THE POLITICS OF EMPTINESS:
ALTERITY, AUTONOMY, AND THE RADICAL SUBJECTIVITY OF NO-SELF

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ABSTRACT

Conventional portrayals of the subject hold that a person is a rational, self-determining agent, whose agency lodges in a single entity that persists for the duration of a lifespan—the entity called the “self.” Legal and governmental institutions rely on this portrayal of the self qua agent when describing the nature of, and assigning rights and duties to, the political subject. This dissertation holds that a person’s immediate lived experience, when exposed to scrutiny, fails to resemble a “self” as commonly understood. As a result, legal and governmental definitions of the political subject fail to address the realities of subjective experience.

The dissertation turns to the resources of Asian philosophy, specifically the Buddhist doctrine of no-self as articulated by Dōgen in the Japanese tradition, to ground an alternative model of the political subject that better reflects the concerns of living persons. The doctrine of no-self denies that the self is a singular entity persisting coherently across time. Instead, this doctrine helps to show the self as (1) relationally constituted, or composed and sustained within a web of interpersonal interdependence; (2) protean, or capable of radical change; and (3) diverse, that is, tolerant of various and even contradictory identities.

As is shown, the doctrine of no-self is capable of addressing dilemmas faced by those twentieth-century continental and postmodern philosophers who also criticize conventional accounts of the self. The first two chapters focus on two ethical dilemmas relevant to postmodernist critiques of subjectivity. The first chapter establishes conceptual links between radical otherness and self-emptiness, and the second chapter constructs a sense of autonomy upon the experience of self-loss (as opposed to self-
determination). The final two chapters use these ethical insights to explore possibilities for the political subjectivity of no-self, both in terms of the relation between persons and institutions and in terms of developing a radicalized political consciousness.

With appeal to Buddhist teachings on non-attachment and compassion, and with appeal to aesthetics as the appropriate source of standards for judging the creativity of the protean and diverse self, the doctrine of no-self produces an exciting alternative to existing accounts of the political subject.
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INTRODUCTION

POLITICAL SUBJECTS AND RELATIONAL SELVES

“When he died, it was like a part of me died.”—Olympic swimmer Ron Karnaugh, on the death of his father during the Barcelona games

“I haven’t been myself since my baby was born.”—From the book This Isn’t What I Expected: Overcoming Postpartum Depression

“She really likes Jack, though she’s not herself when he’s around. She laughs too easily, her smile foreign.”
—From the novel Doctor Olaf van Schuler’s Brain

“Every time you go away, you take a piece of me with you.”—Daryl Hall and John Oates

People do not enter into and depart from relationships as isolated individuals walking in and out of rooms; rather, they merge with one another, leave parts of themselves behind with others, and generally change each other in the course of being related. In short, people do not constitute relationships but relationships constitute people.

This experience of the self as relationally constituted is not uncommon. A loved one dies, and those left behind will never be the same again. A baby is born, and a person suddenly becomes a parent, not through his or her biological contribution but through the shift in personality that occurs in response to the infant. A woman in an abusive relationship becomes unrecognizable to her friends—she becomes a different person when she’s around her abuser, not metaphorically but concretely.

As such cases show, people often find that facets of their own personalities are dependent upon their relations with others. Character is not a stable set of traits that a
person carries around like a bag of tricks; rather, various characteristics arise only in particular contexts and in response to particular others. Cast in these terms, relational constitution indicates a situation of extreme vulnerability. The self is not simply associated with others but is susceptible to others, and all people are further susceptible to the passage of time, the unpredictability of life, and the unforeseeability of death. As much as a person would like to hold onto who she is at a given moment, she finds herself changing in spite of herself as the relations that constitute her change. Against this backdrop of impermanence, a given person is protean, extemporary, and highly tolerant of inner-subjective diversity.

Such a view conflicts with the conventional understanding of the self as a stable, self-determining, and self-same entity capable of persisting without change over time and across different contexts. This conventional understanding may be the default definition of “self” for philosophers and non-philosophers alike, but when exposed to scrutiny it fails to reflect the very common experience of relational constitution. Should it not be problematic, then, that the conventional understanding of the self forms the basis of most notions of political subjectivity, and that political subjects as commonly defined do not resemble living selves?

One could argue that for various practical reasons, legal and political institutions must adopt a simplified picture of the self. They must regard each person as an individual agent and so must suppose the existence of a core self that is the seat of agency. If such institutions were to take into account the full extent to which this presumed core self is capable of changing, reinventing, or multiplying itself, then they would undermine the locus of the agency necessary for political subjectivity. Moreover, if they were to take
into account the full extent of this self’s vulnerability to others and susceptibility in relations, they would undermine the function of agency in the assigning of accountability.

However, atomistic core selves and the institutions designed to deal with them reflect more than a practical concern with the efficient organization of public life. The notion of a core self possessed by each individual plays not only a role in politics and government but reflects a general understanding of personhood that many people would defend. Why is this individualistic and atomistic understanding of “person” so attractive? This dissertation answers that such an understanding of the person covers over the self’s vulnerability to others and susceptibility to change by promoting an illusion of permanence. The transience of lived experience can be frightening and anxiety-provoking—the flow of life threatens to carry away all that one loves and values. Power structures and self-concepts that seem to stop this flow, or at least seem to impose stability upon it, are understandably attractive. Through an illusion of permanence, the self can avoid facing the potential for loss that characterizes every moment of lived experience.

In contrast to most conceptions of political subjectivity, the Sōtō Zen Buddhist understanding of no-self, as a model for subjective experience, highlights the immediacy of loss. Describing the position of Sōtō’s founder, the thirteenth-century monk Dōgen Kigen, Hee Jin Kim writes:

Dōgen maintains that death is not some external power which visits at the close of human life, and, consequently, can be dealt with somehow indifferently, but something co-present with our life: life and death interpenetrate one another in the structural whole of human existence.¹

¹ Kim (1987), 167.
There is no enduring entity called the “self;” for the living person is processual and transitory. Because there is no enduring self, the changes undergone by a given person are not simply variations of a single entity. Rather, with all change comes loss, as old versions of the self pass away and new versions arise. Through such loss, the self constantly faces its own emptiness, which is what Dōgen means when he characterizes death as an ever-present, structural component of existence.

Dōgen’s philosophy is in part a reflection of standard Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, according to which the impression of the enduring self is a misguided response to the various physical and mental events (commonly grouped as the five skandhas) that characterize human experience. The so-called self does not exist independently of the skandhas and thus is described as no-self (anātman). Moreover, these aggregates that give rise to the impression of the self also lack independent existence. All that exists is caught up in a web of mutual interdependence, or what Buddhism calls dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda). Thus, the doctrine of no-self does not mean that the self is simplistically nonexistent, but that its manner of existing cannot be separated from the web of mutually interdependent relations that sustain it.

Dōgen’s philosophy is also in part a reflection of trends that characterize the Japanese Zen tradition in particular, which is notable within Mahāyāna for an anti-transcendent interpretation of Buddhist practice. Dōgen does not present enlightenment as an escape from the world of impermanence or even as a peaceful acceptance of it. As Kim comments, “Dōgen’s way of life was not a sentimental flight from, but a compassionate understanding of, the intolerable reality of existence.”² The transience of

life involves loss, and loss involves sadness, and nothing—not even enlightenment—diminishes what is intolerable about this.

Reflecting Dōgen’s philosophy, this dissertation is concerned with loss, the importance of dealing with loss, and the relevance of addressing loss in political contexts. Specifically, this work looks at the Buddhist doctrine of no-self to formulate an alternative account of political subjectivity that better reflects the lived reality of selfhood. In considering the political implications of no-self, this dissertation is also inspired by bell hooks’s challenge to those engaged in postmodernist critiques of subjectivity and identity: “Any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it relates to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups.”³ If one considers Buddhist doctrine as a critique of an atomistic conception of the self, then one might imagine comparative philosophers taking on the same challenge that hooks assigns to postmodernism. That is, any critic exploring the radical potential of Buddhist philosophy, as it relates to the politics of difference and domination, would need to consider the implications of the doctrine of no-self for oppressed groups.

In what follows, this introduction lays out two major themes relevant to the rest of the project: the postmodern critique of the subject and its political dimensions; and the anti-transcendent philosophy of Dōgen. The final section brings the doctrine of no-self into dialogue with the dissertation’s political concerns and provides an overview of how this dialogue will unfold in the next four chapters.

³ hooks (1990), 26.
I. Modern and Postmodern Subjects

The modern world is one of simulacra. Man did not survive God, nor did the identity of the subject survive that of substance. All identities are only simulated, produced as an optical ‘effect’ by the more profound game of difference and repetition.

—Gilles Deleuze

It never surprises me when black folks respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity politics, by saying, “Yeah, it’s easy to give up identity, when you got one.”

—bell hooks

From the death of God to the death of the author, the narratives characterizing the modern period have come under now-familiar critiques. In particular, critical work on the issue of subjectivity has challenged the conventional narrative according to which the subject coincides with an atomistic self who is both rational and self-determining. Against this conventional account, postmodernist critiques posit the subject as a grammatical placeholder, a social construct, or a discursive effect of larger power structures that specify and organize forms of human relations. These critiques aim at being liberatory, to the extent that they de-center or fragment the subject and thereby challenge those power structures in society that legitimate some forms of knowledge over others.

Within the scope of power structures still dominant today, the modernist account of the subject as individual agent and the socio-political meta-narratives of Western culture mutually legitimate each other. Following modernism, the essence of human

4 Deleuze (1995), xix.
5 hooks (1990), 28.
nature—the “being” of the human being—is thought to be grounded in reason, which is capable of discovering the principles that govern people, society, the natural world, and all of reality. Because each person is essentially rational and self-determining, he or she acts naturally when acting in accordance with the principles of reason. There is no need for coercion, for rule by reason is, in fact, self-rule.

As Jane Flax points out in *Disputed Subjects*, “Only under these conditions can authority be other than domination.” In other words, the modernist account of the subject makes power structures *invisible* by rationalizing them. Instead of a gendered, socialized, and historically-situated self, one sees only a sovereign subject acting in accordance with its own inner nature. Just as the essentializing ontology of the subject is bound up with a rationalized view of socio-political structures, so the postmodernist critique of the subject calls into question both the nature of self and the order of society. The critique denies the existence of the atomistic self supposedly underlying the subject, while at the same time questioning the obviousness of power structures claiming to reflect the “natural order.” When the conditions of modernity no longer hold, the rule of reason becomes *visible* as a form of domination.

Due to its presumed liberatory potential, the critique of the subject has become linked to anti-essentialist movements within feminism and race theory, which are also concerned with how societal power structures shape identity and constitute political subjects. As Flax states, “Attention to gendering reveals the delusory character of self-determining, individualistic, and autonomous ideas of subjectivity.” At this point, however, the critique of the subject runs into an important problem: In a political arena,

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6 Flax (1993), 95.
7 Flax (1993), 97.
the conventional account of the subject has its benefits, especially for women and minorities. Being self-determining, individualistic, and autonomous—in short, being an agent—is not simply a matter of philosophical speculation or political theorizing. Rather, under most governmental systems today, this notion of agency handed down from the modern period imparts to individuals a weighty legal status with numerous real-world consequences.

For example, an agent can be held responsible for her actions and can be prosecuted for them in a court of law. For another example, an agent is a self-originating source of valid claims who can defend her claims in a court of law. Accordingly, the denial of agency is linked to various forms of social and political oppression carried out through the diminishment of legal rights. Familiar rhetoric holds that a person is empowered when her agency is acknowledged and respected under the law; she is disempowered when her agency is denied. A slave is not a self-determining agent but is the passive extension of a master’s will. A woman in a traditional marriage is similarly denied self-determination when the male head of the household is the only recognized agent in the family unit. Both the slave and the woman lack access to important legal avenues for the redress of wrongs and the dispensation of compensation. In such cases where agency is denied, persons are not seen as independent individuals with rights and duties on a par with other individuals.

Flax notes that part of the problem in translating the philosophical critique of the subject into socio-political terms lies in a mistaken dichotomy. After debunking the coherence and unity of the supposedly atomistic self, postmodernism presents an alternative that appears to be a fragmented and incoherent selflessness:
Postmodernists’ critique of reason sometimes presupposes that rationality’s only possible locus or consequence is a schizoid Cartesian subject. They celebrate the fragmentation of subjectivity or an egoless experience of the sublime, pleasure, or the Other as alternatives to this oppressive subject.\(^8\)

By presenting the postmodern subject as a broken version of the modern subject, this dichotomy still remains within the basic framework of an essentializing ontology. Moreover, this broken subject is woefully unable to maneuver effectively on the stage of contemporary politics, where rights, duties, and all other terms that serve as the currency of political discourse are predicated upon the individuality and agency of the atomistic self.

Feminist, race theorist, and cultural critic bell hooks sums up the dilemma in asserting that “a critique of essentialism. . . . should not be made synonymous with the dismissal of the struggle of oppressed and exploited peoples to make ourselves subjects.”\(^9\) In other words, an anti-essentialist stance on race or gender identity should not lead to the fragmentation of the very subject that anti-essentialism (presumably) intends to empower. Both hooks and Flax look beyond the dichotomy of atomistic selves and fractured selves to construct a notion of subjectivity that is fluid, processual, and multifaceted. As Flax says, “Only multiple and fluid subjects can develop a strong enough aversion to domination to struggle against its always present and endlessly seductive temptations.”\(^10\) Flax is correct to point out that an understanding of subjectivity as processual and multiple would be at odds with the essentializing socio-political power structures that are the legacy of modernism. However, to be at odds with this modernist

\(^8\) Flax (1993), 102.
\(^9\) hooks (1990), 28–29.
\(^10\) Flax (1993), 110.
political framework is to be at odds with the dominant conception of political subjectivity, which, as stated above, is predicated upon the atomistic self. Like the fragmented subject of postmodernism, the fluid subject often found in liberatory critical discourse seems ill-equipped to navigate political systems structured to recognize, and confer rights upon, unitary, selfsame, and self-determining agents.

Thus, the liberatory potential of critical discourse remains relevant at a personal level—for example, it may help to develop characteristics such as flexibility, open-mindedness, and an aversion to domination—but, as hooks herself worries, it rarely ventures beyond critique to make a positive intervention in political systems. Such a positive intervention means not forcing the fluid subject into the mold of rights-bearer, at least not as conventionally understood, but means instead changing the mold altogether; and not just the mold that shapes political subjects but the mold that shapes political institutions as well.

To change these molds, one may first consider the question: What’s so attractive about essentializing power structures and atomistic selves? That is, why have these molds in particular come to be dominant? As mentioned earlier, the allure of essentialism and atomistic selfhood lie in their ability to promote an illusion of permanence. These structures and concepts give us all, simply put, something to hold onto. As a point of contrast, the Buddhist tradition provides a framework in which to reconsider the human response to impermanence and rethink the drive to form attachments.
II. Dōgen’s Critique of Transcendence

Buddhism’s central teaching is that the suffering associated with impermanence results from human attachments. According to Mahāyāna teachings, dealing with suffering lies not in escaping impermanence but in reevaluating the desire for permanence. In the Japanese Zen tradition especially, this reevaluation does not mean transcending or escaping the transience of everyday life, for liberation from attachment occurs within, not beyond, the present world. That is to say, non-attachment is a perpetual process geared toward navigating day-to-day affairs, not a resting place free of attachment that one strives to attain. Dōgen writes:

Those who regard worldly affairs as a hindrance to buddha-dharma only think that there is no buddha-dharma in the secular world, and do not understand that there is no secular world in buddha-dharma. . . . In Song China, kings and ministers, officials and common people, men and women, kept their intention on the ancestors’ way. Both warriors and literary people aroused the intention to practice Zen and study the way. Among those who aroused their intention, many of them illuminated their mind-ground. From this you know that worldly duties do not hinder buddha-dharma.11

As Dōgen is famous for saying, the most honorable position within the monastery is that of head cook. The cook is unable to sit in zazen all day with the other monks, but must devote his attention to gathering food, preparing meals, and cleaning. These acts, Dōgen believes, express the height of Buddhist practice.12

11 “On the Endeavor of the Way” (bendōwa 辦道話). Dōgen (1971–72), Vol. 4, 309–310; Tanahashi (1985), 156. All quotations of Dōgen are from the Shōbōgenzō unless otherwise noted. Given first is the name of the fascicle, followed by a reference to the volume number and page number in the 1971–72 edition; this is followed by a reference to an English source in cases where one was consulted or followed.

