects of self-centeredness themselves. After charting out some of its different dimensions, we will be able to better recognize its prudential and moral costs.

First, being self-centered is often a matter of one's motives or reasons for acting. Ivanhoe's examples of off-putting self-centeredness nicely illustrate this. In one of these, we are invited to consider the parents who insist that they be the ones to pay for their kids' education when a stranger offers to pay. They are very concerned to be the ones to help because they know that if they do help they will merit esteem for being good parents. Now I agree that this is off-putting, but I also want to suggest that the problem crops up because of the parents' desire to be, or be seen as, good parents, rather than their desire to be the ones to help their kids (instead of a stranger). To see the difference, consider a case in which someone wants to be the one to act virtuously (rather than some relevant strangers), but in which she is *not* moved by any self-centered desire to merit praise or approval. Take a mother who sees her kid go down in a soccer game from a painful slide tackle. As he writhes in pain on the field, she rushes out to comfort him. So does the father of another teammate. I think that the mother quite naturally prefers to be the one to comfort her son ("Thanks, but I have this covered"), even if the other father might do well enough in her stead. In fact, I think that desiring to be the one to help might make her a better mother. My main point, however, is that the mother can desire to be the one to help without desiring to be the one to help because that makes her a better mother (in fact or in other's eyes). This illustrates the general point that self-centered motivation is often or mainly problematic because it involves an undue concern with getting or meriting approval, esteem, and pride; adapting some language from Kant, we can say that while self-centered people are inordinately concerned with or have false beliefs about the worth of their self, selfish people are inordinately concerned with the worth of their condition.

Next, consider some of the ways in which inordinate concern with, or false beliefs about, the worth of one's self can be manifest in self-centered patterns of thought and behavior. We can roughly divide these into three categories: self-centered attention, self-centered judgment, and self-centered interpersonal interaction.

Self-centered attention can be manifest, in the first place, in facts about what one does and does not notice in one's experience. For example, we may be unduly self-centered when we are so focused on our own projects or problems that we simply do not notice the suffering or the success of others around us. Or we may fail to notice (or foresee) how our actions will affect others because we are so focused on our projects, problems, or standing. In addition, self-centered attention is often manifest in dispositions to think or guide discussion. We are all familiar with people (including perhaps ourselves) who tend to bring their thoughts, and the conversations they have with others, back to themselves and their experiences.

Next, consider self-centered judgment. This is manifest when the way that we interpret and judge things in our experience is unduly colored by our own interests or concerns, especially our desires to get or merit approval. Iris Murdoch's famous example of the mother who judges her daughter-in-law illustrates this.<sup>2</sup> As I imagine it, the upper-class British mother initially judges her young American daughter-in-law to be crude and impertinent. On Murdoch's telling she is able to revise this interpretation by paying concentrated attention to the daughter-in-law's actual behavior and adopting a loving, just gaze. This results in the mother thinking that the daughter-in-law is refreshingly forthright and unconventional. My point here is that we naturally imagine that the mother's initial interpretation of the daughter-in-law is motivated by her concern to get and merit the approval of her peers. She might initially judge that the daughter-in-law is crude and unrefined because she is concerned about what her peers will say about the daughter-in-law, her son, the family, or her. If she is only concerned about what her peers or others will say, her motives need not be self-focused, but we can imagine that she is concerned about losing face herself and this is what drives her negative interpretation of the daughter-in-law. If so, this would be a case in which her judgment is distorted by self-centered considerations, and coming to see things aright would involve overcoming these effects of, as Murdoch colorfully puts it, the big fat ego.

There are other forms of self-centered judgment, but I want to move on to self-centered interpersonal interaction. There are at least three subforms of self-centeredness here that I think we can roughly distinguish: self-centered negligence, self-centered reactivity, and self-centered demands/needs. Self-centered negligence has already been mentioned earlier and it involves a failure to notice, aptly interpret, or respond to the struggles, successes, needs, or valid demands of others because one is unduly focused on one's own projects, problems, or standing. People who exhibit robust self-centered negligence are often said to be living in a bubble.

Self-centered reactivity involves oversensitivity to how things will affect one's own projects, problems, or standing. People who exhibit robust self-centered reactivity are often said to take things too personally. And as with the other

forms of self-centered interpersonal interaction, reactivity will involve self-centered attention and judgment. People who are overly sensitive about how things will affect their own social standing, for example, will often have trouble noticing how others are being affected by their actions because they are so centrally concerned with protecting their own standing and they will also often interpret people who they take to threaten their social standing with an evil, self-centered eye.

Last, but not least, there are self-centered demands/needs. First, there are self-conceited people who believe they already are more important or worthy of esteem and benefits than others and who are obsessed with getting esteem or benefits. Second, there are people who want to be, or to be taken to be, more important and worthy than others and focus unduly on getting benefit and esteem in order to have evidence that they are getting what they want. They may also want benefits or esteem in order to feel good about themselves, in which case we might say they are thirsty for approval or validation from others. They want to prove themselves. Third, there are people who don't believe or feel that they have some relatively basic modicum of worth or esteem, and who focus on getting approval or benefits to assuage their fear of being worthless or shameful. This illustrates the important point that self-centeredness need not always be driven by an overly high opinion of oneself.

