

The Idolatry of Doctrine Versus Genuine Ethics

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Your true self is free from beauty and ugliness, free from God and evil. When you manifest yourself as emptiness, at that moment, you are free from everything. (Joshu Sasaki-Roshi)

I pray God to make me free of God." "If I had a God I could understand, I would no longer consider him God. (Meister Eckhart)

Religious doctrine is ironically the most egregious form of idolatry. It turns the sacred into *propositional truths*, often expressed in creeds, that are then the focus of worship that turn us away from the founding transformative *experience*. Doctrines are typically the attempt to preserve and provide a rational basis for beliefs associated with the founding experiences of religions otherwise manifested in mythopoeic accounts and ritual re-enactments of these experiences. These doctrinal beliefs are abstract and propositional. Anything that is propositionally contradictory or inconsistent with them is "false" or heretical. By focusing on what to believe, propositional truth separates us from the concrete experience of profound liberation from the condition of insecurity, fear, and selfishness that dominates much of human consciousness. Such experience opens the possibility of a radically different way of being in the world. They open us to an experience of undoing what we thought we knew, open us to wonder, awe, and reverence toward the mystery of being here. If one achieves such a liberating experience of the sacred in doctrinal religion is it not because of its doctrines, but in spite of them.¹

It is also commonly and erroneously believed that the attempt to preserve this kind of revelation and transformation in consciousness in religious doctrine provides a foundation for an ethical way of life. I have argued elsewhere², using the distinction between "morality" and "genuine ethics", that morality and genuine ethics are mutually exclusive. Morality is a rule governed system of control that is a symptom of an arrested emancipation process motivated by fear, deep hostility, and mistrust toward the individuality it is ironically supposed to protect. In other words, morality is spiritually corrupt, tainted by the very deadly sins it is supposed to guard against. Genuine ethics is a non-rule governed manifestation of the higher fulfillment of the emancipation process inherent in human experience if it comes to fulfillment. This fulfillment is revealed in the lives of paragons of genuine ethics (not morality) such as Jesus, Buddha, Socrates, and many others (that is, they "lived" the "Golden Rule" of reciprocity and compassion rather than relying on rules and their rationalization to enforce and justify any "ought." Something was achieved in their lives, a kind of spiritual freedom, that allowed for a completely different motivation than the selfishness that is typical for human beings.

It has long been known that there is a deep irony in this attempt to preserve the sacred.³ In most religions, the sacred is held to be unspeakable and only felt and "seen" in ways that are beyond

¹ Pickard, D., "The Sacred and the True." Presentation at the University of Aarhus and Danish University of Pedagogy, Endrup: Copenhagen, 2002. This talk distinguished "sacred" and "true" supported by direct experience. In addition to an expository presentation, the audience also participated in phenomenological exercises to elicit direct concrete experiences to evoke a sense of the sacred as a basis for shifts in perspective away from propositionally based habits of interpretation with regard to this distinction. The exercises facilitated a direct concrete awareness of the vulnerability that underlies all meaningful experience that motivates and attaches to belief and propositional truth as well as our tendency toward religious faith.

² Pickard, D., "Nietzsche, Emancipation, & Truth" in *New Nietzsche Studies*, (SUNY), Winter, 1997, pp. 85-109, and "The Problem of Reflexivity in Habermasian Universalism," *Auslegung*, V. 19, #1, Winter, 1993, pp 1-20.

³ I draw on the insights of many: Plato, to Meister Eckhart, Rabbe, Whitelhead, Nietzsche, Rudolf Otto, Eliade, Buber, for example, in the West, and Gautama Buddha, Chan and Zen Buddhism, Rumi, and others in the East. A definition of the sacred cannot be finally given, but the attempt can direct us to a perspective from which we might detect it in our

our rational grasp and only pointed to in figurative and poetic language. So what I say here is nothing new. This writing is simply to reiterate what needs to be said repeatedly in response to the most damaging human activity with regard to the felt sense of the mystery of meaningful consciousness and especially the enigma of suffering. That most damaging activity is the human propensity to attempt to capture the sacred in doctrine and propositional truths.

Religious doctrine is deeply ironic: Doctrine is the worst form of idolatry. It makes an idol of its supposed truth, that is, it is most damaging to the possibility of a deep sense of the sacred, AND it does not provide a foundation for an ethical way of life. Because such experience is instead, it robs us of the emancipatory movement in consciousness that can give rise to a genuine ethics. The founders of religions seem to be high examples of such genuine ethics and it is a further irony that the doctrines that are formed in their names are anti sacred and anti ethical. Rules vs genuine ethics.

The enigma of suffering is at the core of all religion. At its best, religion is deep humility in response to the mystery that there is a world at all and the mystery of our vulnerability, specifically our ignorance and fallibility that leads us to miss the mark (sin). Our condition cannot be captured in any mythological accounts or scientific explanations. It has been known from the earliest accounts by humans that this attempt to know is fraught with danger, with the illusion that one can be as "God" and know such things. "The Fall" in the Old Testament is precisely due to this arrogance and innocent ignorance that left Adam and Eve vulnerable to iniquity and horrendous loss. Once knowledge begins to "make its bloody entrance" our idealized mythical original condition is lost and it is in need of recovery via redemption for this most egregious sin. We see through the art of our greatest tragedians this fallen condition of ignorance, fallibility, and arrogance that leads inevitably to tragedy and loss. The fundamental mystery is that there is consciousness at all and that its very finitude is the condition for all that is "good" and "bad" all our cravings and aversions and illusions about permanence that lead us to suffer.

In the West and in much of Eastern thought, the problem of suffering and/or evil (since they are not synonyms), is seen as perhaps THE question at the heart of the mystery of vulnerability and meaningful experience. Why is there anything at all, but much more pressing, why do we suffer? We feel compelled to explain this and also to ascribe blame, if not to others, to ourselves. We must have done something to offend the gods.