12 Dōgen tells a story about how he came to appreciate the position of head cook (tenzo). As a young monk, he traveled by ship from Japan to China, and when his ship docked, he
Thus, in Dōgen’s philosophy, non-attachment is not a retreat from, but a certain way-of-being within, the world. A practitioner may be seated in meditation or may be at work in the kitchen, but he or she still practices non-attachment with compassion and mindfulness. In this sense, the teaching of non-attachment is relevant to the discussion of political subjectivity, for it expresses an ability to be engaged in life without demanding that life’s impermanence be otherwise. Dōgen writes eloquently:

To be unstained does not mean that you try forcefully to exclude intention or discrimination, or that you establish a state of nonintention. . . . Being unstained is like meeting a person and not considering what he looks like. Also it is like not wishing for more color or brightness when viewing flowers or the moon. Spring has the tone of spring, and autumn has the scene of autumn; there is no escaping it. So when you want spring or autumn to be different from what it is, notice that it can only be as it is. Or when you want to keep spring or autumn as it is, reflect that it has no unchanging nature.

Again, because enlightenment is an ongoing process that does not terminate in a state of non-intention, non-discrimination, or non-attachment, it can only be expressed actively. The practitioner does not strive to reach a state free of judgment, but she does strive to express actively a non-judgmental attitude by meeting someone and not considering his appearance. She does not strive to remain in a state of non-attachment, but she does strive to appreciate actively the beauty of the world as it is, in its incompleteness and fleetingness, without insisting that it stop changing.

met a cook from a Chinese monastery who had come to buy dried Japanese mushrooms. Dōgen, impressed with the cook’s wise demeanor, asked: “Honorable tenzo, why don’t you concentrate on zazen practice and on the study of the ancient masters’ words rather than troubling yourself by holding the position of tenzo and just working? Is there anything good about it?” As Dōgen recounts the story, “The tenzo laughed a lot and replied, ‘Good man from a foreign country, you do not yet understand practice or know the meaning of the words of ancient masters.’” See Tanahashi (1985), 58–60.

Note that Dōgen does not mention overcoming the sadness associated with seasonal change (a paradigmatic expression of impermanence in his writings). That is, when speaking of a person who wishes that a changing state of affairs would remain the same, Dōgen does not offer an antidote to the sadness that she might feel. He recommends only that she reflect on the impossibility of having what she wishes for. This reflection will allow her both to appreciate what she has in the present and to face the eventuality of its passing away. Dōgen’s interpretation of Buddhist practice is attuned to a specific sense of loss associated with impermanence, which empowers the human capacity for aesthetic pleasure while allowing for the sadness that always accompanies this pleasure’s arising and passing. Not unique to Dōgen, this aesthetic appreciation of impermanence, especially as related to Buddhist non-attachment, is a common theme in Japanese aesthetics and will guide in part the approach to Buddhism throughout the dissertation.

What is unique to Dōgen, however, is the insistence that this aestheticized take on the experience of impermanence should not be mistaken for a kind of resigned quietism. In Dōgen’s time, there was a widespread belief, amongst the aristocracy as well as the peasantry, that the world would soon be coming to an end. The “age of degenerate law” or “age of decline” (mappō), the final phase of the world according to some Buddhist doctrine, had been calculated in Japan to have begun in 1052, and the decadence and warfare that consumed the country was seen as evidence of this impending doom. Those who could afford to do so devoted their remaining time to the pursuit of aesthetic experience and to the perpetual refinement of the capacity for aesthetic appreciation. The meaninglessness and hopelessness of life in the face of the unavoidable destruction of
human civilization served to fuel the sentimentality of aesthetic pleasure and quiet the ambition to work for socio-economic change.  

In a later fascicle of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō, he entertains the question: “Can we attain realization if we practice, even in this last age of decline?” By considering this question, he acknowledges both the growing resistance to time-consuming Buddhist practices such as sustained meditation, which were seen as pointless given the coming end of the world, and the corresponding increase in the popularity of Pure Land Buddhism, with its promise of immediate salvation through the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha. In his answer, he writes:

In the scriptural schools they explain various names and aspects, but in the true Mahāyāna teachings dharma is not divided into periods of truth, imitation, and decline. Instead, it is taught that everyone attains the way by practice. Particularly in this correctly transmitted teaching of zazen, you are enriched with the treasure of yourself, entering dharma and leaving bondage behind. Those who practice know whether realization is attained or not, just as those who drink water know whether it is hot or cold.

Here Dōgen flatly rejects those Buddhist doctrines that support the notion of the age of decline, and he insists that practice is relevant in any era. For Dōgen, practice is a matter of exerting effort. He deemphasizes accounts of people who attain enlightenment suddenly, such as by hearing wind in bamboo or seeing a flower, and he denies claims that practice is unnecessary because buddha-dharma is inherent within a person’s original

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nature. Just as one cannot know the temperature of water without making the effort to drink it, one cannot know realization without making the effort to practice.

Importantly, this is not because practice leads to realization, but because practice itself is realization. Dōgen builds his sect upon his teaching of practice-enlightenment (shushō 修證), which holds that realization is synonymous with the effort exerted in practices of meditation such as zazen. As Kim points out, Dōgen was highly critical of what he viewed as the “aesthetic dilettantism” pervading the Japan of his day. For Dōgen, one cannot simply sigh wistfully at the passing of the cherry blossoms and then consider oneself to have meditated upon the meaning of impermanence. To the contrary, meditation is an exertion of effort, and this very exertion is itself liberatory.

Dōgen’s concept of practice-enlightenment is complex and is not intended (by Dōgen) to be a comprehensive theory of the relation, in general, between activity and achievement or means and ends. This dissertation, however, will look to practice-enlightenment as a model for politically motivated action and personally empowering activity. Following this model, the politically relevant aesthetic value to be found in the contemplation of impermanence must be tied to the exertion of an effort that is not necessarily goal-oriented. Dōgen thus provides a unique vocabulary through which to express the idea that our efforts in the political realm do not simply aim to bring about liberation, but our efforts are liberatory—we are liberated by exerting ourselves, not by reaping the fruits of our exertion, and certainly not by resting quietly in a state of non-exertion.

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III. Overview of the Project: The Other, the Relational Self, Society, and Empowerment

The Buddhist doctrine of no-self helps to bring the issues of loss, sadness, and impermanence into dialogue with the critique of the subject found in postmodernism and critical theory. Like postmodernism, the doctrine of no-self challenges the impulse to read the processual and transitory subject in static or essentialist terms. But unlike postmodernism, the doctrine of no-self was not developed as a critical response to modernism. Thus, no-self can help push the present discourse beyond the dichotomy Flax identifies between working modernist subjects and broken modernist subjects. The doctrine brings with it all the conceptual resources of Buddhism, where no-self is framed coherently by interrelated notions of emptiness, impermanence, non-attachment, and compassion. Thus, rather than simply rejecting or revising the terms of modernism, the doctrine of no-self operates according to different terms altogether, opening up new and creative approaches to the political problems associated with postmodernist critiques.

Earlier, this introduction proposed that any critic exploring the radical potential of Buddhist philosophy, as it relates to the politics of difference and domination, would need to consider the implications of the doctrine of no-self for oppressed groups. The conversation between politics and Buddhist doctrine thus begins with issues of difference and domination. The first chapter relies heavily on the work of Emmanuel Lévinas to explore questions of difference and otherness in terms of no-self. The second chapter explores possibilities for autonomy for the relationally constituted self, drawing a parallel with the issue of agency in Judith Butler’s account of the subject. These first two chapters,
dealing with issues of alterity and autonomy, can be seen as primarily ethical in their focus. The final chapters take the fruits of these ethical inquiries and apply them to political questions. Chapter three explores the political ideals that would shape a well-ordered society for people understood as relational and transitory. The fourth and final chapter describes the empowering potential of the doctrine of no-self as a resource for personal growth and political activism.

1. The Problem of Alterity: No-Self, No-Other?

At first glance, the doctrine of no-self is conceptually at odds with ethical alterity. If all selves are to be considered “no-selves”—that is, if neither you nor I have a self—then the idea of no-self seems to imply “no-other.” If no “self” has an independent existence, then “self” and “other” are two interchangeable terms in a mutually interdependent relation. From my perspective, you are the other; from your perspective, I am the other. “Alterity” is simply the logical inverse of identity and has no further ethical significance.

Taking the work of Lévinas as the main source for the notion of ethical alterity, one sees that he resists the above characterization of the self-other relation:

[T]he relation between me and the other commences in the inequality of terms, transcendent to one another, where alterity does not determine the other in a formal sense, as where the alterity of B with respect to A results simply from the identity of B, distinct from the identity of A.  

When self and other become defined in relation to each other, like convex to concave, they enter into a totality that reduces the other person to simply “another self” and

thereby reduces difference to a more fundamental sameness. Lévinas argues that alterity is not simply a matter of perspective, for there is no perspective from which I can be the other. Alterity marks an absolute value, which is not defined in relation to the self, and which the self can never occupy. As Lévinas repeatedly says, the other is the “absolutely other.”

But what is this absolute alterity, and why is it a relevant political concern? The recognition of alterity is, at a basic level, the acknowledgment of an inability to assume—the inability to assume that one’s own perspective is the normal, the right, or the best one. Alterity establishes not only that other voices have a “right” to speak, but also that those who are addressed have a responsibility to listen. It is the insistence that ethics should focus on differences between people, and the suspicion that supposed human commonalities too quickly silence the voices of those marginalized beyond the border of what is common. In a political context, alterity is a permanent stance against totalitarianism and against all those good intentions that pave the road toward it.

To summarize, these are the main issues that the problem of alterity poses for the doctrine of no-self, which will be addressed in the first chapter:

- Because the doctrine of no-self implies that all people are constitutively relational, it denies that the other person has an independent existence. All people owe their being to the same vast web of mutually constitutive relationality.

- In this web, the distinction between “self” and “other” is one of perspective. The terms “self” and “other” can only be defined in relation to one another—there can be no “absolutely other.”
• Because the self/other pair forms a reciprocal relation, there can be no ethics of alterity, only an ethics of equality based on the fundamental sameness of all people.

The first chapter argues, contrary to the above objections, that the web of inter-relationality in which all selves exist promotes difference, whereas the essentialist account of selfhood focuses on what is the same in all people. Under the doctrine of no-self, alterity expresses an experience of the self’s own impermanence, an experience in which the self is understood as “becoming-other.” The chapter concludes that the experience of selfhood is always an experience of the self-as-other, an idea also found in contemporary Buddhist philosophy. Alterity, then, instead of being at odds with the doctrine of no-self, is shown to be a central component.

2. The Problem of Autonomy: No-Self, No Self-Determination?

Working with themes such as no-self, impermanence, and mutual interdependence, comparative philosophy has come to share with feminist thought a concern for what both groups call the relational self. But comparative philosophy, in contrast to feminism, tends toward an extreme form of relational personhood that I call constitutive relationality. For example, contemporary work in Confucian role ethics holds that a person is constituted entirely through her roles and relations. A person is a mother to a daughter, a daughter to a mother, a teacher to a student, a friend to a friend, and there
is no atomistic core self existing apart from these relations. For another example, the twentieth-century Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō interprets the notion of self-emptiness to mean that persons exist in a state of “betweenness,” constituted entirely in the liminal space of inter-subjective relationality. In the denial of the atomistic self, these comparativist projects are at odds with modernist accounts in which the independent core self may be *in* relations, or even in some ways dependent upon relations, but not constituted by them.

The comparativist model of constitutive relationality also finds itself at odds with some articulations of relational personhood in feminism. For example, the feminist theologian Catherine Keller, who advocates a relational self, nonetheless objects to the kind of constitutive relationality that she sees as following from Buddhist emptiness. In an article critical of Abe Masao’s treatment of emptiness, she writes that “there are tensions between the feminist pursuit of a relational self and the Buddhist pursuit of a nonself whose relationality discloses its emptiness of any own-being.” According to Keller, the relational self in feminist thought retains the capacity for self-assertion, because it does not deny the self’s “own-being.” Thus she marks a divide between a feminist relational self, which retains some inner core, and a constitutively relational self, which is exhausted by its relations. She asserts that we lose the grounds for personal empowerment when we move to the latter sense of relationality. On this model, because

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20 See, for example, Roger Ames’s forthcoming *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*, scheduled for release in 2010 from University of Hawai‘i Press and Hong Kong’s Chinese University Press.


22 Keller (1990), 107.
the Buddhist self is purely relational and entirely empty of own-being, it lacks the capacity for autonomy.

From Keller’s observations, one can generalize the following objections against the doctrine of no-self relevant to feminist concerns over autonomy:

- To be fully constituted by relations is to be determined by those relations.
- Being determined by its relations, the constitutively relational self is incapable of critical resistance, political or otherwise. In other words, if the self has no non-relationally constituted vantage point from which to carry out its critical reflections, then the whole notion of a self “thinking for itself” becomes unintelligible. Such a self would be unable to distinguish which thoughts and desires are its “own” and which are determined by its interactions with others.
- Being incapable of critical resistance, the constitutively relational self—and, by extension, the doctrine of no-self—cannot support a notion of autonomy.

In answering these objections, the second chapter articulates the conditions under which the self can be seen as “becoming-other” autonomously. To become other, the self is always engaged in a process of self-loss, as old aspects of the self pass away and new aspects arise. This chapter explores the psychological and emotional engagement with self-loss as enabling the achievement of autonomy within the context of no-self.

3. The Solution to the Problem of Alterity as a Foundation for Political Ideals

The third chapter builds upon the notion of self-alterity developed in chapter one to address the question of what constitutes a well-ordered society for selves understood as
“selves-as-others.” Conventionally, the ordering of society is predicated upon an understanding of people as rational, self-determining agents. Social order is designed to serve the interests of citizens modeled on this understanding of human nature. The third chapter asks: What social order serves the interests of citizens understood as relationally constituted, socially situated people?

The relational constitution of the self challenges a conventional understanding of fairness. All people are born into and develop within politically charged communities, growing to occupy roles such as oppressor and oppressed before becoming capable of agreeing to such roles or evaluating them critically. Thus the philosophy of John Rawls is so compelling, for he uncovers the logical sequence through which rational people develop principles of justice that impose a veneer of fairness upon the initially inequitable circumstances into which all are born. Rawls reflects the optimism that, given a blank slate, rational agents would choose to create a world not so patently unfair as the current one.

Although such optimism is tempting, this chapter starts instead with the world as it is, in all of its unfairness. Beginning not with the individual as a rational agent, but with the relationally constituted self, this chapter shows that political institutions can and must address themselves to issues of vulnerability and loss. The government’s very reason for being is located in its ameliorative value, which is its ability to bear the burden of a person’s overwhelming responsibilities to others on a scale larger than any individual alone could manage. On this model, the political ideal that best accords with the doctrine of no-self is not fairness but kindness.
4. The Solution to the Problem of Autonomy as a Foundation for Empowered Political Subjectivity

bell hooks makes several claims that suggest ways in which she sees what she calls “radical black subjectivity” resolving the issues of anti-essentialist identity critiques. At the heart of these claims is her belief that one’s capacity for critical resistance is linked to one’s capacity for aesthetic experience. She speaks often of connections between artistry and political empowerment, or between creativity and critique, but she does not specify the nature of these connections. Relying on the interrelatedness of autonomy and self-loss discussed in chapter two, the last chapter elaborates on the relation between liberatory aesthetics and liberatory politics that hooks suggests. In doing so, the chapter presents the “radical subjectivity of no-self” as the articulation of a political subject within the conceptual framework of Buddhist doctrine and practice.

5. Tying it All together: Against the Achievement of Liberation

As this introduction has laid out, two main themes from Japanese philosophy will guide political discourse throughout the dissertation: the aesthetic appreciation of impermanence as an approach to dealing with loss, and an anti-transcendent interpretation of Buddhist doctrines such as no-self based on Dōgen’s model of practice-enlightenment. Together these two themes shift political thinking away from intended outcomes and toward ongoing practices. Why is this desirable? Goal-oriented thinking in a limited context leads easily to questions of ultimate goals. For example, in a limited
context, one may exert effort to secure equal wages for women. This goal is in turn a means to a larger goal, such as increased recognition of women’s professional contributions, which is then linked to an even larger goal, such as the equally respectful treatment of all genders at home and at work. What, then, are feminism’s ultimate goals? A better world? A world in which all people get fair and equal treatment? Is feminism thus a kind of humanism? If not, does it advocate some sort of gender-separatism? The nature of goal-oriented thinking is to push the train of thought down these speculative paths, which are prone to diverge over false dichotomies.