With this rough overview of some aspects of self-centeredness in mind, we will be turning to Kant and then Buddhism and asking how we should normatively evaluate and overcome our all-too-human tendencies to be self-centered. But before doing that, it will be helpful to consider more carefully how our self-centeredness can impede our treating others as ends in themselves and our enjoying good relationships, which are key contributors to the good life.

First, being self-centered will often reduce one's tendency to empathize and empathize well with others. Someone with self-centered attention, for example, will have a reduced tendency to empathize simply because he or she will not notice others or what is happening to them. And even if one notices another person and how she is doing, self-centered judgment may inhibit the ability to empathize well. Returning to our Bill and Hilary example, we can imagine Bill noticing that Hilary is down but his misunderstanding what is making her upset and what might help her feel better because he can only think about how he would feel if he were in that situation. Or perhaps his thinking about things from her point of view would be distorted by his concern about how the new book about her will make *him* look and affect *his* popularity. Last, consider my Murdoch-inspired mother case. If the mother is thinking about the daughter-in-law as a crude and unrefined American, she may then think it would be best for the daughter-in-law to take night classes at a finishing school when she empathizes with the daughter. So even if her self-centered tendencies do not lead her to heartlessly not care about the

daughter-in-law, it can distort her thinking about what would be best for the daughter-in-law.

These points about how self-centeredness affects our tendency to empathize and do it well support the claim that self-centeredness often impedes virtue, but they also remind us that being self-centered impedes our ability to develop and maintain healthy, reciprocal relationships. Unsupportive or otherwise "dysfunctional" relations between friends, parents and children, teachers and students, and so forth are often marred by self-centered negligence, reactivity, demands/needs, and subpar empathy, and the people who exhibit these tendencies fail to treat their partners as ends in themselves. Some forms of self-centeredness involve arrogance or self-conceit and this can lead people to *disrespect* others or to enable others to disrespect themselves. Other forms of self-centeredness involve failures to positively treat others as final ends—overly self-involved parents are notorious for *failing to love* and support their kids and for failing to nurture a nonneurotic sort of independence and confidence.<sup>3</sup>

Last, but not least, it is worth noting that self-centeredness can inhibit the achievement of so-called flow states. These are states in which an agent is pleasurably drawn on into a good activity for its own sake and is not caught up in thinking about what she is doing or how well she is doing it. Of course this is not a satisfying account of flow, but I hope that with only that much said we can see that someone who exhibits a self-centered tendency to worry about their self and whether it will get or merit esteem or praise will have a hard time dropping these hang-ups and getting into a flow state. If this is right, and flow states are very good for us, then being self-centered can be bad for us. In addition, if flow states are a part of many excellent joint activities and practices, as it seems plausible to assume, the self-centered impediments to flow threaten our ability to bond with others by participating in flow-fueled joint activities and practices.<sup>4</sup>

### Kant and Self-Centeredness

Now that we have brought to mind some of the various ways in which people can be self-centered and noted some of ethical and prudential costs of self-centeredness, I want to turn to Kant and his account of treating people as final ends. We have seen that to treat others as ends in themselves one needs to overcome self-centeredness so we can test the adequacy of Kantian conceptions of treating people as final ends by considering what they can say about the cases discussed earlier.

To sharpen our discussion, we can narrow our focus to some variations on the Iris Murdoch example discussed earlier. The mother-in-law who initially

judges her daughter-in-law to be impertinent and crude but then comes to see her as refreshingly forthright and unconventional gives us a good example of someone whose self-centered vice initially blocks her from positively treating another person as an end in herself, but who then shifts and is able to relate to this person in a more loving way. Murdoch's own discussion of the case suggests a broadly Platonic conception of positive moral motivation on which ethically well-motivated agents are moved by love of a transcendent Good to overcome their self-centered tendencies. She emphasizes that this involves (i) paying attention to people and situations as they really are and (ii) imagining others and their situations realistically, and in each case (when attending to what is directly present in experience and imagining what is not) Murdoch thinks we must exercise discipline in order to resist self-centered "fantasies." This presumably would involve resisting many of the more specific aspects of self-centeredness that we identified earlier.<sup>5</sup> Of course this sort of discipline does require a *willful* resistance to fantasy and *willed* attempts to attend and imagine realistically, but we should keep in mind that in Murdoch's account these willed activities are ultimately motivated by love of the Good—be it embodied in the full reality of some person to whom one attends, embodied in the noble and realistic vision that one aspires to achieve,<sup>6</sup> or understood along theistic lines.<sup>7</sup>