The Greek adage: "From suffering, wisdom" seems to promise some semblance of redeeming significance to this enigma, if in fact wisdom would arise. But in the religious art of Greek tragedy we are typically left only to ponder the enormity of senseless suffering. It appears that we must face the absurdity of it all armed only with the courage of Sisyphus to give what meaning we can to our lives. Man does not live by bread alone. Mere survival, though a necessary condition for meaningful human life, is not sufficient. Weak scientific explanations of the utility of pain or religious abstractions about salvation do nothing to help understand our basic deep emotional-psychological vulnerability. How do we address the profound horror we experience in the face of the worst suffering, especially suffering caused by others out of ignorance, cruelty, or indifference? No amount of naturalistic explanation or "in the grand scheme" type of answer seems to come close to addressing this profound mystery and horror. The Book of Job confronts this issue directly but never has an answer. In the end, Job's commitment paid off and he was restored. But he only affirms what he knew to begin with: God is powerful and not to be questioned or understood, only obeyed. At the end of his encounter with God, when Job says: "Now that I have beheld thee, woe unto man," he knows this power is whimsical and cannot be trusted. Justice is a matter of power. In the New Testament, we are introduced to an all loving, all forgiving God, rather than an all powerful God to be feared (though the New Testament is also a book of the worst retribution). But still, nothing in the New Testament accounts for the suffering in the world and primarily gives only "the solution," not an explanation. Man's Fall in the "Old Testament" is mythologically-psychologically powerful but, if taken as an explanation, it is notoriously inadequate. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* famously confronts the problem, but also has no

experience: the sacred is that which elicits in human consciousness to some degree a complete loss of ego that opens up the possibility of living in a profoundly emancipated way. It moves consciousness.

answer, only the possibility of being in the world lovingly as depicted in the character of Father Zossima. To overcome selfishness and to love is the highest and most fulfilling form of life for a human being. Such is a sacred life, a life of spiritual maturity and genuine ethics, a lived felt sense of reciprocity and compassion for others. I agree with this, but it has nothing inherently to do with theism and is antithetical to moralities of good and evil that are typically associated with theism. The sacred is that which makes possible a transformation of the heart into an attitude of Love which is the ultimate and most powerful response to deep vulnerability, insecurity and suffering. This too is no explanation of suffering. But I will try to show why seeking such explanations is itself deeply problematic, has nothing to do with the sacred, and impedes such transformation.

Suffering is a loss of equilibrium, loss of the sense of ease and flow of meaningful experience. This rupture of equilibrium gives rise to craving especially craving for a permanent condition of equilibrium in the face of temporality and impermanence. The basic temporal nature of finitude and vulnerability is the condition of possibility of suffering, horror, and anguish to begin with. Vulnerability is the condition of suffering and suffering is the condition for the possibility of the idea of evil. The shock of evil is the shock of coming face to face with temporality and vulnerability. It is a rupture of abstract expectation, a rupture of habit, and elicits a sense of helplessness in the face of the dispossession that the "I" experiences. Wisdom in both East and West has been seen, at least in part, as the development and exercise of our ability to cease our "self-focused" response to suffering, (and its causes: craving, and aversion) and in some way (whether amor Dei intellectualis, aslama, bodhisattva compassion, amor fati, etc.), embrace the whole despite the finitude from which we always see/experience things and suffer over them. Again, this is no explanation.

Religion is a response to our felt sense of vulnerability and our suffering. But religious experience is a species of human experience and it is with human experience that we must begin, a phenomenology of human experience, then a phenomenology of religious experience in that larger context of human experience. What is central to human experience is making sense or meaning making. Above all else, in response to our vulnerability, we need things to make sense. We need to be oriented, be at home in the world, and have a sense of purpose and belonging, if not control. We are beings who can be brought into meaning, into sense making. The notions of meaning and vulnerability seem to be coequally fundamental. Without vulnerability there is no meaning and without meaning there is no awareness of vulnerability. Meaning is the condition of vulnerability and vice versa. Sense making is the source of the self, the "I" (see the autobiography of Helen Keller). Making sense and developing an identity is a co-creative relationship with others in and through language and language is at the root of all meaningful human experience and endeavor, including religious doctrine. Religious doctrine is a response to the fundamental and intense desire to make sense, to explain, especially to explain power and suffering and to cope with our vulnerability. Each cultural tradition develops ways of making sense of our basic finite temporal vulnerable condition and the mystery of being here. But there is always a very uncomfortable even violent tension between religious experience and religious doctrine. That tension finally comes down to either holding onto the self that so often includes the baggage of moralities of good and evil or finally jettisoning this in order to move toward the sacred which has nothing to do with truth, retribution, and being right.

Was the defining moment for Christianity the institution of the Nicene Creed or the life of Jesus? If it was the later, then why not just call it striving to be awake (in fact, the name of Buddhism) from which love and *genuine ethics* can more readily emerge? That possibility is open to all humanity, not merely Christians who (are required to) believe they have found "the way." To the extent one takes the entirely abstract Nicene Creed as the defining moment, to that extent the possibility of emulating the wakefulness of Jesus is diminished. Idolatry is an ever present danger. Every major religion has to reinvent itself, reinvigorate itself with some sort of mysticism from time to time, cleanse itself of the idolatrous accretions that arise from the arrogance of finitude, from the craving of human finitude to secure itself in some truth, some object of belief, in some explanation and justification as if these are not born of our finite and fallible condition. This arrogance of finitude, this failure to sufficiently acknowledge our limits and ignorance is seen in all wisdom traditions as the root and source of suffering. And so the desire to preserve the founding experience of a religion in doctrine

invariably tends toward idolatry, a movement away from the sacred. It makes an idol of truth. Doctrinal religion is an idolatrous betrayal of the sacred and metaphysics is an ironic betrayal of the wonder and creativity that gives rise to it. The morality of good and evil is associated with metaphysics. In contrast, *genuine ethics* is associated with an emancipatory movement toward the sacred. Jesus was an example of genuine ethics. He was the ultimate heretic. This is not just a coincidence. Genuine non judgmental love and compassion can only move away from doctrine and is always heretical. Love is the ultimate most powerful response to the vulnerability of finitude, not doctrine.