Such speculation is disenabling for women in the present. To cast feminism in terms of its ultimate goals focuses unwarranted attention on deciding just what defines “women” as a group (which only leads to the endless generation of counterexamples) and diverts energy better spent on carefully and caringly getting to know the unique contexts in which specific feminist concerns arise. This example involving feminism is relevant for other groups of people seeking to define themselves for the sake of political recognition. As the example is meant to illustrate, political activism and personal empowerment are best approached through practice-oriented, not goal-oriented, thinking. This dissertation addresses itself, then, not to the achievement of (ultimate) liberation but to the liberatory practices of ever-changing persons in ever-changing contexts.
THE PROBLEM OF ALTERITY

Is there space for a dialogue between the ethics of alterity and the doctrine of no-self? In the article “Ethics and the Subversion of Conceptual Reification in Lévinas and Śāntideva,” William Edelglass identifies the difficulties that might beset a comparative study of Lévinas and Mādhyamaka Buddhism:

Mādhyamakas such as Śāntideva emphasize there is no absolute distinction between self and other, or between other traditional binaries such as samsara and nirvana. Levinas would likely consider this emphasis on overcoming alterity to be a totalization, and thus violent appropriation of the singular, different, Other.¹

As Edelglass rightly makes clear, from Lévinas’s perspective Śāntideva totalizes the other, and from Śāntideva’s perspective Lévinas’s insistence on absolute alterity reflects simply a dualism between other and self. Nonetheless, Edelglass builds a case in his article for important similarities between the two thinkers, “namely, their shared concern for the moral dimension of conceptual reification.”² In Śāntideva’s analysis of śūnyatā, or emptiness, Edelglass sees a deconstruction of conceptual categories aimed at overcoming the attachments at the root of human suffering. And in Lévinas’s notion of “unsaying the said,” Edelglass sees the same emphasis on disrupting conceptual categories. But Edelglass leaves unsettled the problem that Lévinas and Śāntideva criticize conceptual reification with drastically different aims in mind. Whereas Śāntideva is concerned with disrupting conceptual categories to the extent that these obstruct the awareness of emptiness, Lévinas is concerned foremost with disrupting the dominant conceptual

¹ Edelglass (2007), 154.
² Edelglass (2007), 154.
categories of the Western tradition to the extent that these obscure or diminish the absolutely other.

As Edelglass eventually admits: “The broad contours of Śāntideva’s thought constitute a contrast as much as, if not more than, a resemblance to Lévinas’s work.”

This contrast persists because a connection between “emptiness” and “absolute alterity”—if there even is such a connection—remains unproblematized in Edelglass’s article. Although he makes an interesting point about the similar “deconstructionist” strategies employed by both Śāntideva and Lévinas, the fact remains that many philosophers can get behind the idea of resisting conceptual reification. In other words, the admonition to avoid being an ideologue is a common ground that unites more people than just Śāntideva and Lévinas. If the comparison with Śāntideva stops short of engaging the absolutely other in whose service Lévinas contests conceptual reification, then little of productive value has been said about the relation between the ethics of alterity and the doctrine of no-self.

The feature of Lévinas’s self-other relation that stands in the way of any easy comparison with the doctrine of no-self is that of non-reciprocity or asymmetry. As Lévinas repeatedly stresses, there is no simple, symmetrical, one-to-one correspondence between self and other, for the terms are not united in a reciprocal relation as, for example, “convex” and “concave.” He writes:

[W]hat I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable to what I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry: the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others, and consequently the impossibility of totalization—and, on the plane of social experience, the

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impossibility of forgetting the intersubjective experience that leads to social experience and endows it with meaning. . .

Thus, broadly speaking, this concept of asymmetry has two functions: it prevents totalization on both a personal and a societal level. At a personal level, asymmetry indicates the impossibility of reversing the relation between self and other, which entails the non-reciprocity of ethical responsibility. At a societal level, this asymmetry means that communities never form unities which erase or diminish ethical alterity for the sake of a totalizing social narrative. Both of these functions can be addressed in the context of a philosophy of emptiness. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates that the relations of the relationally constituted self are asymmetrical in a sense similar to, but ultimately different from, the asymmetry that marks the ethical fact of alterity for Lévinas.

The chapter begins with an overview of Lévinas’s phenomenology of ethical experience and his concept of alterity. Next, relying on Watsuji Tetsurō’s work on socio-ethical relations within a philosophy of emptiness, the doctrine of no-self is shown to be, at the least, at odds with social totalitarianism. But Watsuji’s work is also criticized for insisting on a model of reciprocity in interpersonal relations that seems to contradict the notion of emptiness he employs. The relations that constitute the self are instead interpreted as differentiating relations that preserve the alterity of the other. Relying on the work of Dōgen, these differentiating relations are shown to support a conception of ethical responsibility that is non-reciprocal. However, in linking the emptiness of the self to the alterity of the other, the chapter develops an interpretation of alterity that, unlike Lévinas’s, allows for the possibility that the self can experience itself as an “other.” The impermanence of existence, as articulated by Dōgen, is interpreted as a process of

4 Ibid., 53.
becoming-other in which all selves are involved. Thus the chapter locates alterity within a philosophy of emptiness through this notion of the “self-as-other,” which becomes the definition of subjectivity relied on in subsequent chapters.
I. Overview of Lévinas’s Phenomenology of Ethical Experience

To describe the experience of alterity, Lévinas begins by re-imagining the Cartesian meditation on infinity:

The relation of the same to the other, where the transcendence of the relation does not cut the bonds a relation implies, yet where these bonds do not unite the same and the other into a Whole, is in fact fixed in the situation described by Descartes in which the “I think” maintains with the Infinite it can nowise contain and from which it is separated a relation called the “idea of infinity.” To be sure, things, mathematical and moral notions are also, according to Descartes, presented to use through their ideas, and are distinct from them. But the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total coincidence of their “objective” and “formal” realities is not precluded; we could conceivably have accounted for all the ideas, other than that of Infinity, by ourselves. . . . The distance that separates ideatum and idea here constitutes the content of the ideatum itself.5

When Descartes reviews the objects of his knowledge—those which he can know clearly and distinctly—he finds that there is nothing in such an object itself (the ideatum) not already contained in Descartes idea of it. Hence, he reaches the frightening conclusion that perhaps he is the only thinking thing in existence, and all objects of his knowledge (including other people) live only in his mind as ideas.

Finally he turns to consider his idea of infinity and runs up against a puzzle. Any idea that he possesses must be finite, for it is precisely the finite nature of most objects of knowledge that allows Descartes to claim perfect correspondence between an object and his idea of it. If an object were infinite, then Descartes could not possibly know it completely. And if he cannot know it completely, then it cannot possibly be living only in his mind as one of his ideas. Thus, infinity is necessarily exterior to Descartes, existing

independently of him. Thanks to this little sign from his maker, he can trust in the existence of a God who does not deceive.

Lévinas leaves aside the proof of God’s existence and focuses instead on the phenomenology of the experience of the infinite, which, properly speaking, is the experience of the idea of the infinite. By definition, infinity (the ideatum) must exceed any idea one might have of it, such that any idea of infinity necessarily distorts infinity itself. Given that the idea of infinity is in this sense “wrong,” then what is the content of the idea? What ideatum is it an idea of? Since the ideatum cannot be infinity itself, it must be, Lévinas claims, the difference between the idea of infinity and infinity itself. Importantly, this difference has positive content—it is distance. That is, knowledge of infinity is not simply via negativa; rather, the phenomenological experience of infinity itself is not of an entity but of a process—infinity is infinition. It is the perpetual differing of infinity from one’s idea of it, and the perpetual creation of the absolute distance separating the finite from the infinite, an absoluteness that prevents one from ever being defined in relation to the other.

As Lévinas claims, this phenomenological experience is not the mark of one’s creator nor a merely abstract meditation on paradoxical relations. To the contrary, the phenomenological experience of infinity is the concrete experience of facing and discoursing with another person. It is the experience of alterity. Like infinity, the other approaches not as an object of knowledge, as an entity that may be known completely, but as a process. Due to this processual existence, the other always differs from any idea I may have of her. Her freedom to change and grow is a trace of the absolute distance

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separating the finite from the infinite, or in this case, my idea of her from her living presence.

As Lévinas repeatedly stresses, this absolute distance neither renders the other an unapproachable mystery nor prevents communication:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught.\(^7\)

For Lévinas, because knowledge aims at grasping and possessing, the relation with the other is not one of knowledge but of discourse. Conversation admits the impossibility of grasping or possessing the other in knowledge. It involves a sense of disruption, in that the security of my own knowledge is disrupted so that I may learn. I thus face the other not as one whom I would know but as one to whom I must respond.

This is what Lévinas calls the “face to face” relation. In this relation, what I know is called into question, because the other stands before me as an absolute limit on what I can possess: “It involves a calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is itself produced in the face of the other and under his authority. . . . The face to face remains an ultimate situation.”\(^8\) The ethical significance of this ultimate situation is not only the absolute limit it places on what I may possess in knowledge, but also on my freedom as the agent of my own actions. In the face to face relation, my freedom is immediately made questionable, my spontaneity immediately made suspect, for any step I take reflects my insecure footing and the inadequacy of my knowledge. Thus, the face to face relation is marked by two characteristic phenomenological experiences: the

\(^7\) Lévinas (1969), 51.
\(^8\) Lévinas (1969), 81.
passivity of the self before the other, and the inordinate responsibility the self bears to and for the other, which precedes the self’s sense of its own freedom.

Both of these characteristics will be discussed in detail throughout the dissertation. In the meantime, note that this basic summary of Lévinas’s thought establishes the broad contours of the deep disagreements separating the ethics of alterity from the doctrine of no-self, which center on the nature of interpersonal relations. For Watsuji, a boundary that separates any two things is also the meeting place that unites them. In his Rinrigaku, or “study of ethics,” he refers to the boundary between two people as “betweenness” (aidagara 間柄):9 “Betweenness consists in the fact that self and other are divided from each other . . . and at the same time that what is thus divided becomes unified.”10 Betweenness does not mean simply the relations between one atomistic self and another but refers directly to the structure of the self. That is, relations constitute the self, and no independent self exists outside of these relations. Thus Watsuji’s notion of betweenness reflects the influence of the doctrine of no-self within a philosophy of emptiness. In this sense, Watsuji can be understood as working out what the doctrine of no-self means for both self and other: if both are empty and lack independent existence, then they can only reside in the liminal space which is their point of contact. This constitutive relationality is at once a boundary that differentiates one self from another and, at the same time, a connection that binds them together.

This notion of interpersonal relationality seems antithetical to the alterity that Lévinas constructs in Totality and Infinity. Lévinas resists the idea that a boundary

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9 Aidagara can also be translated simply as “relationship,” but Watsuji is making explicit the occurrence of the character 間, which on its own means “between,” in both aidagara 間柄 and ningen 人間 or “human being.”
10 Watsuji (1996), 35.
between two people simultaneously unifies them or defines them in relation to one another. To the contrary, otherness must be defined on its own terms and not in relation to sameness: “Other with an alterity that does not limit the same, for in limiting the same the other would not be rigorously other: by virtue of the common frontier the other, within the system, would yet be the same.”¹¹ Just as infinity cannot be defined in relation to the finite, there is no “common frontier” between myself and another person that serves the function of betweenness in Watsuji’s philosophy.

Yet, Lévinas, too, insists on the necessary interrelatedness of self and other, while at the same time insisting that otherness is absolute. He addresses the issue of relationality—even using the term “betweenness”—in his studies of Martin Buber. In *Philosophical Interrogations* Lévinas comments:

> Certain formulations of Buber . . . imply that the terms ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ have neither meaning nor independent existence apart from the relation into which they enter. The interval itself, the ‘betweenness,’ so to speak, of that relation is, according to Buber, the concept of the foundation and ultimate structure of being.”¹²

However, Lévinas goes on to object that Buber’s relation of betweenness is a reciprocal relationship, wherein “the two terms, then, are correlated and constitute a totality from which they cannot be separated.”¹³ This reciprocity denies the asymmetry of the ethical relation central to Lévinas’s thought. Buber’s I-Thou relation is, in Lévinas’s own analysis, asymmetrical, but Lévinas claims that Buber himself does not make this explicit.

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¹² Rome (1964), 23. Buber, in his response, distances himself from Lévinas’s account of betweenness: “I have never designated the between as ‘the concept of the foundation and the ultimate structure of being.’” See Rome (1964), 27.
In Lévinas’s reading of Buber, the self is relational—that is, subjectivity is always inter-subjectivity—but the other is the absolutely other: “the I-Thou is a relation in which one of the terms remains absolute. . . . Is Buber fully aware of the original nature of this relation, however?”\footnote{14} Lévinas answers that Buber is not, and thus the Thou, initially encountered as absolutely other, is eventually drawn into a reciprocal relation that renders it relatively other while simultaneously compromising “the originality of the I for whom separation is essential.”\footnote{15} Lévinas counters that the relational character of inter-subjectivity must occur within the separated self, who remains absolutely separate such that the other remains absolutely other. This “relationality” is thus highly paradoxical, being a relation between absolutes.\footnote{16}

At the risk of over-generalizing, one may say that the paradoxical relation between absolutes is standard parlance within a philosophy of emptiness, as seen for example in Nishida Kitarō’s notion of “absolutely contradictory identity,” which will be discussed below. For the present, the main lesson to learn from this encounter between Lévinas and Buber is that Lévinas does not resist speaking of the self as relational; rather, he resists speaking of that relationality as symmetrical or reciprocal. Thus, to find a place

\footnote{14} Rome (1964), 24.  
\footnote{15} Rome (1964), 26.  
\footnote{16} Robert Bernasconi, in his essay “‘Failure of Communication’ as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Lévinas,” discusses how Lévinas’s readings of Buber change over time. Almost fifteen years after the 1964 *Philosophical Interrogations* quoted above, Lévinas revisits his objections to Buber in the 1978 “Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel and Philosophy” and in other essays throughout the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Eventually Lévinas dismisses his earlier charge of reciprocity and locates the asymmetry of the I-Thou relation in Buber’s notion of grace. He similarly reconsiders his objections to betweenness, viewing it later as an expression of the intimate space of conversation between self and other. See Bernasconi (1988), 115.
for alterity in the philosophy of no-self, one need not sever the mutual relatedness of self and other but only cast that relatedness in asymmetrical terms.
II. Experiential Relationality and Interpersonal Relationality

To construct an interpretation of emptiness that is hospitable to alterity, it is helpful to first distinguish between two senses of co-dependent arising used to articulate emptiness in contemporary Japanese philosophy. One of these senses is better able than the other to accommodate the idea of ethical alterity. There is on the one hand the mutual interdependence of subject and object, called experiential relationality (ER); on the other hand there is the interdependence of self and other, or interpersonal relationality (IR).

Experiential relationality can be understood as the immediacy of perceptual experience prior to the distinction of subject and object. Applying this category to recent philosophers, Nishida Kitarō’s idea of “pure experience” is an example of ER. Interpersonal relationality can be understood as the socially situated self who is constituted by its roles and relations within community. Watsuji Tetsurō’s idea of “betweenness” is an example of IR. Although these two senses of relationality are conceptually linked, potentially serious problems in the interpretation of no-self stem from slippages between the levels of ER and IR. For example, to imply that subject-object non-duality translates directly into self-other non-duality is to give the impression that the other person can be reduced to the status of the object. Such a reductionist reading of otherness would be at odds with ethical alterity.

Slippages between ER and IR are apparent, for example, when Nishida writes in *Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*: “Self and other, subject and object, are constituted in the individual acts of existential consciousness.”¹⁷ Here Nishida moves

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¹⁷ Nishida (1987), 49.
freely between the phrases “self and other” and “subject and object,” using them interchangeably. This gives the problematic impression that the alterity of the other person is on a par with the objectivity of an object. Later in the text Nishida discusses the “absolutely contradictory identity” of self (I) and other (Thou) as “co-originating through mutual self-expression.” But immediately following this extraordinarily dense paragraph on the interpersonal I-Thou relationship, he writes: “Let me put this in terms of the absolutely contradictory identity of the many and the one.” For Nishida, the relation between the many and the one refers to the basic perceptual experience of coordinating the multiplicity of phenomena in the unity of consciousness. The many-one relation is thus, in the terms laid out here, a form of experiential relationality. In Nishida’s quick transition from the I-Thou relation (IR) to the many-one relation (ER), readers may conclude that Nishida fails to recognize the ethical difference of another person by reducing the other to one term in a co-originary self-other relationship.