I mention Murdoch's love-of-the-Good conception of ethical motivation not in order to develop and assess it here, but because it provides a nice contrast to Kant's conception of treating people as final ends. The first thing to note is that Kant has no use for the concept of an attractive, lovable Good that motivates and justifies our struggles to overcome self-centeredness; for Kant, the two fundamental forms of value that move morally responsible agents are happiness and ethical goodness or worth, and good moral motivation is a matter of willing in a way that aptly responds to the objectively greater significance of ethical goodness. In developing this view, Kant connects the idea of ethical goodness with the idea of moral worth and argues that our conception of moral worth should be grounded in the idea of a moral and rational law that is binding on all agents, a law that human beings experience most clearly when it constrains their desire to be happy. Kant thinks that if we will in a way that is aptly responsive to the objective value or rational significance of the moral law, we thereby actualize our potential for rational freedom, and that we will also respect other people and their humanity as ends in themselves and not mere means. More concretely, Kant thought that people who will in a way that responds correctly to the moral law are bound to will benevolently (that is, will to promote others' welfare or happiness) and respect the dignity of persons; he holds that if we have a good will, which rightly adopts these ends, then we will treat other people, and their humanity, as ends in themselves.

Given the basic structure of his theory, there are two main ways that Kant could try to capture the ethical defects that show up when self-centered people

fail to treat their friends, children, parents, and the like as ends in themselves. In general he holds that ethically culpable failures to treat others as final ends involve irrational forms of willing that do not aptly respond to the objective value and rational significance of the moral law, but in thinking about cases it is better to focus on the idea that self-centered people can fail to treat others as ends because they either fail to *respect* the other person's dignity or fail to treat the person in a *loving* way. By extension, Kant thinks that we can reorient our will and become well-motivated agents by adopting and acting on commitments to respect and love. But, in part because he believes that we are not ethically culpable for what is not under our volitional control, he argues that a well-motivated agent need only manifest *practical love*, roughly the intentional promotion of others' happiness or welfare, in order to treat others as ends. He contrasts this with *pathological love*, which would involve emotions or affects (*pathos*) that we cannot control at will, and holds that we treat persons as final ends if and only if we are willingly benevolent and respectful to persons. So to capture the thought that self-centered friends, parents, teachers, and the like often fail to treat others as ends and that a well-motivated Kantian person will do better, Kant must argue that the relevant self-centered people are either not respectful or not practically loving in the way that a well-motivated Kantian person would be.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to Murdoch's example of the judgmental mother-in-law with this background in mind, we need to ask whether she is plausibly thought of as failing to respect the dignity that her daughter-in-law has in virtue of her powers of rational reflection and end-setting, and whether her change of heart can be aptly understood as her adopting the Kantian ends of benevolence and respect with respect to her daughter-in-law. Before we directly answer that question, however, it will be useful to think about Kant's account of ethically defective motivation or vice and how this might explain the motivation behind the mother-in-law's initial, self-centered verdict. In short, Kant holds that all culpable moral failures reflect an agent's disordered will. More specifically, he thinks that moral failures always result from a decision to comply with morality only if doing so is compatible with pursuit of one's happiness; he thinks immorality always traces back to a merely conditional commitment to act morally, where the condition is compatibility with one's happiness. Given this background, Kant would explain the mother-in-law judging her daughter-in-law to be crude and impertinent by appeal to her conditional commitment to morality and the fact that her concern for her own happiness is what leads her to make this judgment. More generally, Kant would explain self-centered vice by appeal to the fact that self-centeredness is motivated by the agent's concern for her happiness.

At first glance it might seem implausible to claim that the mother-in-law's self-centered judgment is motivated by a desire for happiness, because, as noted

earlier, being self-centered is often at odds with one's self-interest. For example, the mother-in-law's judgment is presumably part of a larger pattern that may strain her relationship with her son and her daughter-in-law and that may cause her significant grief. Regardless of one's conception of personal well-being, it is plausible to think that her self-centeredness and its expression in this judgment may be quite bad for her because it detracts from the quality of her experiences and her relationships. By extension, it is implausible to think that agents who are self-centered, and for that reason fail to treat others as ends in themselves, must always believe that they will gain benefits by being self-centered or by making specific self-centered judgments.

I believe that the foregoing points are correct, but it is important to note that Kant has further resources on which to draw. The challenge at hand is to explain how self-centeredness could be grounded in the desire for happiness, so it will presumably help to focus in on what Kant says about happiness and the immoral (Kant says "evil") temptation to act in accord with the moral law only if doing so is compatible with one's pursuit of happiness. Now Kant's claims about happiness are somewhat opaque and underdeveloped, but three things are clear. First, he thinks that the desire for happiness centrally involves the desires to feel content with one's condition and to feel pleased with oneself. Second, he holds that happiness is an indeterminate and moving target—it lies beyond our powers to form a rational conception of it that could guide our deliberations or modes of activity. Third, Kant holds that our *rational* capacities actually make it harder for us to be happy and that awareness of this fact can tempt us to hate our rational capacities and wish that we were less reflective, like nonrational animals. We can usefully reconstruct Kant's way of thinking about the desire for happiness if we keep these three basic points in mind and consider how the moral-psychological views that Kant develops in his later works can support and elucidate them.