A Christian colleague said to me that though he admires some things about Buddhism, it appears to him that it does not quite know what to do with evil. He is right that Buddhism does not deal with evil, which it takes as an abstraction and is entirely focused instead on the concrete fact of suffering. Buddhism does not attempt to give any metaphysical account or justification for its “truths,” only a descriptive phenomenology of features of consciousness as integral to a practice that can allow us to respond differently to suffering so it is reduced and compassion is increased. Buddhism is a heretical reaction to the highly ritualized and metaphysical religion of the 6th century BCE in India as Jesus appears to be a similar heretical response to the entrenched legalism of Judaism of the 1st century BCE. In Buddhism, the sacred is the capacity in each one of us for wakefulness and transformation. Buddhism is focused not on what to believe, but on what thought and action impedes or promotes wakefulness and transformation.

But we need look no further than Christianity itself to find that evil is not dealt with but completely left behind. The Original Sin of the Old Testament is obliterated. Jesus is a high example of what it is to be beyond good and evil. What would a consciousness be like that has overcome the desire for revenge and is genuinely capable of indiscriminate love:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. **(Matthew 5:43-48)**

This is the core of Christianity, not its truths, its doctrines. Its core is the possibility of such self-overcoming and indiscriminate love. To genuinely love one’s “enemies” means the world is no longer made up of friends/allies and enemies. The insecurities that lead to fear and hatred and desire for revenge against others is no longer present. The self is not the center. Love is the center. Christianity is a religion of love, not divisive doctrine and a creed that is exclusive. One must believe, one must have faith in order to be a Christian? If we distinguish the transformative founding experience of Jesus with the religion that formed to protect this transformative possibility and spread the good news, got it completely wrong. the self does not get saved. The “self” is a coping strategy that one must overcome and to wish to have it saved for eternity is an illness! One leaves such self-centeredness behind. Jesus was freed from the desire to be saved and is exactly a great model of the possibility. The small self and its petty insecurities no longer dominate. It is the recognition as in Buddhism that all people have the Buddha nature and that nature simply leaves evil behind. Jesus truly was beyond good and evil and thus could love without distinction. The greatest benefit of this is to the one who lives in this liberated state and brings limitless compassion to all beings. Would Jesus have loved Hitler? That is a rhetorical question. And a person who can love as God, love all beings without distinction, is exactly the completed being beyond good and evil no longer driven by the desires and aversions that give rise to the notion of evil to begin with. Such a God would not blame, would not punish, would make no distinction whatever between believers or unbelievers, the wicked or the righteous. That is what Matthew 5:43-48 tells us. But doctrinal Christians allow their truths to trump this and retain the divisiveness of the small self. What would such a consciousness be like? It would be so liberated, so

completely secure in the wisdom of insecurity that there would be no desire for being saved at all. Only a condition of attachment gives rise to the desire and craving for salvation. Only a selfish and self-centered consciousness driven by insecurity, fear, and hatred can divide the world into good and evil.

Jesus and Buddha overcame the arrogance of finitude and this freed them to simply love and have deep compassion for what often seems like a hopeless condition of meaningless suffering, iniquity, and death. That such transformation is possible in the face of the mystery and enigma of consciousness and suffering has been manifestly realized in virtually every culture, not by an abstract God, but in exemplary concrete human lives. THAT is the evangel, the good news that access to such transformation does not lie in something outside ourselves, though this possibility is part of the gift of our cultural heritage and it is understood that it requires both the support of a community but finally a personal journey, the courage to give up the last vestiges of clinging. And I believe if we take the Gospel of Thomas as our point of departure instead of what Paul and the canonical gospels did to the life and teachings of Jesus that eventually led to the idolatry of the Nicene Creed, then Jesus is among the highest examples of why this good news is not just talk, not just more illusion in the service of the ego, but concrete evidence of this most wonderful possibility in the face of the “slaughter bench of history,” the arrogance of finitude, and the enigma at the heart of human vulnerability and meaningful awareness.

Such transformation is only possible AFTER jettisoning all religious and metaphysical illusions without turning to the equally arrogant illusions of scientism or rationalism (making science and reason idols instead of seeing them as the limited though indispensable tools and means that they are). This, of course, is NOT anti religion any more than it is anti-science. It is a critique of what prevents the movement toward transformation and genuine ethics, namely the arrogance of finitude. And that requires precisely skepticism about received opinions and habits of thought and especially a critical stance toward dogma and ideology whether religious, political, or scientific because these drastically inhibit our spiritual possibilities.

The Buddha laid out a course of pragmatic skepticism necessary for the movement toward wakefulness and transformation.

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it. (popular translation of a section of the Kalama Sutra, a sermon by the Buddha in the 6th century BCE)

Critical thought is a necessary condition, though certainly not a sufficient one, for self-overcoming and moving away from the cultural and personal attachments and beliefs that ensnare us. The true role of philosophy is NOT theories and system building, but UNDOING what we thought we knew to allow us a much more honest and fresh start in the pursuit of wisdom (Pickard, “The Eros of Wisdom” 2005). One will never overcome having beliefs and a historically situated perspective. What transformation means is radically changing our relationship to our vulnerability, to our cravings that are reflected in our beliefs so that we no longer allow these to govern our lives and prevent the highest possibility for a human life, a life of love and genuine ethics.