Watsuji’s explicit emphasis on interpersonal relationality provides better tools with which to construct an interpretation of no-self that does recognize ethical alterity. For Watsuji, as for Nishida, emptiness is the ultimate reality prior to the subject-object distinction. Also like Nishida, Watsuji makes clear that this ultimate reality is not a state

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18 Nishida (1987), 103.
20 At least one philosopher has recently come to such a conclusion. In his provocatively titled essay “Non-I and Thou: Nishida, Buber, and the Moral Consequences of Self-Actualization,” James Heisig searches for an account of alterity within Nishida’s philosophy that might stand up to the robust “Thou” of Martin Buber’s I-Thou relationship. Yet he finds Nishida’s analysis of the other to be inadequate: “Buber’s I-Thou, it will be recalled, was aimed directly against the complementary tendencies to collectivism and individualism in modern society. Nishida’s championing of the ‘self-awareness of absolute nothingness’ as the foundation for the I-Thou relationship has no such aim. Alas.” See Heisig (2000), 200.
beyond everyday human existence but is the immediate transience of lived experience. Unlike Nishida, however, Watsuji spends little time discussing the awareness of emptiness in terms of the highly rarefied perceptual experience of subject-object non-duality (ER). Instead, he focuses on emptiness as it is manifested in the mutual relationality of unique selves in unique social situations (IR). The following discussion of alterity in Watsuji’s philosophy will focus specifically on this interpersonal understanding of relationality.
III. The Question of Totalization: Social Bonds as Asymmetrical Relations

A central concern in Totality and Infinity is that a failure to recognize ethical alterity will lead to social totalities, or oppressive communities that reduce otherness to sameness and thereby mandate the absolute exchangeability of individuals. The question of this section is whether Watsuji’s commitment to a reciprocal form of self-other relationality does lead to such a social totality. Watsuji, for his part, believes otherwise: he sees society as radically open-ended and even, in Lévinas’s terms, non-totalizable. A close reading of Watsuji’s writings on the relations between individuality, society, and emptiness reveal that his vision for social freedom is hampered by his commitment to reciprocity at the interpersonal level. His portrayal of society as non-totalizable would be better served by a corresponding portrayal of interpersonal relationality as non-reciprocal.

1. On the Conceptual Connections between Watsuji’s “Emptiness” and Lévinas’s “Infinity”

Watsuji begins his study of ethics by discussing why the term ningen sonzai 人間存在 is not reducible to its standard English translation “human being.” The first character of ningen 人間 means “person” and the second means “between.” Although in Chinese, the two characters together signify “the world of people” or “the public,” in Japanese ningen means both a unique person and a community of people. Watsuji concludes that the Japanese term expresses “the dialectical unity of those double
characteristics that are inherent in a human being.”\textsuperscript{21} The character for “between” in \textit{ningen} means not only the space between two persons but also the space of a single person, who exists as neither individual nor social, but in between the two. Within herself, the person is the unity of these contradictory characteristics. Society, denoted by the same word, is also a contradictory unity. It is composed of persons without whom it could not exist, yet it also forms a totality that is greater than the sum of its parts.

These contradictory facets of the human situation exist together in the sense of being maintained, or of holding themselves together, despite a tendency to disintegrate. This is the meaning of the word \textit{sonzai}, which is often translated as “being.” Watsuji writes: “The original meaning of the Chinese character \textit{son}, of \textit{son-zai}, is ‘subjective self-subsistence.’ It means maintenance or subsistence over against loss. . . . The original meaning of the \textit{zai} of \textit{son-zai} lies in the fact that the subject stays in some place.”\textsuperscript{22} Watsuji interprets “staying in some place” to mean that the subject “while coming and going in human relations in one way or another, nevertheless, remains within these relations”; he concludes that “\textit{son-zai} is precisely the self-sustenance of the self as betweenness.”\textsuperscript{23} This analysis reveals that \textit{ningen sonzai} means much more than what can be rendered by the English translation “human being.” It refers to the subject, who is at once individual and social, and to society, at once singular and composite. Thus it also indicates the subject’s space between individuality and society, and the space in society between multiple subjects. Finally, it expresses the manner that this structure of contradictory parts exists through self-sustenance, by holding itself together and

\textsuperscript{21} Watsuji (1996), 15.  
\textsuperscript{22} Watsuji (1996), 20–21.  
\textsuperscript{23} Watsuji (1996), 21.
maintaining its place.

Against what does it hold itself together, and where does it maintain its place?

Watsuji answers that “the true reality of an individual, as well as of totality, is ‘emptiness,’ and this emptiness is the absolute totality.” The concept of emptiness appears in Watsuji’s scheme as double negation, or the two negations that characterizes the structure of *ningen sonzai*:

On the one hand, the standpoint of the acting ‘individual’ comes to be established only in some way as a negation of the totality of *ningen*. . . . On the other hand, the totality of *ningen* comes to be established as the negation of individuality. . . . These two negations constitute the dual character of a human being.

As we said earlier, emptiness never manifests directly but only in the transience of everyday life; here Watsuji cashes out this idea of transience in terms of the perpetual movement of double negation. The subject is an individual through the negation of society and is social through the negation of individuality, such that the co-existence of society and individuality occurs through their mutual self-negation.

This perpetual movement points to what are, for Watsuji, the persistent tensions of human life. A group of people may be seen from one angle as a multiplicity—that is, as a collection of unique individuals. From another angle they may be seen as a totality—the socio-ethical whole in which all selves are mutually interrelated. He writes:

When the whole is considered, the conflicts among many individuals must be recognized; and when individuals are spoken of, the unifying whole must be understood to be that which underlies all of them. In other words, an individual is an individual in its connection with multiplicity and totality, and the whole is a whole in its connection with multiplicity and

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individuality. Human beings possess this dynamic structure of reciprocal transformation.\textsuperscript{26}

Throughout *Rinrigaku*, Watsuji’s term translated as “individual” is *kojin*, which is an explicit reference to the Japanese word for Western individualism (*kojinshugi*). And, more problematically, his term translated as “totality” is *zentai*, which appears in Japanese words for totalitarianism (*zentaishugi*) and totalitarian state (*zentaishugikoku*). In light of these associations, Watsuji’s emphasis on discrete individuals who unite to form a social totality seems unavoidably at odds with Lévinas’s ethics, both philosophically and politically.

However, Watsuji does make clear that the concept of an absolute totality is “nothing but a product of the imagination.”\textsuperscript{27} The persistence of the movement of double negation—the persistent tension between individuality and society—ensures that neither absolute individuality nor absolute totality are possible. In the constant flux of existence, the perspective from which a group of people may be seen as a totality is never fixed. All such vantage points are temporary, with no one gaze able to encompass society as a static whole abstracted from its fundamental transience. This stands in contrast to Lévinas’s idea of totalization, which always seeks to impose a static definition upon the other or assimilate the other into an unchanging, non-negotiable relationship that would be visible, as it were, from the outside.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} Watsuji (1996), 124.
\textsuperscript{27} Watsuji (1996), 22.
\textsuperscript{28} See Lévinas (1961), 251. He writes: “This inequality [between self and other] does not appear to the third party who would count us. It precisely signifies the absence of a third party capable of taking in me and the other, such that the primordial multiplicity is observed within the very face to face that constitutes it.”
The impossibility of absolute totality, for Watsuji, lies in the paradoxical role that emptiness plays in the transience of social relations. While emptiness never manifests as emptiness per se, it is nonetheless evident in the negation of individuality expressed in society and in the negation of society expressed in individuality. Emptiness “exists” paradoxically only through negating itself and appearing in the transience of everyday life. Watsuji refers to this self-negating activity of emptiness as “absolute negativity”:

The negation of absolute negativity [i.e., the self-negating activity of emptiness] establishes the standpoint of an individual. This does not mean, however, that the individual stands in opposition to absolute negativity as his other. This negation always takes place in the form of a revolt against the whole as something socio-ethical. The individual opposes precisely this socio-ethical whole as the other... Apart from this finite negation, there is no place where absolute negativity manifests itself.29

An individual cannot stand in opposition to emptiness as if in relation to an “other” because emptiness—being absolute—cannot stand in relation to anything. Rather, it manifests indirectly in the movement by which relative things negate each other. In this sense, we may say that emptiness functions as an “absolutely other” in Watsuji’s philosophy—that is, as he says, the individual cannot be opposed to or be at all related to absolute emptiness, because absolute emptiness, by definition, cannot hold the place of a relatum. If emptiness were a relatum, then it would be the ultimate counterpart to all of existence, such that being and emptiness would constitute a symmetrical totality. By failing to occupy the place of this relatum, emptiness reveals that existence has no stable foundation but is in a constant, non-totalizable state of becoming.

Lévinas employs similar reasoning when explaining the impossibility of totalization through the relation of infinity to the finite. He writes:

29 Watsuji (1996), 120–121.
The idea of infinity implies the separation of the same with regard to the other, but this separation cannot rest on an opposition to the other which would be purely anti-thetical. Thesis and antithesis, in repelling one another, call for one another. They appear in opposition to a synoptic gaze that encompasses them; they already form a totality which, by integrating the metaphysical transcendence expressed by the idea of infinity, relativizes it. An absolute transcendence has to be non-integratable.  

Like finity and infinity, being and emptiness do not enter into a symmetrical relation that would unite them in a dialectical totality visible to an all-encompassing gaze. Emptiness is thus non-integratable in Lévinas’s sense. This connection between infinity and emptiness allows a productive return to the question of social totality. When Watsuji admits the impossibility of absolute totality in society—that is, the impossibility of reducing a multiplicity of people to a unity—he means that society, like existence itself, never achieves stasis and that human relations are always in flux. In Lévinas’s language, the impossibility of stasis is the impossibility of totalization, and the reason human relations are always in flux is the persistence of the non-integratable other.  

Indeed, Lévinas’s description of the ever-expressive face of the other seems to indicate a notion of moment-to-moment transience: “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum—the adequate idea.” The other, to the extent that she always differs from my conception of her, is always capable of changing. Furthermore, due to this constant potential for change, my relations with the other are always provisional, or in flux. Both emptiness and alterity direct us to the immediacy of lived experience, without allowing us to escape this immediacy by inscribing it within a larger, totalizing narrative. Lévinas, like Watsuji, rejects permanent social arrangements.

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30 Lévinas (1969), 53.
31 Lévinas (1969), 51.
and accepts the tensions that persist in all relationships, tensions which are at once the freedom of people, in their relations, to grow and change. And, as already indicated, Watsuji never claims that society is immune to tension, growth, or change.

Watsuji does say that the individual can reach beyond her self-centeredness to experience social unity, but he also says that “this should not be taken to signify a mystical experience in which the individual is immersed in the Absolute.” Watsuji often refers to emptiness as “the Absolute,” but this Absolute is nothing other than the transience of everyday social life: “The Absolute is realized endlessly, and has nothing to do with a static and absolute destination. The place in which this self-returning is exhibited is the socio-ethical whole as finite.” Thus, by totality Watsuji does not mean the erasure of individuality through mystical ego-transcendence, nor does he mean some master narrative governing humanity’s development and specifying its final destination. Instead, he means the temporary social unity that may arise within human community, but which is nonetheless always at the same time a multiplicity that preserves the non-integratability of self and other.

2. A Critique of Watsuji’s Account of Reciprocal Relationality

Watsuji’s overall picture of society is one of dynamic communities rendered unstable and thus creative through the influence of emptiness. This dynamism, instability, and creativity are possible because emptiness provides no ultimate foundation that might support absolute totality at the social level. This addresses the earlier concern that an

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32 Watsuji (1996), 121.
33 Watsuji (1996), 121.
ethics based on the doctrine of no-self—or a relational concept of self—will lead to social totalities. But what seems to be missing in this interpretation is the specifically ethical reading of asymmetry at the personal level that Lévinas provides, which involves the non-reciprocity of ethical responsibility. Indeed, according to Graham Mayeda, Watsuji reduces all interpersonal relations to the same reciprocal form: “This form is one in which a whole, the relationship, prescribes particular roles for individuals who, through their mutual action, actualize these relationships.” As Mayeda points out, Watsuji often speaks of actual, interpersonal relationships in terms of two roles that mutually define each other, such as a parent-child relation or a writer-reader relation. Watsuji discusses such relations as if one were the inverse of the other. That is, a reader is related to a writer like convex to concave—the two terms mutually define one another and form a totality.

Broadly speaking, the individual-society relation and the self-other relation, for Watsuji, are marked by a similar reciprocity. His abstract, overly-simplified portrayal of social and interpersonal relationships seems to undermine the complexity that the term betweenness claims to capture. It would seem that Watsuji’s vision of a transient society, which is fundamentally imbalanced according to the philosophy of emptiness, would be better served by a corresponding vision of non-reciprocal, and thus asymmetrical, relations at the immediate interpersonal level. The problem hinges on how one interprets the notion of mutual interdependence that underlies Watsuji’s use of the term totality. The relationally constituted self is connected to other selves in what may be called a web of inter-relationality. A Lévinasian might object that inter-relationality means mutual

\[34\] Mayeda (2006), 96.
reciprocity, or that person A stands in relation to person B just as person B stands in relation to person A, and thus A and B are exchangeable. If this were the case, then inter-relationality would deny alterity, which is the direction in which Watsuji’s interpretation of mutual interdependence is headed.

However, contrary to Watsuji’s own leanings, the idea of being connected in a web of inter-relationality need not imply that relations are reversible or that people are exchangeable, especially when one distinguishes identity relations from what may be called differentiating relations. Consider that, generally, if entity A is identical to B, then no other relations can hold between them. That is, if A is identical to B, then A cannot be larger than B, taller than B, older than B, yellower than B, or anything other than B. There can be no relation between them that differentiates them from each other, because they are identical. In terms of interpersonal relations, such identity is only possible based on an essentialist account of the self.

Suppose a person does have an essential core self. What is “essential” about this core refers not to what is unique about this person but to the basic features of human selfhood that she shares with all other people. The essentialist account of identity thus divides a person’s necessary features from her contingent ones. A person is necessarily a rational free agent; she is contingently a mother, a sister, an avid bird-watcher, and so forth. She shares her necessary features with all other people; her contingent features are peculiar to her. By dividing the necessary from the contingent, the essentialist account of identity shows that all people share a common human nature and must be accorded equal treatment on the basis of it. That is, one must respect the basic human dignity of person A as much as person B, regardless of other contingent differences between A and B. In this
sense, A and B are exchangeable, as, for example, in the eyes of the law, which applies equally to all people.

Now suppose that a person does not have an essential core self and is instead relationally constituted. She has no necessary features by which she is defined; her identity is based entirely on contingent features. She is a mother, a sister, and a member of a bird-watching club: these are the relations that constitute her. They are differentiating relations as opposed to relations of identity, for if person A is person B’s mother, then this relation not only differentiates A from B but also locates A uniquely within the web of relations—no one else is person B’s mother. Such differentiating relations are the only relations possible under a doctrine of no-self.

The following section looks to Buddhist teachings on the connection between emptiness, transience, and non-attachment to show why these differentiating relations are non-reversible and non-reciprocal, in terms of the responsibility the self bears for others. That is, person A may be the mother of person B, and person B may be the daughter of person A, but “being the mother of” is not the inverse of “being the daughter of.” Moreover, acting in the role of a daughter to a mother does not reciprocate the mother for acting in the role of a mother to a daughter. This non-reversible, non-reciprocal understanding of the self-other relation accords better with a philosophy of emptiness than does Watsuji’s language of relational reciprocity.
**IV. The Question of Responsibility: Non-Reciprocity and Non-Attachment**

In the asymmetry of Lévinas’s self-other relation, the other person is not another self, just like me, with rights and responsibilities that correspond to my own. Rather, the unmatched responsibility I bear to and for the other can neither be reciprocated nor deferred. The question of this section is whether or not the doctrine of no-self recognizes the non-reciprocity of ethical responsibility. This doctrine complicates the usual understanding of reciprocity as the equilibrium resulting from corresponding actions—for the transient self, no such equilibrium is possible. To be unequally situated with respect to others, to bear responsibility for others with no expectation of reciprocation, is characteristic of the Buddhist compassion that arises from non-attachment.