In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, and other late works and lectures, Kant develops a nuanced account of the various types of desires that human beings have, discusses which desires typically tempt people to adopt a merely conditional commitment to being moral, and develops psychologically substantive accounts of good moral motivation, moral improvement, and virtue. First, he distinguishes three types of desires that are rooted in three basic "predispositions" that he takes to be innate. He associates unreflective bodily desires that do not depend on our capacity to reason, for example, hunger, thirst, and sexual desire, with the predisposition to animality, but he denies that these desires are the ones that motivate people to be immoral. Instead, he points the finger at the desires that he associates with the predisposition to humanity. These are desires that depend on our capacity to reason, but they do not include respect for the moral law, which Kant takes to be an especially pure rational motive, and he associates it with the separate



predisposition to personality. Given this typology it makes sense to think that happiness involves contentment and that this involves satisfaction of one's animal desires (for food, water, sex, sleep, and so forth), but if we want to understand how the desire for happiness motivates people to be immoral, why Kant thinks happiness is an indeterminate and moving target, and why Kant thinks reason makes it hard for us to be happy, we need to focus on the distinctively rational desires that Kant associates with the predisposition to humanity.

Kant clearly thinks that human desires are based in reason in a way that animal desires are not, and while it is not entirely clear what "reason" means in this context or in what sense the desires are based in reason, Kant seems to be thinking that our human reason enables us to be self-aware, to compare our condition with that of others, and to be aware of how others judge us. Without going into unnecessary detail, we can note some of the central ways that exercise of these capacities could affect our conception of happiness (in addition to affecting who strongly we are motivated by considerations of happiness).

Most simply, rational comparison with others and awareness of their judgments of our condition can affect what we want and how content we are with what we have. So our degree of contentment with our condition can depend on how others around us are faring and how they judge our condition—factors that are out of our control, subject to regular change, and hard to predict. Next, probably under the influence of Rousseau, Kant notes that interpersonal comparison and self-awareness lead human beings to care a lot about how others judge *them* and their relative status. For example, even if someone envies your *condition* you may feel discontent because she thinks *you* have a bad or flawed character that makes you a fit target for mockery or denigration (or that just causes her to reduce her degree of good will toward you). More generally, whether we are pleased with ourselves is often affected by what others think of us and by how we fare relative to the social conventions that we embrace or that are embraced by those whose approval we care about. Moreover there is often a competitive aspect in play here, as people jockey for social status and prestige, with people kissing up to those above them and kicking down their peers and rising underlings. These factors all introduce new reasons for our happiness to be out of our control, subject to regular change, and hard to predict.

The foregoing remarks about how Kant thinks of our distinctively human desires are no doubt schematic, but I think they also help us understand Kant's claims about happiness being an indeterminate and moving target and about reason making it harder for us to be happy. Presumably Kant is thinking that human happiness is indeterminate and moving because our contentment and self-satisfaction are affected by various contingent, unpredictable factors, such as those just canvassed, and he thinks these features persist because our contentment and self-satisfaction are largely staked on our success or failure in fulfilling our human, rationally based desires. If we had only animal desires,

our contentment and self-satisfaction would hinge on factors that are easier to control and predict, so we can see how these reflections might lead one to hate one's reason or humanity.

Now that we have a better grasp of Kant's conception of the human desire for happiness, we can turn to his claim that it is the specifically human desires, not the animal ones, that motivate us to immoral action, and to his idea that respect for the law motivates a moral agent by striking down her self-conceit and curbing her self-love. Simply put, Kant thinks that the human desire for happiness, especially the desire to be pleased with oneself, leads some people to think they are more worthy of respect than others or that they are more deserving of happiness than others because of their nonmoral excellences. Alternatively, the desire to be pleased with oneself can lead one to disrespect oneself or another, either in order to gain social esteem or approval or because oneself or the other person has some nonmoral defects. Those desires tempt us to disrespect people or treat them in a nonbenevolent manner in order to further our pursuit of happiness, and Kant holds that our inherent respect for the moral law, which is associated with our predisposition to personality, can motivate us to resist these temptations and to choose to pursue our happiness only if in doing so we are able to treat people respectfully and benevolently. To reign in our natural desire for happiness in this way, however, we must make our pursuit of happiness conditional on our adherence to morality rather than vice versa.

With this Kantian model of immorality and moral motivation in mind, we can now return to our guiding question and ask how this model might apply to the self-centered mother-in-law who judges her daughter-in-law to be crude and impertinent. Murdoch holds that these judgments are false and reflect the mother-in-laws' bad (mean or vicious) motives or character. She also holds that love of the Good can move the woman to become aware of those facts and improve. Our question now concerns what Kant could say in this case. Despite the lack of any explicit discussion of such cases by Kant, it is hard to see how he could accept Murdoch's claim that the mother-in-law's initial judgment was false and that her later judgment was true. Kant does hold that there are non-relative evaluative facts about what has *moral worth* and what does not, but he does not have any clear resources for building a nonconventionalist, nonrelativist account of judgments like the one that the mother-in-law makes (for example, about whether someone's behavior is crude). Still, Kant could adopt a conventionalist and relativist view when it comes to such judgments and still hold that the mother-in-law's change in view is an instance of moral improvement. First, he could argue that the daughter-in-law is crude and impertinent relative to the social standards that the mother-in-law's peers embrace but that she is *also* refreshingly youthful and unconventional from the point of view of someone who rejects those standards and embraces more romantic ones.