Jesus and Buddha became agents of transformation for others and the core of the traditions that grew out of their founding experiences can always be brought back to life because this possibility resides at the core of every finite being to whom things matter. Mattering presupposes a self and its vulnerability and meaning, the pre-conditions of suffering. In addressing suffering, Jesus and Buddha did not just talk about the possibility of living here and now in such a liberated state in which they could experience their vulnerability to its depths, not as fear and insecurity, but as love. They were living examples of what extent this possibility of self-overcoming can be realized for finite suffering

meaning-making beings. "Judge not," "turn the other cheek," "forgive others their trespasses," are not goals. They are not commandments to be followed in order to receive reward, but are "gifts" to ourselves and each other that we do not attempt to give. One does not struggle for or aim at these. They are by-products, the fruits of such liberated consciousness, such self-overcoming. No rules and commandments are necessary to this, certainly not rules of good and evil. Even the ethics of reciprocity is not wakefulness, and rather a by-product of it. Genuine ethics is not merely the sensible principle of reciprocity stated, for example, in the Golden Rule. All reasoned ethics is only critical thought that attempts to approach the doorstep of genuine ethics. Critical thought is necessary but not a sufficient condition for genuine ethics. This requires a transformation of the heart to cross over and beyond such principles and rules, beyond good and evil and beyond any attempt to justify and explain. One does not believe in this or that morality and "try" to live up to it. The need for rules and commandments is in fact a symptom of the absence of such liberated consciousness. Such rules and commandments only tend to wind up perpetuating habits that arise from the arrogance of finitude.

Moralities of good and evil are inherently destructive and antithetical to the sacred and to the liberated consciousness that can approach the sacred beyond the arrogance of finitude. There is no true liberation or freedom if one is caught in the problem of evil. And there is no relief in any mythological-metaphysical accounts of the origin of evil. These accounts do nothing to promote emancipation from the craving for salvation. Such abstract accounts of salvation only partly assuage insecurity but play into the desire that gives rise to such idolatrous thinking that overall increases human suffering. It is astonishing to listen to erudite followers of various religions talk about heaven and what it will be like. This is literal non-sense that does nothing but obscure and defer the real hermeneutical task of self-understanding and self-overcoming that can lead to genuine ethics and away from the punitive, vengeful morality of good and evil. Such thinking is completely focused on preservation of the self and the meaning and expectation one is stuck in. It is forfeiting the here and now of temporal impermanence, the place of our possible liberation, to the utter self-centered abstraction and illusion born of a craving for permanence. It has nothing to do with the sacred. Clinging to such metaphysical illusions substitutes them for the sacred. The very definition of idolatry is to substitute the self (and its truths/attachments) for the sacred. This is the arrogance of finitude, not the utter humility that arises in a genuine self-annihilating experience of the sacred that extinguishes all illusion of such truths.

The beautiful language of sacred texts that arises from liberated and reverent consciousness truly can be transformative, but not if we do not know how to read these texts, do not bring a certain readiness to be transformed even if it is a surprise to us. As Augustine rightly believed, the Christian Bible was not a book of literal truths, in which case it is full of self-destructive contradictions, but was far more valuable and important than anything propositional logic and literal discourse can reveal. It is a book of spiritual transformation regardless how one interprets it. There is no "true" interpretation (though there could certainly be better or worse interpretations). It is the spiritual outcome that determines whether one has read it well and touched its "truth." Recall the famous remark: "One cannot have an ass looking into the scriptures and see an angel staring back." One must be ready to read a sacred text. One must have begun to understand the hermeneutical task of seeing through the illusions of our habits of meaning and our truths so we are not reading sacred texts to support these habits and truths instead of doing the hard and risky work that self-overcoming entails. If one reads the Bible in order to be saved, one is already practicing idolatry in the service of preserving the self and assuaging its insecurities. But the path to the sacred is to do the opposite, to go the way to one's insecurities, one's vulnerability. A sacred text will not do the work for you. It ONLY becomes a vehicle for the sacred when you have moved seriously toward emptying out the arrogance of finitude. Otherwise, any reading of such texts will only be idolatrous attempts to support one's habits of commitment to the self and its insecurities, cravings and aversions. Rabia, the famous Muslim Sufi, exposes one of the worst wrong-headed approaches to the sacred:

O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of hell, burn me in hell, if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.

Buddhism could easily embrace this expression despite its non-theism because it is about utter emancipation from the craving and aversion of the self that opens onto donative love, compassion, and genuine ethics. But overcoming all worldly attachments in a transformation to a God centered meaning is only trading one large attachment for many small ones. The Buddhist exhortation: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" is completely enigmatic to Christians attached to God. Meister Eckhart's "I pray God to make me free of God" seems to move in the direction of this Buddhist insight. However, any attachment (including God, Jesus, or the Buddha) impedes freedom, diverts it, impedes the sacred process of self-overcoming. Freedom is essential to moving toward the sacred mystery of vulnerability and the possible transformation of this vulnerability into love instead of attachment, insecurity, craving, and aversion that are the root of iniquity. It has been demonstrated many times over that attachment to, devotion to, or worship of God is not essential to wakefulness. Enlightenment, whether one approaches it through theism or non theism, includes the emancipation from the desire for salvation. Devotion to God may provide a transition to a much less self-centered way of living. But God-centered religions always run the risk of attachment to worship, dogmatic truth, and following commandments that can just as easily lead to tyranny. What is at issue is not attachment to abstract belief about what is propositionally true about God or anything else, but transformation of the heart, a way of being. Even Augustine, who understood this, nonetheless, in his yearning for Truth/God/Salvation, was caught in a form of craving. His suffering over his iniquity was itself a compulsion and an aversion that still sometimes dominated his life, even if he did great good (along with the evil he certainly visited on others such as the Donatists). In Buddhism, such yearning and craving is something to be observed as an artifact of human vulnerability. No matter how unnamable one pretends God to be, our needs and prejudices are inescapably bound up with such projections no matter how nebulous. Must one have an object for one's self-transcending love? Can that object of reverence simply be the mystery and enigma that we are, that we suffer, that our vulnerability is the condition of possibility for emancipation and self-transcendence? Of all the gospels floating around in the first century after the death of Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas seems to be least dogmatic, (says nothing of the immaculate conception, the crucifixion, resurrection, or the trinity), but is focused on an emancipated way of living here and now, not salvation in a hereafter based on a particular set of beliefs.

Jesus and Buddha were not talking about salvation and preservation of the self and were not aiming to assuage its insecurities by giving illusions of permanence to cling to. There is a dignity and maturity in embracing one's impermanence that also allows one to truly be here now with some semblance of the age old quest for sophisticated innocence. Jesus and Buddha were living examples of overcoming the desire for salvation and overcoming the self-centered craving and aversion that lead us into iniquity and away from the sacred, away from the genuine Bildungs-process of self-overcoming and emancipation that can lead to genuine ethics, the ethics of a transformed heart and donative love.