Dōgen teaches that the proper attitude toward life’s impermanence is one of *non-attachment*. The roots of attachment lie in a failure to accept the continual arising and passing away of the self’s experiences and in a desire to cling to some experiences while rejecting others. But Dōgen does not suggest overcoming attachment by retreating from the world and worldly relations. After all, for the relational self, there is no “self” outside of the relations that constitute it. On the contrary, Dōgen claims that non-attachment is achieved through a heightened sense of responsibility for and responsiveness to other people: “Just practice good, do good things for others without thinking of establishing your own name, and truly benefit others without earning anything for yourself. To break
free of the self, this is the first matter of concern.” Why does Dōgen consider ethical relations with others as necessary for overcoming attachments to the self?

To answer this question, first note that transience means not only the inevitability of loss but also the freedom to change. As seen in Lévinas, the other person resists totalization through her freedom to elude whatever conceptions and expectations I may have of her. Now, when the other person so changes, my relationship with her must change as well. And, if I am a relationally constituted self, then changes in another person must affect my own identity, to the extent that the relations that constitute me have altered. In contrast to an atomistic model of the self, in which the individual may remain the same while others around her change, the relationally constituted self changes along with the changing relata. This means that, in order to be open to and accepting of changes in others, I must be open to changes in myself, because my “self” is constituted by my relations with others. And being open to changes in myself means remaining unattached to any particular presentation of the self. Thus, in daily life, respect for the other’s freedom cannot be separated from non-attachment to the self. Or, as Dōgen says succinctly: “Not hindering others is not hindering the self” (他に不礙なるは自にも不礙なり).

It stands to reason, then, that if changes in another person necessarily affect me, changes in myself necessarily affect other people. In other words, there is always an interpersonal dimension even to the most private thoughts and actions. Much like Lévinas

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35 Yamazaki, ed. (1972), 189. My translation from Yamazaki’s compilation of the Shōbōgenzō zuimonki (正法眼蔵隨聞記), a collection of Dōgen’s teachings purportedly recorded by his disciple Eijō.
might say, my own freedom is called into question, and I realize that—even in my own transience—I am not “innocent spontaneity.” Rather, I am connected to other people such that an awareness of the relational nature of the self cannot be separated from the “welcoming of the Other” which is at once the recognition of ethical responsibility.

Through my very existence, I cannot avoid affecting others; so as Dōgen says, I must make every effort to do good for others freely, without becoming attached to selfish ends—in other words, without expecting reciprocation. Thus Dōgen praises people who help injured animals with no expectation of reciprocation or reward, and he admonishes as “fools” those people who resist putting others ahead of themselves. These foolish people do not understand that overcoming self-attachment is impossible without acting unselfishly for the benefit of others.

However, this denial of reciprocation is not to say that the self simply ignores itself or is altruistic to the point of self-abnegation. After all, the self only exists through its active engagement with others and with the world, so there is no “self” outside of these engagements that one could “ignore.” Moreover, to ignore the inevitable effects of one’s actions on others is to turn a blind eye to the full extent of the relations through which the self persists. Rather, Dōgen’s emphasis on non-reciprocality indicates that in the impermanent world where both self and other are constantly changing, reciprocation as traditionally understood is impossible. If you help me today, how can I repay you when

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37 Lévinas (1961), 84. The text reads: “Discourse and Desire, where the Other presents himself as interlocutor, as him over whom I cannot have power [je ne peux pas pouvoir], whom I cannot kill, condition this shame, where, qua I, I am not innocent spontaneity but usurper and murderer.”

38 Ibid., 89. The text reads: “The welcoming of the Other is ipso facto the consciousness of my own injustice—the shame that freedom feels for itself.”

tomorrow’s circumstances will be different? If I help you today, how can you repay me when there is “no self” to receive such a payment? These are not just paradoxes of thought; these questions reveal that in the philosophy of emptiness all acts are unique and non-repeatable: one good deed may be followed by another, but no good deed will ever reciprocate another.

Dōgen’s writings on non-attachment shows that (1) there is an immediate connection between the emptiness of no-self and the alterity of the other, and (2) this connection is best understood in terms of the non-reciprocity of ethical responsibility. Although neither Watsuji nor Dōgen employ the idea of alterity as Lévinas develops it, an understanding of alterity does follow reasonably from the related concepts of emptiness, transience, and non-attachment. So far, this sense of alterity has been similar to Lévinas’s, at least in terms of its implications for the functioning of communities and the (non-)reciprocation of ethical acts. However, there are important differences between these concepts of alterity when considering the possible relations the self might bear to itself.
V. Self-Alterity: I Am a Stranger to Myself

In general, Buddhism supports the idea that the self can be an “other” to itself. The doctrine of no-self asks each person to resist easy identifications, whether this means identifying the self with another or identifying the self with itself. Drawing on Mark Siderits’s analysis of Śāntideva, Vrinda Dalmiya writes that we have difficulty overcoming identifications because “we have difficulty realizing that the future states considered as mine are really as other to the current me as some contemporary state of another.”

It seems then that according to Buddhism, alterity exists in the self’s relation to itself. If we consider the self as a series of transient states, then the self’s own alterity is nothing other than its fundamental impermanence, in which it is always becoming different from and thus other than what it once was.

This use of alterity in a Buddhist context conflicts with Lévinas’s use of alterity, in which the self is not an “other” to itself in this way. Lévinas writes: “The alterity of the self that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same.” The self’s discomfort at being unable to fully grasp itself, and thus experiencing itself as an other, does not constitute ethical alterity for Lévinas. Rather, alterity is ethical precisely because the other, appearing from the outside, calls into question the spontaneity and freedom of the self. And the relation between self and other is asymmetrical precisely because there is no counterpart, within the self, for the

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40 Dalmiya (2001), 70.
41 Lévinas (1969), 37.
alterity that approaches from the outside. In this way, alterity makes impossible a symmetrical, one-to-one correspondence between self and other.\footnote{Lévinas’s account of the self’s own alterity changes between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, as will be discussed in the fourth chapter.}

Now, to the extent that the doctrine of no-self allows for a real sense of alterity within the self, there seems to be a deep symmetry—or, perhaps, a complementary asymmetry—at the heart of interpersonal relationality. For does not the alterity of the other and the alterity within myself command the same ethical force? According to the doctrine of no-self, there is a sense in which I am an other to myself and in which my own alterity is on a par with the alterity of another person. Such a claim is not problematic for the Buddhist tradition, wherein the “self” is a convention—a construct that gives coherence to the transience of lived experience but which nonetheless corresponds to no “inner self.” This loss of interiority, however, marks an irreconcilable difference with Lévinas, who insists that if the self can experience itself as “exterior” in this way, then “exteriority [i.e., alterity] would then no longer mean anything, since it would encompass the very interiority that justified this appellation.”\footnote{Lévinas (1969), 290.} The loss of the “interior” is an unavoidable consequence of the doctrine of no-self. Under this doctrine, the self is not “inner” like the Lévinasian egoism of privacy and enjoyment but “outer” and “other” as a construct and a convention.

So, accepting this disagreement with Lévinas and accepting the Buddhist claim that I can—and always do—experience myself as an other, the corresponding claim would seem to be, logically, that I can experience an other as myself. This would constitute a true symmetry, wherein self and other are exchangeable terms. But as
discussed in the following section, the doctrine of no-self does not necessarily support the claim that I can experience another as myself. Under this interpretation, the doctrine preserves its own version of asymmetry within self-other relationality—different from Lévinas’s—expressed in the statement: *I can experience myself as another, but I cannot experience another as myself.*

1. Non-Lévinasian Asymmetry: *I Feel Your Pain?*

Some scholars of Buddhism do make the claim that the self can experience others as itself. In “Dōgen’s View of Authentic Selfhood and Its Socio-ethical Implications,” Francis H. Cook writes:

> But the sense of commonality that results from the achievement of authentic selfhood, rather than being an abstract concept, is much more concrete and of the nature of feeling, for the “other” is experienced as the self in the overcoming of the subject-object split. More important than the mere experiencing of other beings as the self, though, is the act of feeling their feelings also. That is to say, the authentic self as the concrete unity of experience is not simply the unity in experience of mere physical entities but is also the inclusion of their concerns, their suffering and joys, and so on. . . . I believe that this is the basis for the Buddhist social emotions of sympathy and compassion and the reason why it is said that the Bodhisattva is said to feel the sufferings of others.\(^{44}\)

Here we can see that Cook is not making a distinction between subject-object non-duality (ER) and self-other relationality (IR). He asserts that the experience of subject-object non-duality is actually the concrete, emotional event of experiencing another person as oneself. In other words, he implies that non-duality involves the merger of subject and object on a large scale and the corresponding merger of self and other on a smaller scale.

\(^{44}\) Cook (1985), 145.
Thus, he believes that the overcoming of the subject-object split results in the self’s ability to feel directly the suffering of others.

But his conflation of ER and IR leads to contradictory claims. On the one hand, he says that the relational self “has no existence prior to or apart from the experience which in fact constitutes it. Such a self is not . . . separated from its objective world. It is rather the very ‘other’ in a real way.”\(^{45}\) Here, when Cook writes of being the other, he is speaking of the basic perceptual experience underlying the subject-object distinction (ER). When this distinction is challenged, it appears that the objects of experience, not some core subjectivity, constitute the existence of the self. Yet, on the other hand, Cook says: “Therefore, for Dōgen, authentic selfhood is an authentic selfhood for others—that is, its proper function is that of eliminating suffering and struggle in the world.”\(^{46}\) Here, when he writes of being for the other, he is speaking of the ethical implications that the doctrine of no-self has for interpersonal relations (IR) in Dōgen’s philosophy. As seen in the long quote above, Cook connects the levels of ER and IR to conclude that the self actually feels the other as itself, just as the subject finds itself to be constituted by the objects of its experience.

But is being the other equivalent to being for the other? If the self really does experience the other as itself, then why does Cook not say that authentic selfhood is for itself? After all, if its proper function is that of eliminating suffering and struggle in the world, and if the self takes on the suffering of others as its own, then there should be no meaningful difference between saying that authentic selfhood is for itself or for others. Either way, the suffering is the same, and authentic selfhood achieves its proper function

\(^{45}\) Cook (1985), 138.  
\(^{46}\) Cook (1985), 140.
by eliminating it. But it is doubtful that Cook would wish to commit to the locution that authentic selfhood is “for itself”—not only does this contradict Dōgen’s preoccupation with doing good for others, but it also runs counter to the point Cook himself is trying to make about the socio-ethical implications of the doctrine of no-self. Indeed, by saying that authentic selfhood exists not for its own sake but for the sake of others, Cook suggests a necessary difference between the self and the others on whose behalf the self acts. But he cannot explore the ethical consequences of this difference, because he conflates the use of the term “other” as objective experience and “other” as another person.

Dōgen’s own writings on acting for the sake of others are found in his commentary on the bodhisattva’s four methods of guidance (shishōhō 四攝法), the fourth of which is dōji 同事, commonly translated as “identity-action” or “identifying with others.” But, as Dōgen himself explains in his commentary, the ji 事 in dōji means “to attain proper form, dignity, and correct manner” (儀なり、威なり、態なり). This suggests that Dōgen is not using ji in today’s sense of fact, circumstances, or event. Rather, he seems to have in mind a secondary usage of ji from classical Chinese meaning “to serve,” which he interprets in the sense of observing appropriate behavior with respect to others. Considering that the dō 同 of dōji does not simply mean sheer identity but also “to be in agreement with” or “to be together with,” it now seems that a better rendering of dōji may be closer the Chinese tongshi 同事, “to act together” or “to act as a

A preferable translation of *dōji* is “acting appropriately together with others,” which is indeed closer to the original Sanskrit *samānārthatā*.

But several translators of Dōgen’s commentary on *dōji* maintain the sense of *dō* as “identity.” For example, Kazuaki Tanahashi and Lew Richmond make use of a verbal construction with *dō* in the following sentence: “This means that you cause yourself to be in identity with others after causing others to be in identity with you” (他をして自に同ぜしめてのちに、自をして他に同ぜしむる道理あるべし). ⁵⁰ Hee-Jin Kim offers a translation of this sentence even farther removed from the preferable sense of *dō*: “There is a truth that after self assimilates others to itself, self lets itself be assimilated by others.” ⁵¹ *Dō* does not warrant this idea of “assimilation,” which has the negative connotation of being absorbed or overwhelmed. But neither does *dō* warrant the translation “to be in identity with,” because identity connotes sameness, which does not capture the sense of “being together with” that is more faithful both to the original Chinese with which Dōgen would have been familiar and the original Sanskrit term on which the Chinese was based. A better translation would be: “The self should act together with others after encouraging others to act together with the self.” This translation suggests that, through a process of negotiation, self and other designate a common ground.

This interpretation is supported by Kiyotaka Kimura, who devotes part of an essay on compassion in Dōgen’s philosophy to a reading of this passage concerning “identification.” Kimura observes that “the manner in which self and others, forever

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⁴⁹ Matthews (1966), 808; 966.
⁵⁰ Tanahashi (1985), 47. For the original, see Dōgen, (1971–72), 4:368.
changing with the passage of time, act as friends and partners toward each other to create a single, harmonious world represents ‘identification.’”

Accordingly, he translates the above sentence as “[I]t stands to reason that we may first harmonize others with ourselves and then harmonize ourselves with others.” His translation also avoids the assimilative sense of identification and stresses the cooperative aspect of achieved harmony.

However, there are times when Dōgen does speak of dōji as the unity of self and other. For example, he says that “when you understand dōji, self and other become as one” (同志をしるとき、自他一如なり)

But if we translate this as understanding how to act appropriately together with others, then “becoming as one together” does not mean “becoming the same” but rather has the sense of self and other becoming unified through joint action. Joining together around a common goal or activity does not mean to become identical with another person. And it certainly does not mean, contrary to Cook, that the self actually becomes the other and knows the other’s suffering, as it were, from the inside. Rather, like the sentence above, it has a sense of negotiation over agreed upon activities.

2. No-Self and Self-as-Other

Who carries out these negotiations, considering that there is no-self? Within Buddhism, this question is not problematic: the self is a convention, and although it does not correspond to an actual “self,” it is nonetheless useful for providing a coherent

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53 Kimura (1991), 334
framework in which to understand and participate in the immediacy of lived experience. I present myself to others as this construction, which remains changeable. The other, as well, presents himself to me as a changeable construction. As Lévinas himself says: “Expression does not consist in giving us the Other’s interiority.” This means that other person, even when freely expressing himself to us, does not—and cannot—provide us with a conception of himself that is completely definitive or that sums him up entirely. Lévinas writes: “In discourse the divergence that inevitably opens between the Other as my theme and the Other as my interlocutor, emancipated from the theme that seemed a moment to hold him, forthwith contests the meaning I ascribe to my interlocutor.” Thus all concepts of the other person are changeable constructions, and the accepting, rejecting, and refining of these constructions is the work of interpersonal communication.

What Buddhism adds to this Lévinasian idea is the claim that, in my own self-constructions through which I express myself, I also give nothing of my own interiority, because according to the doctrine of no-self no such interiority exists. This absence of interiority marks an important disagreement with Lévinas. Yet, even though neither I nor the other have any “interiority,” our relations are still asymmetrical, according to the formulation: I can experience myself as another, but I cannot experience another as myself. The claim that I can experience myself as another means that because there is no self, my experience of what I conventionally call the self is, in its immediacy, an experience of becoming-other. And the claim that I cannot experience another as myself is a logical consequence of the fact that there is no “self” whom I would be experiencing the other “as.” These two propositions together constitute an asymmetry in which my

experience is always skewed toward an other to whom I have ethical responsibility, even when the other is myself.

One famous passage from the opening lines of Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* seems to support this asymmetrical reading of the self’s relationality. He writes: “Carrying yourself forward to affirm the myriad things is delusion. The myriad things advancing forward to affirm you is enlightenment.”57 Here Dōgen ascribes a distinct directionality to the self’s basic experiential states, a directionality that can be characterized as asymmetrical. The self is receptive to experiences that are always incoming, but there is no corresponding outgoing selfhood that might impose itself on experience. Using this passage to interpret the commentary on identification, one plausible interpretation might be as follows: The process of identification is not one of internalization, which is to say that the self does not reach out to appropriate the other or the other’s experiences as the self’s own; rather identification is a matter of receptivity, which is being able to remain open to and accepting of the other person as other.