Second, he could argue that while both standard-relative claims about the daughter-in-law are *true*, it is morally or ethically better for the mother-in-law to make, and approach the situation in the light of, the second, more romantic judgment.

To establish that the mother-in-law's self-centered judgment is morally worse than her revised one, the Kantian will presumably argue that the initial judgment is motivated by her desire for happiness but that it involves either disrespect or a lack of benevolence. The first part of this proposed explanation is plausible. The basic idea would be that the mother-in-law judges her daughter-in-law to be crude and impertinent because her own happiness hinges to a significant extent on how the daughter-in-law fares relative to the social standards against which those judgments are framed.<sup>9</sup> It is natural to imagine that the mother-in-law cares a lot about the approval or judgment of her peers who embrace those standards and that she will be less pleased with herself and her condition if her daughter-in-law provokes her peers to look down their noses at her or pity her. And the mother-in-law may have herself internalized the relevant standards and feel ashamed to have such a daughter-in-law or at least feel sorry for herself in that condition. As this case illustrates, concern for happiness, understood in the Kantian way I have sketched, does often motivate self-centeredness because it often motivates us to worry about how our self and our condition compares with and will be judged by others. The standards relative to which we will be judged are often set by others' judgments, by social competitions for status or recognition, by collectively evolving expressions of approval or esteem, and so forth. It makes sense that one would be anxious about these factors because they are constantly changing, involve competition, and are hard to control and predict; and this anxiety presumably often motivates self-centeredness in all of its various forms.

I think we should grant that self-centeredness is characteristically based in a Kantian desire for happiness in something like the way I just suggested, but this is only the first part of the story that Kantians need to tell. They have a plausible account of what motivates self-centered vice, but they also need to explain why it counts as vice and they need to show that an ethically good person, who embodies their conception of good moral motivation, will not exhibit self-centered vice. To accomplish these tasks, the Kantian must argue that in cases like Murdoch's the person's self-centeredness is at odds with her duties to treat others respectfully and benevolently. And this is where I think the Kantian argument falters. To see why, we can helpfully attend to relevant details of the Kantian response to Murdoch developed by Bagnoli (2003). As she mentions, Kant's central example of respect striking down an out-of-line desire for happiness involves someone who is arrogant and *self-conceited*.

Self-conceited people come in two grades, but they all have a high opinion of themselves and believe, or act as if they believe, that their needs, desires, and

projects are more important than others' because of their greater personal worth. We can think of a CEO or famous painter who thinks that it is more important for him to have his coffee just as he likes it than for his intern to get through the day without being harshly told to remake the coffee because his desire to feel good at work is more important than hers (because he is a great man and she is a mere intern). Someone who is self-conceited in this sense thinks *he* has more reason to satisfy, and focus on the satisfaction of, his own desires and projects than others, and he presumably thinks that the same is true of *others*. This does not by itself settle, however, how he thinks of and reacts to others who do not treat his desires and needs as more important. Some self-conceited people may simply think that others are too stupid, blind, or crude to appreciate their greater worth, while others may *demand* that others recognize their greater worth. For example, the CEO may think he has the authority to demand that the intern recognize his greatness and stop complaining after he yells at her. In addition, in some cases conceited people act as if their worth provides reasons for others to forgo their *happiness* and in other cases they act as if their worth provides reasons for others to put up with vicious treatment and sacrifice their *self-respect*. For example, a CEO who yells at his intern for not getting his latte right is one thing, but a CEO who expects his interns to put up with sexual harassment is another. They might both act as if their great worth makes their desires more important than others and demand that others treat them accordingly but the former CEO is less bad because he does not expect others to put up with vicious treatment and sacrifice their self-respect.

Kant thinks that respect for the dignity of persons and the moral law strikes down self-conceit because this respect reflects a recognition that while we are naturally inclined to pursue our own happiness and that is perfectly rational, it is *never* rational to think that we have some sort of personal worth that gives others reason to disrespect themselves (let alone that this is something we have the authority to demand of others). The self-conceited CEO who expects his intern to put up with sexual harassment would be acting rationally if his high social and economic status or power made his desires so important that the intern had reason to sacrifice her self-respect in order to help satisfy them, but this supposition is false because the intern has a rationally compelling duty to treat herself with self-respect and to stand up to his insulting behavior. Moreover, the Kantian can help us understand why harassment is insulting; it implies that the person being harassed does not deserve respect when they most certainly do in virtue of their powers of rational reflection and end-setting.