Evil is an artifact of suffering. If we could not suffer, there would be no perspective from which to experience and label something evil. Without vulnerability there would be no suffering at all. So why is there consciousness at all such that suffering can arise? Buddhism finds this question misplaced, sees it as a diversion that creates more suffering. Buddhism simply begins with the phenomenon of vulnerability and especially the epiphenomenon of craving (most basically for permanence in a condition of impermanence). Buddhism eschews any attempt to explain the mystery of suffering in terms of evil or any account of a fall through original sin. Even the use of the widespread notion of karma to explain suffering is only used in Buddhism to refer to the cause and effect of conscious states and is not a metaphysical explanation as it is in Hinduism. The point is not to find an explanation for evil, nor is it to ignore evil, but to see evil as a product of vulnerability and ignorance of the nature of consciousness, especially its inherent emancipatory possibility. The craving for explanations only magnifies suffering since no metaphysical explanation can reach into the heart of

the enigma of being here, of meaning, of vulnerability, and suffering. Any abstract account moves toward the arrogance of finitude and an idolatrous separation from the concrete sacred core of vulnerability. Buddhism is a practical rather than a metaphysical or epistemological response to the immediate phenomenological condition of suffering which is seen as rooted in craving, habit and expectation. As the story goes in Buddhist lore: A monk repeatedly posed the question of the origin of evil and suffering to the Buddha to which the Buddha finally said (I paraphrase): "If you were shot with a poison arrow, would you not immediately remove it if you could or would you wait until you could identify who or what was responsible for it and provide an explanation for it?" We have no way to penetrate the mystery of suffering (who or what is responsible), but we do have the means for overcoming it (the 8-fold path). Emancipation from the illusion of self is the path to overcoming suffering, blame, desire for revenge. Buddhism has virtually no concern with blame or retribution, nor did Jesus. In stark contrast, these are deep characteristics of the Abrahamic religions and Persian Zoroastrianism that had an immense influence on them. This stain and dis-ease of "ressentiment," as Nietzsche calls it, is ironically anathema to the life of Jesus. It is obvious that these religions do not reduce to Nietzsche's hyperbolic "ressentiment" but they certainly foster it and would be unrecognizable without it, without the power of God to punish or save.

The notion of evil is intimately related to desire for revenge. It is the primary "human, all too human" response to horror when it is abstracted into the morality of good versus evil (whether us versus them or me versus myself). The powerful human penchant for self-deception is a response to the untenable cognitive dissonance that arises from the internalization of the morality of good and evil. This internalization is related to the deepest human spiritual malaise or dis-ease: desire for revenge. Desire for revenge both motivates and is justified by moralities of good and evil. The lives of the Buddha and Jesus are high examples of having overcome this disease. Morality and genuine ethics are mutually exclusive. The first is a symptom of an arrested emancipation process; the second is the higher fulfillment of it. What would such an emancipated consciousness be like? What are its characteristics? This is unimaginable from within moralities of good and evil. Even for those who see its possibility, like Alcibiades at the end of the Symposium, we are left unable to clearly articulate it, but only recognize it and point to it in its living embodiment, the seeming miracle of Socrates. Can we construct a curriculum, as Plato attempts to do in the *Republic*, that might prepare for and lead to this kind of virtuous life?

If the highest good is freedom to pursue my possibilities, evil is a word that denotes the destruction, the ruination of my possibilities and my integrity at the hands of another or through my own iniquity. There is always the struggle between self-overcoming and emancipation, on the one hand, and clinging to the self and its cravings and aversions, on the other. Emancipation, self-overcoming, and transformation are an inherent tendency in human experience. Evil, whether perpetrated by others or by my own iniquity is essentially a loss of this movement toward emancipation and pursuit of my highest possibilities. The basic feature of consciousness, craving and aversion, are habits that can dominate us, rob us of the highest possibilities that are only open through the cultivation and exercise of our freedom. The Christian use of the Greek word "sin," "to miss the mark" is exactly the right word for this loss of freedom due to iniquity that arises from the failure to genuinely engage in the herculean task of self-overcoming. The mark of mature human consciousness is equanimity and compassion that arise from the absence of craving and aversion and all the judging, failed expectation, hatred and retaliation that comes from this. Even if such craving and aversion are present, they can be merely observed as features of consciousness, rather than allowed to motivate one's thoughts and actions. At the center of such mature self-overcoming is a transformed consciousness that resides in the liberated space of love and compassion. It is impossible to "take advantage" of, disappoint, or harm someone who has evolved to this level of maturity. There is no handle on such people as Socrates, Jesus, or Buddha by which to control them, thus they present real threats to those who crave power and control over others instead of themselves. But to appropriate the apt word "sin" and associate it essentially with evil is a fundamental mistake. As long as one is concerned with evil, one has not really come to terms with suffering and the arrogance of finitude. Finitude cannot be overcome as we envision in our metaphysical myths of salvation. Liberation is not