According to this asymmetrical formulation, the transience of lived experience means a perpetual involvement with difference or otherness, which are perhaps better expressed as becoming-different or becoming-other. The self is always becoming-other and moreover is relationally constituted by other people who are also becoming-other. When interpreted this way, the doctrine of self-emptiness, far from denying alterity, seems instead to embrace it. That is, emptiness is understood as transience, and transience is understood as the process of becoming-other in which all selves are involved. Thus no-

self refers not to a nonexistent self but to a self that is always becoming-other, or a “self-as-other.”

The idea of a self-as-other is often used by Buddhist philosophers to explain the doctrine of no-self to Western audiences. In a now-classic analysis, Masao Abe asks readers of *Zen and Western Thought* to contemplate the question “Who am I?”

This is a natural and inevitable question for the ego-self because it objectifies everything including itself. But with regard to this question we must ask, ‘Who is asking, “who am I”? ’ The ego-self may answer, ‘I am asking, “who am I”? ’ But in this answer there are two ‘I’s: an ‘I’ which is asking and an ‘I’ which is inquired into. . . . The self is divided in two. In other words, here ‘I’ am asking about ‘myself’, and ‘myself’ is in this case not the subject but the object of my own asking. This ’myself’ is not the true ‘I’ because it is already objectified and an objectified self can never be a living, truly Subjective Self.58

Whenever the self tries to experience itself, it sees itself as the object of its own perception but not as the perceiving subject. Thus it never experiences itself as a “self” but always as an “other,” or as other than its “true” self. Abe concludes that the ego-self is in a state of perpetual anxiety over its own estrangement from itself.

He characterizes the first step down the path of Zen philosophy as the recognition that there is no “true” self. In this recognition, the search for a subjective perceiver behind the objects of perception is overcome and gives way to the realization that, in the act of perceiving, there is no distinction between subject and object. At this stage, says Abe, the understanding of no-self is nihilistic, for the self is seen as simplistically nonexistent. Moreover, this nonexistent self becomes definitive of the self’s identity, such that a concept of no-self simply replaces the ego-self as the core of the subject.

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Abe warns: “One can objectify not only something positive but something negative. One can conceptualize ‘no-self’ as well as ‘ego-self’.”

This attachment to no-self must be overcome just as was the attachment to ego-self. Abe asserts that one must move past the realization that the self is unattainable to the realization “that the unattainable itself is the true Self.” Here Abe makes use of a common style of argumentation in Buddhism: affirmation, negation, and negation of negation. As in Western logic, the double negation at the third stage has the force of an affirmation. In Abe’s terms, the first stage is the affirmation of the self’s existence as ego-self; the second stage is the denial of the self’s existence; and the third stage is the denial of the self’s nonexistence, which affirms a new sense of self beyond the dichotomy of existence and nonexistence.

With reference to Lévinas’s language, this same pattern can be cast in terms of the self’s experience of itself as an other. At the first stage, the self experiences itself as an other, but as an other who is thematized and objectified. This striving to identify and conceptualize the self is analogous to the attempt to totalize the alterity of the other. The self’s anxiety at this stage stems from its inability to ever know itself completely. At the second stage, the self denies its existence and embraces no-self as a new identity. By

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59 Abe (1985), 10.
60 Abe (1985), 12.
61 Kazuaki Tanahashi discusses this at length in his introduction to Moon in a Dewdrop: The Writings of Zen Master Dōgen (1985). He cites Dōgen’s famous passage: “As all things are Buddha-dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, birth and death, and there are buddhas and sentient beings. As the myriad things are without an abiding self, there is no delusion, no realization, no buddha, no sentient being, no birth and death. The buddha way is, basically, leaping clear of the may and the one; thus there are birth and death, delusion and realization, sentient beings and buddhas.” Tanahashi comments: “The first step is discrimination, the second is denial of discrimination, and the third is beyond discrimination and denial of it” (17).
analogy, one may compare this stage to the misguided interpretations of Lévinasian alterity that portray the other as mysterious and ineffable. Rather than allow the other to remain unthematized, such interpretations take mystery and ineffability as the defining themes.

The third stage marks the renewed affirmation of the other as a living presence that remains unbounded by limiting concepts. In Lévinas’s terms, this is the experience of welcoming the other in conversation and approaching the other as a teacher. In Abe’s terms, it is the realization that

the unattainable is itself the true Self, [in which] all possible conceptualization and objectification, positive and negative, are completely overcome. Emptiness, which in the second stage is still somewhat conceptualized, is now completely emptied; the pure activity of Emptiness forever emptying itself is realized as the true Self.\(^{62}\)

No harm is done to Abe’s logic to say, instead, that at the third stage the self ceases to try and grasp itself as an other but instead experiences its own constant othering. The third stage is not a rejection of the experience of the self-as-other but an openness to this experience in its lived, untotalizable immediacy.

As this interpretation of Abe shows, the language of self-emptying and the language of self-othering support one another. In these terms, the doctrine of no-self is readily amenable to the ethics of alterity. In the final section, we will see that the ethics of alterity may more open to the doctrine of no-self than perhaps Lévinas himself would accept.

\(^{62}\) Abe (1985), 14.
VII. Conclusions and Implications: Passivity and the Self-as-Other

A point of tension within Lévinas’s philosophy follows from his own attempts to explain the basis of the asymmetry so central to his concept of alterity. The formulation of asymmetry in his first major work, Totality and Infinity, holds that the self must be “absolutely separate” in order for the other to be “absolutely other.” He describes the self as an “absolute interiority” that is always identical with itself, for even in differing from itself it only manifests itself further. Because this self can never be an “other” to itself, there is no counterpart within the self for the alterity of the other person, and thus the self-other relation is asymmetrical.

However, these notions of absolute interiority and self-identicalness present problems for Lévinas. In his work, all knowledge is accomplished through thematization as a process of conceptualization. Lévinas usually speaks of thematization as the process by which the self comes to know the other. This process is always ethically dubious, for knowledge seeks to render inert the other’s living presence. Her freedom to grow and change remains a permanent contestation to any knowledge one may have of her. Yet, how does the self gain knowledge of itself? In conceptualizing itself, does it not know itself as an “other”? In the final pages of Totality and Infinity, Lévinas entertains this dilemma: If the self can only know itself as an other, then it appears that otherness encompasses the self and renders the notion of absolute otherness meaningless; yet if the self can know itself as a subject, in some special way distinct from the knowledge it has

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of itself as an other, then there appears an ultimate dualism of self and other.\textsuperscript{64} Lévinas’s answer to this dilemma invokes a new term, the “curvature” of intersubjective space, which seems out of place thrown into the last fifteen pages of the book, and which does little to address the question. The reader is left wondering how any account of selfhood is possible under the dominating theory of alterity that Lévinas presents.

His second major work, \textit{Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence}, can be seen as an attempt to address this question, as it focuses on formulating an account of subjectivity compatible with the notion of alterity. Lévinas recasts the asymmetry of the self-other relation as one of the ethical responsibility that the self bears for the other. The self is not one among many, in a system of symmetry where all selves have equal rights and duties, and where all can demand similar treatment. Rather, the responsibility the self bears for the other is not reciprocated by the other, and thus it situates the self in an asymmetrical relation. He characterizes this responsibility as “a passivity more passive than all passivity.”\textsuperscript{65} In other words, self is constituted entirely through its responsibility for the other, in a process that can only be expressed, even grammatically, in a passive construction—selfhood is \textit{done to} the self \textit{by} the other.

Where is the self in this passivity that obscures even the grammatical place of the subject? Lévinas answers that, to be for the other, and to be constituted through responsibility for the other, “is always to empty oneself anew of oneself. . . . it is to be emptied even of the quasi-formal identity of a being someone.”\textsuperscript{66} After all, what could be more passive than emptiness? Does not the alterity that renders the self passive, that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{64} Lévinas (1969), 290.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Lévinas (1998), 15.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Lévinas (1998), 92.
\end{itemize}
makes the self entirely for-the-other, thereby turn the “self” into no-self? Neither absolute separation nor absolute passivity can alone account for the asymmetry of the self-other relation; rather, the absolute emptiness of one term in the pair—the emptiness of “self”—explains why the entire relation is asymmetrically skewed toward “other.”

Therefore, I suggest that Lévinas’s own concept of alterity points to a kind of “no-self,” and that the philosophy of emptiness gives better support for his account of asymmetry than does the vocabulary of Western ontology within which he works (and which he critiques). However, although this notion of the self-as-other solves the problem of locating alterity within a philosophy of emptiness, it does not solve other politically relevant problems that confront the doctrine of no-self. In the next chapter, the discussion moves on to the question of how the self-as-other can be understood to have any autonomy in the processes of becoming-other by which it exists.67

67 Before leaving this chapter behind, I would like to return to the relation between ER and IR. The purpose of initially distinguishing the two was to avoid objectifying the other person, but now I suggest that the opposite will be true: when we reunite experiential and interpersonal relationality, the problem is not be that the other person is reduced to an object, but that all “others” which conventionally fall on the side of objectivity become ethical others. Animals, and indeed the environment itself, are part of the transience of existence and as such are caught up in the ethically rich process of becoming-other. Pushed to an extreme, no “object” seems to fall outside of the relationality that leads to ethical concern.

This view would be consistent with Dōgen’s philosophy, which, perhaps in all of Zen thought, is the most resistant to an anthropomorphic view of Buddhist practice. Kim points out that Dōgen equates the term “sentient beings” with all of existence—human, plant, animal, and mineral—and claims that all of existence has Buddha-nature. This equation of Buddha-nature with all the facets of impermanent existence, Kim says, is a break not only with anthropocentrism but with biocentrism, as well (Kim 1987, 120).

In contrast, Lévinas offers an unapologetically human-centered account of alterity; although some recent scholars have tried to challenge his claim “the Other” must be a human other. In “Facing Nature: Lévinas beyond the Human,” Christian Diehm convincingly argues: “I do not think that Lévinas’s ethical phenomenology of the face precludes other-than-human faces, or that it can do so and remain consistent with its own principles and aims” (Diehm 2004, 184).
2

THE PROBLEM OF AUTONOMY

*Japanese people easily succumb to resignation, which is the self-realization of the powerlessness of the ego.*

—Kuki Shūzō

In his 1936 essay “Regarding the Japanese Character” Kuki Shuzō identifies resignation as one of the dominant features of Japanese character and attributes this tendency to the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. Buddhism, Kuki observes, advises its adherents to resign themselves to the utter impermanence of existence, in which they are powerless to halt the continual passing away of the self and of all the self holds dear. Yet, he also points out that this resignation has a positive outcome—namely, the practice of non-attachment. This non-attachment inspires such positive character traits as unselfishness, generosity, sincerity, and a preference for simplicity. What connects resignation with generosity? One might say, considering that all transience involves loss, a person can either bemoan the loss of things or can instead engage their transience actively, even hasten their loss, by sincerely giving things away. In this chapter, the possibility Kuki opens up—the possibility of being at once resigned to and actively engaged with loss—provides a foundation upon which to construct a notion of autonomy within the doctrine of no-self.

The idea of resignation or resigned non-attachment has a long history in Japanese thought, especially in Buddhist philosophy and aesthetic theory. Steve Odin engages its

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history and scope in *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics*. As he discusses, a persistent danger in Japanese aesthetic theory concerns the possibility of taking artistic detachment too far; that is, numbing oneself to emotional experience in the name of aesthetic appreciation. He cites the epiphany at the conclusion of Natsume Sōseki’s novel *Grass Pillow*, in which the narrator finally realizes that artistic detachment alone is not sufficient for aesthetic appreciation: “beauty requires compassion just as art requires an element of human feeling.” In Sōseki’s own aesthetic theorizing, he speaks of the need to balance psychic distance with emotional engagement. Aesthetic appreciation is compromised if one is, on the one hand, utterly and unfeelingly detached from what one appreciates; or, on the other hand, too personally and emotionally invested in it.

This chapter builds upon the concept of subjectivity as a process of becoming-other to explore the conditions under which becoming-other can attain autonomy. The resulting account of autonomy is situated within the apparent tensions between the regulative ideals of non-attachment and compassion. Following Odin, this theory insists that non-attachment need not have an “unfeeling” aspect at all. In other words, on the issue of autonomy, the conflict lies not between non-attachment and compassion but between an emotionally naïve and an emotionally mature understanding of non-attachment. In the emotionally mature understanding, non-attachment and compassion work together to enable a self-productive sense of autonomy.

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3 Odin (2001), 257.
The emotional maturity necessary for autonomy hinges on the attitude one holds toward death and dying, specifically toward the sense of mortality associated with the self’s impermanence. Whereas the last chapter focused on impermanence as the acceptance of change in others, this chapter emphasizes transience as the *inevitability of loss* for the self and shows that acceptance of such loss in fact enables autonomy. Here, the unlikely thesis is that autonomy as “self-rule” can be understood simultaneously as an experience of self-loss.

The first section explores conflicts between autonomy and relevant features of the doctrine of no-self, including the *powerlessness* of the ego-self that Kuki discusses, as well as conflicts with the Lévinasian sense of *responsibility* relied on in the last chapter to develop the idea of the self-as-other. The second section turns to Judith Butler’s work on the *melancholia* inherent to ego-bound subjectivity. Her critique of the subject is instructive for the problem of autonomy on several levels. Like the doctrine of no-self, Butler’s concept of performativity rejects an essentialist account of the subject; also like no-self, performativity conflicts with conventional understandings of autonomy and agency. I argue that Butler’s own remarks on the possibility for autonomy within the theory of performativity are best understood through an appeal to aesthetic standards, specifically the aesthetic standards of the Japanese tradition.

The third section begins with a brief overview of the Japanese aesthetic tradition, with an emphasis on the relation between *mourning* and beauty. The discussion then turns to a Japanese account of performativity through Sakabe Megumi’s writings on *nō* theater. The interplay between the impermanence of human experience and the ritualization of human behavior provides an aesthetic framework in which to understand Butler’s
arguments on the potential for creativity within the reiterated performances of the subject. The philosophy of emptiness and the aesthetics of the Japanese tradition together articulate the transition from *melancholy* to *mourning* that makes autonomy possible.

The next section begins with Graham Parkes’s work on subjective performativity to map out the possibilities for psychic health through mourning. The self requires both compassion and non-attachment, as modeled on the bodhisattva ideal, to face its own impermanence and mourn its own passing. Finally, the paradoxes of self-reflexivity that seem to prevent mourning in Butler’s work are compared to the aporia of mourning that extends indefinitely the process of grief for Jacques Derrida. The chapter concludes that autonomy in terms of no-self is articulated not as rational self-determination nor as critical self-reflection but as the emotionally-informed awareness of self-loss.
I. Resignation and Passivity: The Problem of Autonomy for the Doctrine of No-Self

1. Conflicts between Autonomy and the Powerlessness of the Ego-Self

Kuki’s idea of resigning oneself to one’s own powerlessness seems to be at odds with any functional conception of autonomous action. In conventional accounts, autonomy means self-power: the power to exert one’s will, to assert one’s personal independence, and above all to control oneself. But according to the powerlessness associated with impermanence, the individual lacks full control over her own constantly changing identity, and in this sense she lacks full control over her own “self.” Thus, as might be expected, the doctrine of no-self runs counter to many mainstream accounts of autonomy in contemporary American philosophy, which hinge on the notion of self-control. In the influential collection *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy*, John Christman explains the choice of words in the title: “If the concept of autonomy—which refers to an authentic and independent self—is to be defended as a coherent idea as well as a value to be protected and sought, it will be suggestively captured, I think, by the metaphor of such a citadel.”5 In this familiar picture of personhood, the inner citadel is a metaphor for the core self, both independent and authentic, whose unhindered will commands autonomous action.

For example, one general feature of autonomy holds that the self is autonomous when it is free from external constraints and wills its actions independently in accordance with its own internal thoughts and feelings. Following a thinker such as Rawls, who

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follows Kant, one might narrow the realm of internal thoughts and feelings to include only rational thoughts, making autonomy synonymous with rational self-determination. But any such definition of autonomy, which pits external constraints against the self’s internal will, presupposes the isolated, independent self who commands this will. As seen in the last chapter, the doctrine of no-self denies any such inner core. With no independent, non-relationally constituted inner self who would be the seat of the autonomous will, the individual cannot achieve autonomy under this definition of self-determination.