While this Kantian story about how respect for dignity and the moral law can correct arrogant self-conceit is promising, I don't think that it applies to all of the relevant cases of self-centered vice. For example, the mother-in-law's initial judgment may well be based on her concern for her happiness, but it



need not involve any form of self-conceit. The mother-in-law may be quite firmly committed to respecting her daughter-in-law's dignity and merely be upset about, and caught up in, how poorly her new relation fares relative to the social norms that loom large in her social circles and mental life. She need not, furthermore, think that the daughter-in-law is worthy of contempt or that she may be treated cruelly because she is crude and impertinent; perhaps the mother just does not want her son to be married to this woman and greatly dislikes being around her. She might even defend the woman's moral right to live however she wants and deny that there is anything morally bad about her; she just very strongly wants her son be married to someone else and finds it painful to be around a daughter-in-law that she dislikes and finds embarrassing. In my view this just illustrates that self-centered people can fail to treat others as ends in themselves without thereby disrespecting them.

In addition to these doubts about whether the mother-in-law's initial judgment is disrespectful, we should note that Kant will have a hard time explaining how respect for the law can motivate the mother-in-law to adopt her second judgment. Murdoch can sensibly hold that love of the Good will motivate the mother-in-law to judge the daughter-in-law to be refreshingly youthful and unconventional, because love can move one to focus on the standards against which people and their actions look good and because she thinks love motivates us to see people as they really are. It is hard to see, however, how respect for the moral law or the daughter-in-law would require or motivate the mother-in-law to view the daughter-in-law in the light of some more romantic standard. After all, that is presumably not a standard that the mother-in-law otherwise embraces or that is embraced by the people whose approval the mother-in-law cares about. Moreover, that romantic standard is not one that respect requires us to use whenever we are forming our opinions of people and their conduct; presumably in some other context the mother-in-law could judge that someone else is crude and unrefined relative to her upper-crust social standards, and that would not be morally bad on Kant's account. For example, she might make that judgment of her recently arrived cousin from America and then give the newcomer benevolent pointers about how to change her ways and achieve the social success she desires. In this case it would be very odd to think that respect requires the woman to change her judgments and focus on the romantic judgments that render her less able to help her cousin navigate the social ladder in her new land.

We have considered a version of Murdoch's case in which the mother-in-law sticks with her initial judgment, fails to treat the daughter-in-law as an end in herself, exhibits self-centered vice, and yet is motivated by a Kantian desire for happiness (she wants to be pleased by her self, as that is reflected in the eyes of her social circle). As we have seen, this mother-in-law can be regarded as possessing a Kantian good will because she treats the daughter-in-law with

respect and benevolently wishes that she ends up happy (albeit *elsewhere*). If this is correct, then we can conclude that good Kantian moral motivation is insufficient for treating people as ends in themselves.

## Buddhism

Having pressed my worries about the adequacy of Kant's conception of treating people as final ends, I want to devote this last section to Buddhist philosophy and the prospects it holds for developing a more adequate conception.

One initial point is that although Buddhism traces suffering to belief in the self and attachment based on that belief, it is unclear whether this view has anything to say about self-centeredness. On one standard telling, the Buddhist doctrine of no-self centrally involves denial that there is a temporally enduring (or extended) self or subject that would figure in an account of personal identity across time. Once we realize this fact and take it to heart, the story goes, we will, on pain of irrationality, no longer care more about the future and past states that we would conventionally call "ours" than about the states that are conventionally attributed to other people.<sup>10</sup> Now even if this were true and it could lead us to become radically altruistic, it is not clear that it tells us anything about self-centeredness. As we have seen, selfishness and self-centeredness are distinct, and since this Buddhist argument aims at eliminating any sense of self, it does not seem amenable to accommodating any morally significant distinction between these two concerns. Of course if self-centeredness causes suffering and we are radical altruists, we will aim to eradicate it, but one can imagine circumstances where self-centeredness will be beneficial and then a radical altruistic Buddhist might promote it.<sup>11</sup> This just underscores the main point: that the no-personal-identity-across-time version of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self does not seem to support any claim about self-centered vice being a particular moral failing, resulting from a false belief about the self.

In what remains of this chapter, I turn to some other Buddhist ideas, or at least attributed views, that might be more relevant to thinking about what is wrong with self-centeredness. Specifically I have in mind Zen views of nonduality, emptiness, and without-thinking. Although his interpretations are no doubt contentious, I will take my bearings here from T. P. Kasulis's book *Zen Action, Zen Person*. There are two key ideas that I will take from this book. First, a three-way distinction between thinking, not-thinking, and without-thinking found in Dōgen. Second, the idea that Dōgen's concept of without-thinking can be fruitfully understood as combining Madhyamaka views about emptiness and the limits of conceptual thinking with Daoist ideas. Roughly, Kasulis argues that we need first to appreciate that our conceptual self-understanding is always limited

and then to attempt to achieve some sort of nonconceptual self-appreciation that we can use as a basis for action.

Kasulis's Dōgen holds that not-thinking, thinking, and without-thinking are different ways in which we can engage in activities, and that when we are engaged in the without-thinking mode we are in touch with our most fundamental or true nature, which cannot be conceptually described or understood. Of course if we think about what we are doing, have done, or will do, we will be deploying concepts and Kasulis holds that this will inevitably involve our distorting or limiting our appreciation of the relevant activities and what we are most fundamentally like. He does not think the solution is to think more and improve our concepts, as if there were a more complete account that would allow us fully to appreciate our activities or ourselves. Kasulis tries to mount an argument that this is in principle impossible, which I find unconvincing, but I think we can shelve that issue and simply grant that it is practically impossible and imprudent to try to achieve full propositional knowledge of all of the most subtle aspects of our activities or selves; we should accept that our propositional self-understanding is always bound to be partial and limited.