salvation; it is a life enhancing transformed relationship to finitude. The term “sin,” if we take it literally can be a sign for us of the hermeneutical task and challenge incumbent on humans collectively and individually to embrace their finitude and to see self-overcoming rather than self-attachment as our on-going task. It requires us to come to realize we live in our meanings that are always already underway and that require us to overcome those habits of meaning in order to waken to new possibilities of being in the world. These habits and loci of meaning and identity that we call personality and character arise in the conflict of selves struggling to meet need and desire. They are coping strategies that emerge as we are brought into meaningful awareness through bodily contact, feeling, and language. These habitual strategies are to be modified, outgrown, transformed, not reified and preserved in some completely abstract atemporal hereafter. Reifying the self in a metaphysics of presence only magnifies the suffering and carnage of the world. Buddhist Logic is critical philosophical thinking that aims to undo every abstract illusory belief we hold with regard to the self and the world. But this is only as a preparation for something far more important. One finds similar critical thought in, for example, Hume and Nietzsche and much of contemporary postmodern critiques of modernity. But in Buddhism it is specifically designed to free us from our habits of belief and the arrogance of finitude often by eliciting a kind of intellectual or cognitive crisis that can open a path to the practice of mindfulness, a phenomenology that keeps its focus on what is phenomenologically real or present rather than abstractions that are motivated by our insecurities. The path to enlightenment is away from such abstractions to the immediacy of the here and now. It is in ideas of the past where we harbor resentment, desire for revenge, and chronophobia (fear of time and change) and it is in ideas of the future that we have hope for satisfying our desires and attachments as well as salvation of the abstraction we call the self. We are fixated on these instead of the possibility of freedom in the moment, a freedom that allows us to love unconditionally. Past and future are no longer prisons but represent the trajectory of our possibilities for emancipation and fulfillment rather than merely pursuing satisfaction of desire rooted in attachment, craving, and aversion. The here and now is of course always in the context of the co-created meaning of tradition, memory, and projection. However, there is a radical difference in how one interprets one’s past and projects one’s future. That is why the past is never fixed, is always open to more enlightened reinterpretation, and the future and past can appear quite different from a radically changed present.

That there is temporal awareness at all, identity through time at all, the capacity of finitude to think things other than they are, to project a “should” onto the flow of existence, to think the pure abstractions of infinity, perfection, and the absolute are all symptoms of vulnerability and the capacity for meaning. The recognition of our basic hermeneutical condition and task of self-understanding entails giving up the illusion of possessing truth and elicits a sense of humility that, if deep enough, is beyond good and evil, not as an anti morality but as an emancipation from morality that can open to genuine ethics. Morality is a response to the wound of existence that tries to posit and impose a solution, justice, salvation on the enigma of suffering and its condition, namely, temporality and vulnerability. The wisdom of insecurity and embrace of impermanence engenders the capacity to overcome such chronophobia which is what motivates possessiveness and the myth of the given in the face of continual impermanence and loss.

We are vulnerable beings to whom things matter, finite beings who, in experiences of wonder, horror, anguish and awe, can be brought into an immediate awareness of our nothingness and the nothingness of any truths that arise in our craving to overcome finitude and vulnerability. It is in such awareness that we can experience the cravings and aversions of others as symptoms of this deep vulnerability that all humans share in common. Our cravings and aversions and the truths we use to support them are what divide us and are what lead us to iniquity (a kind of performative self-referential contradiction to our basic nature of self-transcendence). Our deep vulnerability is our shared condition from which wakefulness and compassion is our shared possibility. Wakefulness means an intimate awareness of emotional attachments and habits of belief that govern our thought and behavior. Wakefulness includes awareness that most of what we believe is not supported by either experience or reason and that much of what we call iniquity arises from ignorance about this. Wakefulness allows clearing away illusions and insecurities such that compassion can much more

readily arise. Wakefulness includes the awareness that conflict is unavoidable and that it is the motivation and path of self-overcoming that moves us toward wakefulness. Answers and truths arrest this process. The self is a construction and conflict is an artifact of the habits of craving and aversion that give rise to suffering. Emotional and physical pain is a manifestation of the same vulnerability that allows us to experience joy and pleasure and to exercise our freedom to move toward self-transcendence that is inherent to human experience. In a liberated consciousness such as Jesus and Buddha, there is nothing to impede unconditional love. The question: "Would Jesus have loved Hitler?" is a rhetorical question. The question of blame and evil does not arise.

The problem of suffering and evil is the problem of being a self, a being to whom things matter, a co-created identity that becomes the locus of meaning who can suffer from this mattering and meaning. In the West the self has typically been something to preserve and protect. In Buddhism illusions about the self are at the base of virtually all human problems. The Buddhist deconstruction of the self is ancient and was never seen as a loss or a danger but as the very means to salvation from suffering. In Buddhism, it is the radical misunderstanding of the self that is at the center of suffering to begin with. Seeing through the constructed habits we call a self is the means to wakefulness. This is not accessible as long as craving for salvation of the self dominates one's orientation. Such wakefulness opens the possibility of living beyond good and evil, beyond blame and guilt, a life of genuine love as Jesus and Buddha seem to be living examples of. Such a life is decisive, not a belief, truth, or doctrine. Truth is still centrally important to us, but as a practical matter as well as a matter of increasing insight in the conflict of interpretations that arises in human finitude. Whenever I come to see things from the perspective of another, it contributes to my Bildungs-process of self-transcendence. This is not acquiescing to the temporary interpretation of another, which like all interpretation is *unterwegs*. It is simply always being aware of one's own fallibility and that one can learn from the perspectives of others even if not what they want us to agree to.

The question of personal identity and what and how real one takes the "self" to be is a critical point of departure in even opening the possibility of "self" overcoming. Cultural habit may make it difficult to even engage in the process in Western civilization that has reified the self in so many ways. Yet Hume and Nietzsche, for example, seemed to successfully deconstruct the self to reveal it as a mere artifact of language and collective need or convenience and both of them were deeply concerned with suffering. But the *practical* pursuit of enlightenment, which is so often inherent in Eastern approaches to enlightenment, is more often than not relegated to religion in the West where the goal is not so much practical enlightenment, but salvation through truth. However, the understanding of the self as a kind of illusion is rare in the West whereas it is dominant in the East. But even so, there is a diversity of approaches to understanding the self. In Hinduism, for example, the unreality of the self is built into its central metaphysical traditions, but in its stead is the completely abstract metaphysical notion of atman or soul. For Hindus, the personality/body that distinguishes one person from another in practical life is an artifact of incarnation that ceases with death. The atman or soul, however, has no distinguishing features other than the karma it has accumulated in its chain of incarnations. It only continues in the illusion of separateness via its karma until it is freed of the cycle of cause and effect to be reunited with Brahman/Atman from which it was never actually separated (they have the problem of explaining the emergence of the first karma in this attempted metaphysical explanation of reality). In contrast, in more than two millennia of Buddhist logic there has been the highly skillful and rigorous undermining of the coherence of any accounts of the self and personal identity. In that tradition, since there is no phenomenon that corresponds to the self or soul (similar to Hume), they simply do not engage in "soul" talk or any other metaphysical talk. What we call the self and personal identity does not show up phenomenally, only the *Skandhas* (Sanskrit "bundle" or "aggregate"), a succession of conscious states that are held together through conditioned habit or karma. But karma is no longer a metaphysical notion but rather a psychological notion used to account for how the idea of self arises in language and consciousness. The word "self" is a convenient designator for this bundle of skandhas, but does not name anything real in itself. The skandhas are phenomenally real but not because they belong to a "self" that is experiencing them. Rather, it is the habit of language, the use of pronouns and the reality of attraction and aversion that give rise to the habit of the skandhas being ascribed to a