Another general feature of autonomy holds that an individual acts autonomously when she critically reflects upon and approves of her own actions, which is to say, when she acts authentically. This feature is emphasized, with significant variations, in Harry Frankfurt’s notion of second-order desires and Christine Korsgaard’s notion of reflective endorsement. As Marilyn Friedman points out, such theories involve a “split-level self,” which assumes a hierarchical ordering of second-order desires in relation to first-order ones. In this hierarchy, second-order desires are considered closer to the desires of the “authentic” self, because they are developed through rational consideration. Now, under a doctrine that denies the existence of a true self, the passing states of the self’s identity cannot be hierarchically ordered as closer to or farther from some authentic core. Moreover, rational deliberation, as one passing state of the self, is not privileged as being more authentic than the passing states of emotions or other affectivities.

Various critiques have produced alternative formulations of autonomy, but even these alternatives do not easily accommodate the doctrine of no-self. For example, some

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work within feminist philosophy has focused on defining autonomy for the relational, socially situated self, but few of these feminist models for relational selfhood posit that the self is *entirely* constituted by its relations; whereas, in contrast, the doctrine of no-self does allow for such constitutive relationality. In the article “Autonomy and the Social Self,” Linda Barclay specifically rejects the notion of constitutive social relationality, which she associates with communitarianism. Although she accepts the weak claim that no person is born with or can achieve absolute independence from community, she argues against the strong claim that “certain ends and values *constitute* our identity and that these ends and values are fundamentally social in nature.” Her concern is that according to this strong claim “the self is so constituted by her social ends that she is unable to reconsider or reject them.” That is, Barclay assumes that to be constituted by social relations is to be determined by those relations. She concludes that a robust notion of autonomy is compatible with a relational self model where the self is *shaped* by and *motivated* by its social relations but not *constituted* by them.

Barclay’s rejection of communitarianism is based on an idea of social relationality that may seem similar to the notion of interpersonal relationality relied on heavily in the last chapter. As was stated, the self is *constitutively* relational, such that there is always an interpersonal dimension even to the self’s most private thoughts and actions. This being the case, perhaps the self, as Barclay says, is unable to reconsider or reject its various relationships. After all, if the self has no non-relationally constituted vantage point from which to carry out its critical reflections, then the whole notion of a self “thinking for

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9 Barclay (2000), 63.
itself” becomes unintelligible. Such a self would be unable to distinguish which thoughts and desires are its “own” and which are determined by its interactions with others.

Katherine Keller raises objections against Buddhism that are similar to the objections Barclay raises against communitarianism. That is, Keller asserts that constitutive relationality makes autonomy impossible by denying the self a locus of agency. In other writings on the structure of the relational self, Keller avoids making the move to constitutive relationality by placing heavy emphasis on the role of solitude. In her formulation, the relational self is sustained at each moment by the complementary poles of relatedness and aloneness, where aloneness preserves the own-being that makes autonomy possible. At first glance this formulation seems quite similar to Watsuji’s idea that the self exists in between the poles of individuality and community. Yet Watsuji’s conceptual framework is thoroughly permeated by the language of negation and emptiness, which is exactly the sort of language to which Keller objects in her critique of Buddhism. The notion of the self as “betweenness” is meant to express the idea that an individual alone has no “own-being.” There is nothing in Watsuji’s portrayal of betweenness that does the conceptual work aloneness does for Keller. The emptiness of no-self undercuts precisely the own-being which aloneness is meant to preserve.

Since the above discussions of Barclay and Keller appear to align the doctrine of no-self with communitarianism, perhaps instead of seeking to retain autonomy, one should, like some communitarians (and some postmodern critics), reject the significance of autonomy as a value. Perhaps autonomy is inextricably tied to Western, modernist

individualism, with its emphasis on independence over relationality, and thus will always be at odds with a notion of persons as relationally and socially constituted.

2. Conflicts between Autonomy and Lévinasian Responsibility

... whether they knew or didn’t know is not the main issue; the main issue is whether a man is innocent because he didn’t know. Is a fool on the throne relieved of all responsibility merely because he is a fool?
—Milan Kundera

The theory of alterity developed in the last chapter also presents challenges to the idea of autonomy, which are relevant to the doctrine of no-self. Specifically, Lévinas’s notion of responsibility, which was earlier linked to Buddhist non-attachment, forces us to revise certain common assumptions about the function of autonomy. Conventionally, autonomy is thought of as a necessary condition for responsibility. In other words, if a person is first deemed capable of acting autonomously, then that person may be held responsible for her actions. But, based on the conclusions of the last chapter, the self that is no-self always already finds itself responsible to and for other people, such that some conception of responsibility always precedes any conception of autonomy. Thus, a theory of autonomy within the doctrine of no-self will not function to secure responsibility, for responsibility is already established.

Under one interpretation, giving first priority to the responsibility the self bears for others imposes an a priori check on the self’s freedom to act independently and thereby forecloses the possibility of autonomy. However, this sense of freedom which is

11 Kundera (1991), 177
eclipsed by the self’s prior responsibility to others is a trivial sense of freedom, best characterized as the “spontaneity” that Lévinas claims is called into question by the presence of the other. This spontaneity does not reflect a realistic state of affairs but instead expresses the sort of freedom a person might wish for herself were she not relationally constituted. In other words, the individual may wish to behave as if her actions had no consequences for other people, or as if she were an atomistic self free of the ties that bind her to others. Thus spontaneity expresses the fantasy of absolute, non-relational individuality and the pure freedom such individuality is imagined to bring. And since the self has never been anything other than a relational self bound by the ethical force of alterity, the fantasy of spontaneity is also a desire to be rid of the other—which is why Lévinas links it to a desire for murder. Moral consciousness, he writes, “is accomplished as shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise.” Freedom in the sense of spontaneity is revealed in its arbitrariness and violence through the other, whose very presence commits me to ethical consciousness.

This commitment does not mandate that I act in a particular way, or that I treat other people in a particular way, but only causes me to recognize that I am always already involved with others and that these involvements reflect the inescapably ethical character of interpersonal relationality. According to this line of reasoning, ethics would be irrelevant were I the only person in existence. But, as a relational self, I always must deal with more people than just myself. So, ethics is always relevant; or, specifically, my relational constitution is always ethical in character.

Because of the self’s constant ethical connectedness to others, all thoughts, feelings, and actions are to some degree other-oriented, or at least have the potential to
affect others. To take an everyday example, when I pass a stranger on the street, I may or may not choose to acknowledge that person. Either way, I have responded to that person’s presence, for choosing to ignore the other amounts to a response—a response for which I am responsible. Indeed, I am responsible for my response even when I ignore the other because I simply do not notice her. In other words, the persistent other-orientedness of my actions means that I am always responding to people. Even when my responses have unintended consequences, I cannot shift responsibility for my actions onto anyone else. Therefore, responsibility can be defined as the impossibility of not responding to the other.

This inability to evade responding is illustrated not only in everyday examples of interpersonal interactions, such as my acknowledging, ignoring, or failing to notice others; alongside these everyday examples, at a basic level, response cannot be avoided because the self enacts itself through relational responsiveness. That is, to evade responsiveness, a self would have to stop being a self. In *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*, Jeffery T. Nealon calls this self-enactment a “performative response” to the other, prior to which there exists no self.12 The performative self is born of and sustained in the mode of other-oriented responsiveness, such that there is no self before or outside of this constitutive mode. The fixing of the self’s identity, and its perception of itself as a free agent capable of acting autonomously, occurs in the mode of

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12 See Nealon (1998), 34. He writes that “ethics is born and maintained through the necessity of performative response to the other person, and such responsiveness (which he [i.e., Lévinas] calls ‘responsibility’) comes necessarily before the solidification of any theoretical rules or political norms of ethical conduct.” Furthermore, he says that Lévinas “continually calls attention to the primacy of an experience of sociality or otherness that comes before any philosophical understanding or reification of our respective subject positions.”
responsiveness—which is to say, again, responsibility is prior to autonomy on this Lévinasian model.

As such, for Lévinas, responsibility is characterized by what he calls a “passivity” before the other that precedes any sense of the self’s own freedom as an active agent: “Responsibility for the other, in its antecedence to my freedom . . . is a passivity more passive than all passivity.”\(^\text{13}\) This idea of passivity expresses the power of the other to affect the self and the self’s receptivity to being affected. As stated in the last chapter, on a relational model changes in other people necessarily affect the self, because the relations that constitute the self are also altered. In this sense, the individual cannot exert total control over her own identity, when her identity is subject to changes occurring in others. So, considering that this passivity denies an individual total self-rule, what kind of autonomy could such a self possibly possess?

The answer to the above question makes use of the fundamental asymmetry of the ethical relation. Although there are important differences, as noted in the previous chapter, between Lévinasian asymmetry and the asymmetry arising in a doctrine of no-self, the present analysis still upholds Lévinas’s claim that asymmetry means, in part, that “what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable to what I have the right to demand of the Other.”\(^\text{14}\) Now, throughout Lévinas’s work on alterity, this theme is pursued with a focus on what I do \textit{not} have a right to demand of the other, but much is left unsaid about \textit{what I can permit myself to demand of myself}. Accepting as a premise the self’s constitutive responsiveness qua responsibility to others, there are still many demands that the self can make of itself, which are relevant to a theory of autonomy, and which will be

\(^{13}\) Lévinas (1998), 15.
\(^{14}\) Lévinas (1969), 53.
explored throughout this chapter. As will be shown, the loss of spontaneity due to a prior responsibility to and for others does not undermine the freedom necessary for personal autonomy. That said, all freedom is bound by important constraints, namely (1) the self’s constitutive relationality and (2) the passivity toward change that this relationality entails. As Kuki might say, the self must be resigned to these constraints on its freedom resulting from the transience of its own identity. The theory of autonomy presented in this chapter will operate within such constraints, approaching them not as obstacles to strive against but as opportunities to reformulate autonomy as a self-creativity that remains relationally oriented and thus ethically informed.
II. The Melancholy Paradoxes of Agency: Judith Butler’s Performative Subject

To return to the first problem for autonomy and no-self regarding relational constitution, the notion of “interpersonal relationality” is not entirely exhausted by Barclay’s portrayal of “social relationality.” The Buddhist sense of the self’s relationality underscores an interpersonal interconnectedness that reflects more than the role that social values and community narratives play in individual identity formation. Under the notion of social relationality that is often associated with communitarianism, there is still an individual, but one who is overly determined by his or her community. Under the notion of interpersonal relationality, which this dissertation has associated with no-self, there is no “individual” outside of the relations that thoroughly constitute a given person. These relations are not necessarily “social” or “communal” if these terms refer to some abstract group entity; rather, interpersonal relations are always particular and contextualized, involving specific people at specific times and places. What must be shown, in order to support a theory of autonomy, is that this interpersonal relational constitution does not entail relational determinism.

For example, one might accept that interpersonally constituted people can also be, at least to some degree, socially determined. And one may further admit that the societies making these determinations are generally problematic. That is, human communities are often cast in racist, sexist, and classist molds, reflecting power structures that determine people’s lives in abusive and disenabling ways. To resist this determinism, a theory of autonomy under the doctrine of no-self must show that interpersonal relationality does not prevent critical thinking about oneself, one’s relations, and one’s society. Indeed, this
capacity for resistance is what makes the question of autonomy relevant to a philosophy of emptiness when political considerations are the subject of discourse.

1. Autonomy and Critical Resistance

Judith Butler’s account of performativity has an affinity with the doctrine of no-self, in its rejection of essentialism and its constructivist account of the subject. Butler’s work stands in the tradition of J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts, so attributing too much “theatricality” to her sense of performance can easily misconstrue her meaning. However, taking that risk, the aesthetic dimension of performativity is a starting point for answering Butler’s own question of “how we might make such a [performative] conception of the subject work as a notion of political agency in postliberatory times.”

Speaking specifically of gender identity, Butler writes: “The performance of gender produces retroactively the illusion that there is an inner gender core.” The experiencing, acting, and responding self lives life extemporaneously, performing its own identity, as it were, on the spot. As Butler says, this results in the retroactive construction of a core identity, which is assumed to have always been the one responsible for the ongoing identity performance. Butler’s insistence that there is in fact no underlying core identity makes her ideas on performativity especially relevant to Buddhist notions of self-emptiness. Her performative subject lives and acts in the world with no “real” self existing anywhere outside of the performance. Thus the idea of performativity is an apt description of subjective life under a doctrine of no-self.

15 Butler (1997), 18.
16 Butler (1997), 144.
This idea also provides clues regarding both the potential for and impediments to personal agency on an anti-essentialist model of the subject. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler accepts the crux of Michel Foucault’s critique of identity; that is, the idea that subjective existence is created and sustained through certain power structures from which the subject can never be absolutely freed. In this sense the subject as “agent” is always at the same time a subject as “subordinate.” As Butler says: “‘Subjection’ signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject.”

She recognizes that an identity critique cannot naïvely reject the power structures that make subjectivity itself possible, for each person owes his or her subjective life to such power. Yet neither can a critique simply accept the subordinate status of the subject as proof against the capacity for personal freedom. For Butler, a person must face up to a specific sense of melancholy that arises as a result of the missing core self. The creative potential of subjective performativity cannot be claimed unless this melancholy is accepted. This creative potential disrupts the subject’s reiteration of power by enabling divergence from past habits and subversion of dominating narratives to produce a kind of empowered “self-iteration.”

That said, the very idea of self-iteration is a complicated matter in the context of a doctrine of no-self. *Who*, after all, iterates *whom*? What, exactly, is iterated? It certainly cannot be a “self” in any traditional sense of atomistic individuality, and it cannot author its actions according to a conventional understanding of agency. As David Loy says, articulations of no-self in Buddhism “emphasize the denial of an agent, that I perform

\[17\] Butler (1997), 2.
some action.”¹⁸ The relationally constituted self is never the agent of her own actions in a straightforward sense; and yet despite this paradoxical denial of the “I,” she still lives and acts in the world. These paradoxes that delimit the scope of self-iteration in Butler’s work are also relevant for the understanding of autonomy under a doctrine of no-self.

2. The Paradoxes of Self-Reflexivity: Butler and the Non-Existence of the Subject

_In the presence of Dionysus, god of the mask, the self itself becomes problematic._

—Graham Parkes¹⁹

To begin speaking of any aspect of the self’s relation to itself is to immediately run up against the complications that arise when the subject turns upon itself to take itself as the object of its own attention. The self’s attention is generally directed outward; indeed, the doctrine of no-self holds that any awareness of the “self” is constituted through what the self perceives. Yet, it remains the case that the self who is no-self can also perceive itself. When the self turns its attention upon itself, who or what is it perceiving, given that no “self” exists to be perceived? Often, Buddhist answers to this question are proffered in paradoxical terms. Commenting on descriptions of existence in general, Dōgen advises: “Do not mistakenly confuse it as nonbeing. Do not forcefully assert it as being.”²⁰ Doing so will only cause one to make seemingly contradictory claims, asserting, for example, that the individual is both “self” and “no-self” simultaneously.

¹⁸ Loy (1985), 79.
Yet such contradictory statements abound within Buddhist literature and indeed have explanatory force with regards to the self’s experiential situation. After all, how can the subject, who is the perceiver, perceive itself as the perceiver? So long as it is doing the perceiving, must it not instead perceive itself as the perceived? That is, it must perceive itself as the object of its own perceptions and not as the subject. The subjective self can reflect on its own past states or anticipate its future ones, but to perceive itself as an acting, perceiving subject in its lived immediacy is not possible—the self in its lived immediacy is no-self. This claim is not simply a blunt contradiction but a paradox of self-reference that arises in any serious attempt to state the “nature” of the self. Such paradoxes describe important features of subjective experience relevant to the question of autonomy.

In many paradoxes of self-reference, the problem arises with the attempt to identify the first instance of a given series. To say, for example, “I am lying” is to open up a logical loop in which the initial truth value of the statement cannot be identified. Is the statement first true, only to then falsify itself? Or is the statement first a falsehood, which somehow then becomes true of itself? If the statement is first true—that is, if it is true that I am lying—then what I am saying is false. But if what I am saying is false, then the statement is first false. Were there a clear beginning in the series of truth values, then one could simply switch from truth to falsity as when successively negating a given statement: “I am lying;” “It is not the case that I am lying”; “It is not the case that it is not the case that I am lying”; and so forth. But the paradox of self-reference makes this succession impossible. The mind anticipates a series, but because no initial truth value is ever established, reasoning instead travels in circles.
The observation that an analogous paradox of self-reference seems to lie at the heart of self-perception is certainly not restricted to medieval Japanese Buddhism. As Butler discusses in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, paradoxes of self-reference mark the problematic founding of subjectivity:

> The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning on oneself. This figure operates as part of the explanation of how a subject is produced, and so there is no subject, strictly speaking, who makes this turn. On the contrary, the turn appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain. Such a notion, then, appears difficult, if not impossible, to incorporate into the account of subject formation. What or who is said to turn, and what is the object of such a turn? . . . We cannot presume a subject who performs an internalization if the formation of the subject is in need of explanation. The figure to which we refer has not yet acquired existence and is not part of a verifiable explanation, yet our reference continues to make a certain kind of sense. The paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to what does not yet exist.  