According to Kasulis's Dōgen, we need to be constantly reminded of the limits of our propositional self-understanding, and then be encouraged to try to achieve some sort of nonpropositional self-appreciation. This is not easy to do and it might be tempting to try to achieve this by inhibiting conceptual, propositional thought—by making our minds blank. But this aspiration to achieve a state of *not-thinking* is, the argument runs, no wiser than aspiring to achieve full and complete propositional self-understanding. If one aims to appreciate the nature of the sky after realizing that the clouds are not the sky, it is not a good strategy to spend all one's time working to clear the sky of clouds. Instead one should presumably learn to appreciate the sky directly.

Now I don't want to get bogged down in confusing questions about how to achieve this appreciation (of what is already present but unappreciated). Instead, I want to focus on Kasulis's claim that *without-thinking* is the mode of activity that obtains when one "achieves" the "goal" and appreciates one's true nature while being engaged in an activity. One might still be having propositional thoughts while in this mode, but one does not take them to be capturing the full nature of one's activities or experiences.

I am rehearsing all of these ideas drawn from Dōgen because I think they provide one way of understanding oneness and the way it might help us overcome self-centeredness. I say that achieving the mode of without-thinking can be thought of as involving insight into oneness for two reasons. First, because it is said to involve overcoming the assumption that our true nature can be understood propositionally and this entails overcoming the assumption that we can adequately be understood as subjects who bear propositional attitudes.

Second, Buddhist insight is supposed to involve seeing past the dualism of subject and object in the sense that when we attain a mode of without-thinking we appreciate that we are not separate from our environment in the way that propositional thought suggests. Sometimes Zen teachers talk explicitly in this context about our achieving insight into our identity with the environment or things in it, but I do not currently see how to understand these claims propositionally.<sup>12</sup>

In any case, my final goal here is to say something about how Buddhist insight into oneness—Buddhist appreciation of one's true nature—might help us overcome self-centeredness. To lead up to that, I am going to have to speculate some more about Buddhist insight into oneness and its internalization. The first thing to point out is that if we accept the Buddhist view then we should think we are disposed to make two mistakes. First, we are disposed to form propositional beliefs about our experiences and to assume that these are adequate. Second, we are disposed to form propositional beliefs about ourselves and to believe that they are adequate. In each case, we have to recognize the error of our ways and work to appreciate the fact that our experiences and self elude any sort of adequate propositional understanding. However, when it comes to the second mistake—the belief that our propositional beliefs about the self are adequate—there seems to be a special kind of error. When we form beliefs about ourselves, we use concepts and form judgments that fail to capture the whole truth about their object, but we also assume that we are selves of the sort that figure in the judgments. For example, if Jane is upset because her friends think she is a loser and she suspects she is, then she assumes that she is someone—a self—who could be a winner or a loser relative to whatever standard her friends are deploying. Moreover, she cares about how this self fares relative to those standards; she may thirst for success and feel an intense aversion to failure.

I believe that Buddhist insight into oneness is supposed to reveal that one is not a self of the sort that figures in judgments like "Jane is a loser" and that internalization of this insight would involve uprooting the tendencies to think, act, and feel as if one were a self of that sort. This would presumably change the content of one's experience, for example, by modifying the efficacy (if not undercutting the existence) of self-interpreting emotions such as pride and shame,<sup>13</sup> but I think it might also undercut self-centered vice of the sort that we have been discussing. To see why, recall the story that was recounted earlier about how the Kantian desire for happiness could explain most cases of self-centered vice. The Kantian story emphasizes that our human concern for happiness centrally involves a desire to reach contentment with our selves and that this involves caring about how we fare relative to social norms and how others judge us. Against this backdrop we could say that, on the Buddhist view, insight into oneness could undercut self-centered vice because it would undercut the

all-too-human desire to reach contentment with our *selves* where those are understood as the things that figure in the judgments that others make of us and that also figure in our self-interpreting emotions. The basic idea is that those selves are socially and conceptually constructed fictions and that it is a mistake to think they are real and to identify with them. This leaves room for Buddhists to still hold that there are persons or selves in some other sense, and Buddhist teachers do often talk about the Big or Real self that is discovered upon internalization of insight.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, I think that the more simple Buddhist insight into the limits of one's propositional understanding of oneself, one's experiences, and other people should help mitigate the problems of self-centered judgment and attention I identified in the first section. If one knows that one's propositional understanding is limited and is working to mitigate this fact and achieve without-thinking modes of activity, one is presumably more likely to notice that one is only thinking about some aspects of one's environment. And if one is thinking of others, one is presumably disposed to doubt that one's judgments are adequately capturing what others are like.