self. But the self shows up nowhere in experience. The ability to identify the temporal processes of consciousness that give rise to suffering is greatly enhanced by Buddhist logic. Such critical thinking exposes the vacuousness of many of our cultural and cognitive habits about the self and reveals them to be purely abstract. They do not map on to concrete experience at any point, but such assumptions and beliefs about the self greatly magnify suffering. These critical skills go hand in hand with the meditative exercises by which we have first hand concrete awareness of what actually takes place in consciousness as opposed to what we are habituated to believe. If one does not see the self as a set of deconstructible habits, or as an illusion, a non-phenomenon, then the serious spiritual engagement of self-overcoming and meeting the challenge of the arrogance of finitude with all its intellectual and religious idolatries, is nearly insurmountable.

We face a serious problem however: How do we protect individuals if we give up the notion of the self upon which Western notions of sovereignty and justice are based and which seem to be necessary elements of morality. The proper relation between the collective and the individual is one of the oldest most fundamental questions. In this regard, it can be useful to distinguish morality as that which is imposed from without and genuine ethics as something that emerges from within the process of one's emancipation from precisely such externally imposed, even if well intentioned, constraints and obligations. Genuine ethics is a much higher level of responsibility. Genuine ethics, the ethics of love, depends on self-overcoming. It is genuine because it is truly "mine," not something from the "they" or the God of the "they" and it arises naturally as we come to not only understand but live our emancipatory potential. Such ethics of recognition of the other as myself, the ethics of reciprocity out of understanding and love, is inherent in the very nature of human experience and reveals itself in every culture as some form of the "Golden Rule."

If your entire ethics is built on the lived-felt imperative to reduce suffering and do no harm as in Buddhism, which does not come from an external "objective" morality based on divine command or Reason or both, but arises from a *practice* which can engender a transformation in consciousness, an awake consciousness, then all the metaphysical grounding of morality becomes not only useless, since it does not get us all the way to genuine lived ethics, but can be seen for what it is, a terrible impediment that plays right into the arrogance of finitude and the idolatry so often associated with it. Genuine ethics will not arise until morality and the attempt to ground it in metaphysics or calculation is eliminated or at least such legalism and literalism is set aside. I realize that pragmatically until many more humans are awake, we may need Plato's and Spinoza's noble lie (moral rules). Order is not a small issue. The movement toward the unnamable sacred is the movement away from the dishonesty and pretense of the metaphysics of presence and myth of the given, away from selfishness, pride, and idolatry, away from cybernetic thinking that is only about control in the service of efficiency, safety, security, and comfort. At its best, Christianity is perhaps the most dangerous of religions if we focus on Jesus instead of the Nicene Creed. He lived the most dangerous of lives, a life of embracing his deep vulnerability and it is so very ironic that what he discovered from this has been made nearly inaccessible by doctrines intended to preserve this precious possibility.

For Kierkegaard the self is an attempt at a synthesis of the infinite and finite, the eternal and the temporal, possibility and necessity. For the Buddhist, the ideas of the eternal, infinite, and possible are just that: ideas. They are manifestations of something prior which Kierkegaard is acutely aware of which is the struggle to achieve a functional unity (be a self) in a condition of conflict. Kierkegaard was keenly aware of what it is to be a human being struggling for peace and also keenly aware of the unifying power of commitment to transform one's identity, one's world. For him, the only hope for overcoming the inevitable despair of conflicted individuality is a leap of utter and unconditional commitment with all one's heart in order to unify an otherwise diffracted self. This is not merely a change **in** my world but a radical change **to** my world. This is already a recognition of the centrality of meaning, of what it is to be a self, a conflict of meanings and desires. Buddhism sees the condition of being trapped in one's meaning, in one's self, as the source of suffering. But rather than a transformative total leap, one undertakes a careful phenomenological deconstruction of one's meaning both critically and phenomenologically that can at some point lead to a gradual or sudden transformative breakthrough (kensho in Japanese Zen Buddhism). For Kierkegaard one must have an

infinite passion for something finite, God in time (Jesus Christ). Both are right that the truly sacred or religious experience is impossible **in** my world. It requires an utter and total loss or transformation **of** my world (self-centered habits of consciousness and meaning). But for Kierkegaard the self is now reborn as a unity that no longer struggles with a divided nature and all the associated fears in time of not getting enough, not being satisfied or fulfilled.