To end, I want to mention how the Zen Buddhist-inspired view I have sketched suggests a different way of overcoming blinkered interpretations of others than the one that Iris Murdoch famously suggests. In the case of the mother and the daughter-in-law mentioned earlier, Murdoch suggests that the mother will be able to overcome her prejudiced interpretation of the daughter-in-law as crude and impertinent by carefully attending to the daughter-in-law's actual behavior and viewing it justly and lovingly. This will lead her, Murdoch suggests, to thinking the daughter-in-law is refreshingly unconventional.

On the Zen view, however, this would still look like a mistake. It is simply replacing one fundamentally inadequate view of the daughter-in-law with another fundamentally inadequate one, and it would be better to see that no propositional evaluation of the daughter-in-law will be fully adequate. Moreover, on the Zen view, as I have sketched it, it is simply a mistake for the mother to think of the daughter-in-law who figures in her experiences as a self that could figure in judgments like "she is crude and impertinent." Assuming that she is unenlightened this is indeed how the daughter-in-law thinks of herself and she probably has a desire to reach contentment with herself. But on the Buddhist view this desire and the suffering it generates are the result of an erroneous assumption,<sup>15</sup> so if the mother-in-law internalizes insight, her way of relating to the daughter-in-law will not be shaped by beliefs about what kind of self she has. To advance further, we would have to consider the idea that to treat the daughter-in-law as an end in herself the mother must relate to her in ways that will help her achieve insight, and think about whether the mother will do this necessarily and naturally if she achieves insight. But these will have to remain topics for another occasion.

## Notes

1. The narcissism illustrated in this example highlights the way that an unrealistic and unhealthy conception of the self can be both bad for the narcissist and a source of moral failure. Interesting studies of narcissism in contemporary American culture, which are sensitive to these issues, include Twenge and Campbell 2010 and Lasch 1991.
2. Murdoch 1985.
3. For an interesting survey of different forms of neurosis, see Horney 1991. Horney was interested in Zen Buddhism and may have been influenced by it in developing her conception of the "real self" that one must develop in order to overcome neuroses.
4. For interesting discussions of fading self-centeredness and its benefits, see Ivanhoe 2010 and 2011 and Leary 2004.
5. Murdoch also mentions the need to resist the influence of social norms and prejudices, but there is dispute about whether she had a realistic sense of how pervasive their influence is or whether her account provides a helpful way of thinking about how to resist the influence of norms and prejudices. See Blum 2012, Holland 2012, and Clarke 2012.
6. Murdoch thought we could get a grasp on the noble appeal of clear vision and the struggle to achieve it by reflecting on the analogous struggles that artists, philosophers, and scientists must undergo to produce beautiful and insightful works or to discover and justify conclusions or theories.
7. Adams (2002) provides the most worked-out theistic conception that fits much of what Murdoch says in her essays.
8. I am just granting for the sake of argument that Kant's wide duty of benevolence generates a specific duty to treat one's friends, loved ones, and so on benevolently. Kant's conceptions of wide and imperfect duties are hard to understand but most interpreters seem to agree that the duty of beneficence is not a duty to *maximally* promote every person's happiness (within the bounds of respect). For debate about relevant interpretive issues, see Baron 1995 and Cumiskey 1996.
9. In the real world our motives are of course more complex and our judgments and actions may be overdetermined. Real world narcissists may be motivated by inapt concern for their own standing or happiness *and* the welfare of their loved ones, and we might imagine the mother-in-law in a Murdoch-inspired example in this way too. In this discussion I am focusing on a pure narcissist who is motivated only by her concern for her happiness, not by concern for her son or her family.
10. See, for example, Goodman 2009.
11. Julia Driver's consequentialist virtue theory implies that self-centeredness could be a virtue for this reason and presumably, as a Buddhist consequentialist, Goodman would be sympathetic to her view.
12. An example is Thich Nhat Hahn's claim in *The Miracle of Mindfulness* that insight into nonduality should lead us to think, on seeing a bird flying in the sky, "That bird is me." Perhaps we should interpret these utterances expressively, that is, as not making propositional claims but as expressions of nonpropositional insight. One's experience of seeing the bird is presumably partially constituted by the bird's flight and nonpropositional insight involves appreciation of one's experience and the ways it transcends propositional description, so perhaps saying "That bird is me" is a way of expressing awareness of some aspects of experience that are misrepresented when we think about ourselves as subjects that are independent of, and the bearers of, experiences.

13. It is worth mentioning in this context, however, that contemporary Buddhists have had trouble dealing with people who have a fragile and negative sense of self-worth and this is one of the things that has led to calls to combine Buddhism with psychoanalysis. So even if, in principle, internalized Buddhist insight into oneness should undercut tendencies to believe one is a self that is shameful, it may be that this insight is not psychologically accessible to people with such tendencies, and that Buddhist practices of cultivating insight may therefore be ineffective at reducing such people's self-centeredness.
14. For example, see Kosho Uchiyama 2005 and Shunryu Suzuki 2010.
15. For example, the suffering that Kant thinks can lead us to hate our humanity and wish we were more like brute animals.

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