For the Buddhist, self is not unified. Through the practice of meditation, a powerful form of phenomenology, the self is seen as not describing anything real in itself but rather is a convenient designator for what is simply a bundle of or elements of temporality and consciousness (skandhas). Thus the wall between self and other and the struggle of the divided self are eliminated in favor of what is undeniably real, rather than the self we cling to. That undeniable reality is suffering that arises from vulnerability and meaning. The immediate causes of suffering can be phenomenologically witnessed and examined through the practice of mindfulness. The habit of belief in something called the self is gradually replaced by a much more direct and subtle awareness of what is actually happening in the temporal process of consciousness instead of what we make it mean, such as calling some features of awareness “evil” and others “good.” Instead of attempting to provide abstract mythological or metaphysical explanations of these, Buddhism concentrates on what is actually present to us and what is in our power to do about it. The dividedness brought about by selfish craving and aversion and the illusory beliefs built on these habits can be replaced by compassion which remains as the purest response to the reality of vulnerability. Vulnerability can be suffered or it can be transformed into compassion for those who suffer, those who crave control, those without a sense of the sacred. No blame, no retribution. Just an awareness of immediate cause and effect of phenomena and genuine compassion. Buddhist logic is critical thinking applied to our habits of belief that shows them to be unsustainable and then the practice of meditation allows for establishing direct awareness of what does take place in consciousness aside from our beliefs. This provides a way to rehabilitate ourselves so we are not caught in the illusory beliefs that lead to our suffering and the suffering we bring to others out of our own craving and aversion. Both Christianity and Buddhism are religions of love, but Buddhism by its very non doctrinal nature undermines the human tendency to make things mean something and then to ascribe blame and seek retribution. Jesus would have loved Hitler as would the Buddha without at all condoning what he did. This is hard for a Christian to even come close to accepting. It is not at all hard for Buddhists, at least those who really practice *bodhi* or wakefulness.

Most Buddhism is cultural in nature and often does not focus on or comprehend the core insights of the religion. But the typical Buddhist at least does not act or believe in ways that are incompatible with those insights. They are just somewhat buried in the thoughtless fog of religious habit. Christianity, in contrast, with its emphasis on truth and doctrine ironically in many of its variations is not even compatible with the core insights of its founder and I would even risk saying very few practitioners are aware of these deeply ironic incompatibilities of their beliefs and practices with the spirit of the religion and even with its doctrines (which I have already expressed as inessential to a pursuit of the sacred). I am not a practicing Buddhist or Christian but admire in both religions the core insights of their founders of moving away from arrogance and idolatry toward a genuine experience of the sacred that can lead to living a life of genuine ethics. But one can be neither a Buddhist nor a Christian and live such a life. Any path that leads to this counts as a genuinely sacred way of life. In particular, one can take from the tradition of Buddhism an ancient practice called vipassana or insight meditation and extract it from its religious and cultural setting and thus have a secular spiritual practice in which the movement toward wakefulness and genuine ethics can be powerfully pursued without the baggage that religion always is. Founders of religions are one thing, religions are another. Founders have had a transformative awakening. This possibility is almost always antithetical to the doctrines that emerge even in Buddhism. Chan or Zen was a reaction to the buildup of such doctrine in Buddhism. Islamic Sufism and Jewish or Christian mysticisms are forms of revitalizing the core of these religions and are inherently a-doctrinal.

I consider myself a “sinner” in the sense of “missing the mark” of the insights I hold in high esteem. To the extent Judeo Christianity is taken in its powerful mythological sense of our deep vulnerability and how easy it is to “fall” into sin and to lose our way in fallibility, the religion is deeply

moving. But to the extent it insists on the exclusivity of doctrine, the religion itself falls into “sin” and misses the mark of deep humility. To sin is to miss the mark of a hermeneutical awareness about this fallibility and the arrogance that impede a more full and powerful donative love to which Christianity aspires. Eros may pull us to become, to aspire to assert ourselves, even to pursue wisdom. But to the extent we are transformed by a genuine experience of wakefulness, we become gifts to others and to ourselves. I prefer to think of donative love in terms of insight, wakefulness, and compassion rather than truth and goodness. I would preserve the notion of truth only for its practical value, but am also persuaded to embrace the idea of truth as a “toward which” of human freedom in the pursuit of our possibilities. The very core of freedom is opening to our possibilities as a response to the rupture of temporality, the rupture to our meanings such that we impose new meaning, new possibilities. Our meaning always imposes fixity upon the flux of our feeling and in this dynamic tension between meaning and feeling we find an identity. It is in the conflict of interpretations and in the rupture to our worlds that we call wonder (and horror) that we are broken open and are sufficiently motivated toward self-transcendence. This requires that we develop the skills necessary to overcome habits of meaning in order to really pursue our possibilities. Self-transcendence is our fundamental nature: the freedom to redefine ourselves and our world, the capacity to “rehabilitate” ourselves, to re-world and to inhabit a new world. Pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of fulfillment, not the satisfaction of our wants. Fulfillment is always unknown because it lies beyond the enabling horizons that open on to this possibility. At the center of the pursuit of fulfillment is an awakening to our condition so that we are no longer caught in the arrogance of finitude. But how does one pursue this awakening or enlightenment? From the early days of Buddhism, the irony that if one makes enlightenment a goal, that goal will never be reached, has helped guide the movement to selflessness. Fulfillment cannot reduce to a goal of the self that is to be overcome. Rather, the practice of mindfulness and equanimity from which insight can emerge, moves us toward fulfillment without it being a goal. Rather, mindfulness is practiced and insight arises about the nature of suffering. When the self-overcoming process moves toward fulfillment it has something to do with our sacred core of vulnerability when it is transformed from selfish craving and aversion to donative love, love that is beyond good and evil, beyond judgment.

The sacred is anything that transforms us, brings about a rebirth of the heart beyond good and evil that leads to a way of living a life of donative love. The sacred is not this or that canon and cannot be reached by these means. The sacred is not beyond the temporal but is in the heart of temporality and vulnerability itself as the “other” of our selfishness driven by craving and aversion. It is the highest possibility open to human freedom and the self is the *means* to this, not an end in itself. Jesus was a paradigm of how to live an emancipated life, not what to believe. Thus, a metaphysical “soul” and any doctrine of salvation and permanence would be antithetical to the life of Jesus. Ironically the term “antichrist” (the greatest adversary of the life of Jesus) would be the appropriate label for any such thinking and craving for salvation. Doctrinal religion is the antichrist. This does not refer to religious communities organized to promote and support wakefulness. This can be done without doctrine and in fact must be done without doctrine. Once chronophobic doctrine is introduced to “preserve” a “founding experience,” the move to arrest impermanence and temporality has begun its insidious ascent. This is a movement of fear and insecurity rather than trust and love. And that is precisely the difference between morality and genuine ethics.

Dean Pickard