Like Dōgen, Butler recognizes the ontological uncertainty of a subject who cannot be classified according to the binary categories of being and nonbeing. For Butler, this uncertainty is rooted in the ambiguities surrounding the birth or beginning of such a subject. Again, the problem lies in the inability to identify the first instance of a given series. To speak of the initial act by which the subject internalizes the power structures that first produce subjectivity is to imply that the subject was capable of internalizing such structures before it began to exist. Such internalization is thus problematic because it is supposed to both inaugurate the subject and refer back to a preexisting subject.

When one conceives of the subject as already existing, internalization is not paradoxical—I perceive, for an example, the emotion of another person, and I internalize this emotion such that it becomes my own. The paradox arises when attempting to

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identify the first in the series of internalizations that have helped to create my identity as a subject. Thus Butler’s remarks on the paradoxical self-reference involved in the internalization of subjugating power structures are relevant to various psychoanalytic theories of subject formation based on the infantile internalization of perceived objects.

Speaking of the Freudian account of subject formation, Tammy Clewell writes:

During the early stage of human development, the infant negotiates the loss of or separation from a primary love object by identifying with the lost other. Identification thus becomes the condition for constituting the self. . . . It is only by internalizing the lost other through the work of bereaved identification, Freud now claims, that one becomes a subject in the first place. 22

According to this Freudian narrative, prior to the first internalization of the lost other, “I” as a subject did not exist, and “I” came into existence only after the internalization occurred. But where would any such internalization take place if not within the self as a subject? Can there be “internalization” before there is a subject who possesses interiority? As Butler makes clear, this narrative contains a paradox, for the subject who does not yet exist is still required to somehow preexist its own birth. Or, as Butler puts it above, to discuss the formation of the subject is always to “refer to what does not yet exist.” As a result, as one would expect in a paradox of self-reference, one cannot identify the first in the series of experiences that constitute the life of the subject.

Mapping Butler’s paradox onto the doctrine of no-self, and its own insistence on the lack of a core subject, shows that this lack is covered over at the first internalization and at all successive ones. That is, every internalizing act masks the fact that there is no self “inside” waiting to receive the internalized experience. Thus, the paradox of self-reflexive subjectivity exists not only at the beginning of the subject, as Butler says, but

22 Clewell (2002), 61.
throughout the subject’s life: we are always, as it were, referring “to what does not yet exist.” Any time that the self turns upon itself to perceive its “self,” it instead encounters no-self.

3. The Melancholic Dimensions of Butler’s Paradox

In Butler’s work, the nonexistence of the subject produces melancholy. She uses melancholy in its Freudian sense, in contrast to mourning. For Freud, in the process of mourning, the dead other is remembered and grieved. This grief eventually is resolved as the self internalizes an idealization of the lost person. Through this internalization, the self lets go of the dead other in exchange for holding on to the idealized version, which becomes a part of the self. After such letting go, the work of mourning is considered successful. Accordingly, mourning that is unsuccessful fails to interiorize an idealized other, or fails to let go of the dead one. Because such mourning never resolves itself, it lapses into what Freud terms melancholy.23

In line with this distinction between melancholy and mourning, how might one grieve the absence of something or someone that never existed in the first place? The notion of “loss” implies the loss of something that once existed. So a person who has never existed cannot, by definition, be lost. Furthermore, since the notion of mourning implies grief for a person who has been lost, a person who has never existed and who thus has never been lost cannot, by definition, be mourned. According to the Freudian

23 This is a somewhat simplistic introductory account of Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia. His thoughts on the relations between them change over the course of his career, as will be discussed later.
mourning/melancholia pair, in the case of a person who has never existed, successful mourning is curtailed at the outset and melancholy becomes the only viable option. Or, as Butler says, since successful mourning involves interiorizing a lost other, and the self cannot interiorize what has never been lost, mourning the nonexistent subject is impossible.

The subject’s nonexistence is revealed in the self’s constant sense of displacement, or sense of being unable to occupy itself fully. Butler writes: “From the start, this ego is other than itself; what melancholia shows is that only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all.” Of course, as Butler herself notes, “becoming something at all” is beset with the paradoxes that mark the birth of subjectivity. To say simply that the ego becomes other than itself is to avoid the paradox, for in this case there is first an ego which then changes to become other than what it once was. But Butler claims that the ego is other than itself “from the start.” How can the ego be other than itself, without there first being an ego that is identical to itself? How does the self absorb the other before the self has become “something”? Melancholia does indeed show that the self has become a self only through becoming-other. But, beyond that, melancholia is persistent throughout the life of the self because it points to the missing core self, who never preexisted the emergence of the self-as-other, and thus the absence of whom can never be mourned. And because mourning its own loss is impossible, the self’s identity is inescapably melancholic.

The self rarely acknowledges such melancholy but instead holds it at bay through the maintenance of a relatively stable sense of identity. As quoted earlier, Butler claims

that the “performance of gender produces retroactively the illusion that there is an inner gender core.”\textsuperscript{25} The persistent lack of such a core haunts identity as a constant reminder of a loss that cannot be grieved and an idealized gender identity that can never be successfully internalized. Related to the act of internalizing what is initially “other,” the idea of the “performance of gender” is meant to suggest that gender identity is mimetic, as the case of drag performance highlights:

> If there is an ungrieved loss in drag performance, perhaps it is a loss that is refused and incorporated in the performed identification, one which reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical uninhabitability. . . . Gender itself might be understood in part as the “acting out” of unresolved grief.\textsuperscript{26}

The drag performer may be imitating a gender, but all gender is an imitation. This invites the question: An imitation of what? There is no original of which the imitation would be a copy, which is to say that there is no first in the series of internalizations that mark the formation of gender identity.

How, then, can an individual perform his or her gender role while being unable to locate the essential gender core upon which the performance would be based? In answer to this question, the idea of “performative identity” speaks to the lived reality of a paradox of self-reference: it means that the continued existence of the subject relies (albeit paradoxically) on the ongoing performance of a self-identity that corresponds to no core self. Butler’s claim that gender identity is “radically uninhabitable” captures the sense of uneasiness that arises when one reflects on oneself and one’s own uncertain ontological status. That is, when the self relates to itself as if to an other, it can inhabit neither the subject-position nor the object-position without ambiguity. It cannot

\textsuperscript{25} Butler (1997), 144.
\textsuperscript{26} Butler (1997), 145–46.
internalize itself without paradox, yet it cannot mourn its own nonexistence, which is to say that it can neither claim itself nor let itself go. For Butler, then, on the one hand, the self is performative—like the “acting out” of gender roles, personal identity is a mimetic act rendered paradoxical through the nonexistence of any true self whom the act could be said to mime. On the other hand, the self is melancholic—because the self can neither claim itself nor successfully mourn its own nonexistence, its repeated performances of itself are marked with a melancholy indicative of its own persistent uninhabitability.

4. The Question of Agency and Power

Butler’s account of melancholic performativity has been criticized, notably by Seyla Benhabib, for undermining the agency of the subject. As Benhabib claims, Butler attributes too much force to the workings of social power in constituting the subject and leaves no room for the subject’s own self-determination. Benhabib sees Butler’s whole project as threatening feminist politics by undermining the very existence of that which feminism seeks to empower—women’s agency.27

Butler responds: “To claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency.”28 The subject is constituted through reiterative acts; this fact is, for Butler, an unavoidable precondition of subjectivity. However, the repetitive acts through which the subject performs itself are not simple instances of mimicry. Because

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27 See Benhabib’s contributions to (1995) Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange, edited by Benhabib, Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser.
28 Butler (1995a), 46.
there is no original self grounding the series of repetitions, the subject is inherently unstable—every reiterative act makes possible a deviation from the last, which makes possible the subversion of those very powers constitutive of the subject. Butler claims that Benhabib actually undermines the freedom of the subject to deviate or subvert power “by grammatically reinstalling the subject ‘behind’ the deed, and by reducing . . . the notion of performativity to theatrical performance.”29

But not all freedom leads to positive change, and not all subversion is empowering. Instability alone is not necessarily creative or liberatory; to the contrary, it may be chaotic and ridden with anxiety. To distinguish mere instability from the empowering sense of creative freedom that Butler seems to envision, one needs standards, and the most appropriate standards for this task are aesthetic in nature. Butler’s own misgivings about reading performativity as theatricality are based on the conventional model of an actor qua agent performing a role. As she rightly points out, this conventional model only reinstates a notion of agency more deeply within the subject, as if each self is inhabited by a little inner actor. However, in the context of Japanese aesthetics, the art of theater takes on new significance for the question of agency and performativity. An aesthetics of theatricality, which is already predicated upon the doctrine of no-self, opens up new avenues for assessing creative performativity without reference to a conventional model of agency.

Freud reflects on the relation between beauty and mourning in a brief essay “On Transience,” in which he relates his experience while walking through the German countryside sometime shortly before the outbreak of World War II. He was accompanied by two friends, both of whom claimed that the beauty of the landscape was marred by its transience. With “transience,” they referred not only to the coming of winter, which would mark the death of summer’s beauty, but also to the war whose imminence was foreseeable. Freud countered their understanding of beauty, arguing that transience heightens rather than diminishes it, but his friends were unconvinced. Reflecting later on their resistance to his ideas about beauty and transience, Freud concludes that, with their exceptionally sensitive natures, they were aware that the beauty they appreciated in the present would need to be mourned in the too-near future:

What spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning. The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease; and, since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of its transience.  

Here, the presentiment of impending mourning is damaging and disruptive to a person’s present state of mind, preventing a full and appreciative engagement with lived experiences. As Freud seems to suggest, an acceptance of the inevitability of mourning can free up the capacity to appreciate beauty, an idea which is certainly upheld in Japanese aesthetics.

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1. Overview of Japanese Aesthetics: Impermanence and Mournfulness in Aesthetic Appreciation

Buddhism holds that the proper attitude toward life’s impermanence is one of non-attachment. Whereas some may read non-attachment as a kind of cool detachment, meaning to distance oneself emotionally from life’s transience, not all interpretations of it offer emotional escape from the pain of loss due to impermanence. Notably, as discussed in the first chapter, Dōgen claims that non-attachment is achieved through a heightened sense of responsibility for and responsiveness to other people. That the practice of non-attachment should involve a sincere and emotionally mature involvement with others and their concerns is somewhat counterintuitive. Yet the rich connection between non-attachment and compassion is a central theme within Buddhism in general and in the Japanese Zen tradition of which Dōgen is a part. This is especially evident within traditional theories of art in Japan, which, under the influence of Buddhism, show a marked preference for artistic themes meant to inspire attitudes of non-attachment and emotional engagement at the same time.\(^{31}\)

This emotional dimension is usually described as a deep and sad mournfulness that accompanies aesthetic appreciation. Two terms in particular, *aware* and *sabi*, uphold this artistic preoccupation with highlighting the mournful aspects of impermanence for aesthetic affect. As Motoori Norinaga claimed in the late 1700’s, the essence of Japanese literature lies in the expression of *mono no aware*, or the bittersweet “sorrow of things.” Mark Meli comments: “This literal sorrow or misery of things is taken often to signify a

\(^{31}\) For more on non-attachment in Japanese aesthetics, see Steve Odin (2001), *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics.*
sad, fleeting beauty that is conspicuous in traditional Japanese cultural expressions. Thus regarded, *mono no aware* is easily connected to the Buddhist notion of transience. This appreciation of fleeting beauty is also associated with the aesthetic value *sabi*, relevant to artistic traditions such as *chadō* (tea ceremony), *haiku* (poetry), and *ikebana* (flower-arranging). *Sabi* indicates an aesthetic preference for what is simple, old, and rustic, especially what is old and rustic to the point of decaying or breaking down. It also refers to the sense of sadness and mournfulness that accompanies this decay.

For example, in *chadō*, tea houses are traditionally simple structures made of untreated wood that readily succumbs to the elements. The best tea cups and other accoutrements are cracked and worn, revealing their years of use. In *haiku*, standard subject matter concerns the changing of the seasons and the coming to an end of seasonal pleasures. And, perhaps of all the arts, *ikebana* celebrates the connection between beauty and impermanence by showcasing the brief lives of flowers already severed from their roots and thus in the process of dying.

One might question whether this aestheticized presentation of impermanence amounts to little more than a morbid preoccupation with death and decay. But this would miss the point behind the artistic impulse to render life in its fleetingness. If one wishes to present and appreciate existence as faithfully as possible, then one must face its impermanence. And if one wishes to present and appreciate beauty in existence, then one must face the impermanence of beauty, as well. Indeed, one could argue that any attempt to present and appreciate beauty as something lasting or eternal fails to engage the fullness of beauty, which in actuality is always arising and passing away. Thus the truest

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32 Meli (2002), 60.
expression of beauty will not evade or cover over its transitory qualities but will instead highlight them to full aesthetic effect. The fourteenth-century Buddhist priest Kenkō Yoshida writes:

> Are we only to look at flowers in full bloom, at the moon when clear? Nay, to look out on the rain and long for the moon, to draw the blinds and not to know the passing of the spring—these arouse even deeper feelings. There is much to be seen in young boughs about to flower, in gardens strewn with withered blossoms. . . . [People] are wont to regret that the moon has waned or that the blossoms have fallen, and this must be so; but they must be perverse indeed who will say, ‘This branch, that bough is withered, now there is nought to see.’  

Here, Kenkō does not deny the regret that must accompany the passing of beautiful things, such as blossoms and full moons. Their passing is unavoidably sad. But, it would be wrong-headed to claim that the possibilities for aesthetic appreciation are exhausted when flowers wither and moons wane. To the contrary, the fullness of aesthetic experience includes beauty in its demise as well as at its height.

Robert Carter summarizes the mournful and aesthetic dimensions of impermanence as follows:

> The fleeting quality of life, and existence generally, creates a sense of melancholy, of sadness, even to the edge of despair, for the beauty of the world, together with the joys of the world, are transitory and always already disintegrating and decaying. Our recognition of impermanence carries with it a sadness; and yet, awareness of impermanence also carries with it an intensified sense of the preciousness of each moment and of each of the things of this world.  

As Carter makes clear, the aesthetic appreciation of transitory beauty leads not to morbidity but to a deep sadness, which cannot be separated from a deep appreciation of life as it is in its constant arising and passing. To evade this sadness is to fail to

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33 Kenkō (2005), 58.
34 Carter (2008), 82.
appreciate life as it is or to impose a false sense of permanence on what is actually in constant flux. The deepest appreciation of life in its lived immediacy will not erect emotional barriers against the impermanence that eventually carries away all that one might appreciate. Such appreciation brings inevitable sadness, but it also grants a valuable and meaningful aesthetic awareness which would be impossible without the accompanying mournfulness.

2. The Doctrine of No-Self in Japanese Theater

The statement “I am a mask” has the same paradoxical structure as the statements “I am lying” or “I am (from the start) an other.” To say “I am masked” is to not say “I am a mask”: the former says only that the true self is hidden by a false face, while the later claims that the self is identical with its façade. By definition, a façade is a false front in relation to whatever structure or entity stands behind it, such that a façade would cease to be a “front” were it not standing in relation to something in “back.” But the statement “I am a mask” asks one to think of a façade that remains a “front” in relation to no “back.” Though this thought may be counterintuitive, its style of reasoning should be familiar, since the definition of alterity used in the last chapter was Lévinas’s claim that “the alterity of the Other is in him and is not relative to me.”\(^{35}\) That is, the other person is not “other than” some self but “absolutely other.” The last chapter also established that Buddhism allows for the possibility that the self can, and perhaps always does,

\(^{35}\) Lévinas (1969), 119.
experience itself as an other, an idea which resonates with the figurative expression “I am a mask.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the art of 木 actors is considered a spiritual practice in Japan. The great fifteenth-century 木 theorist Zeami is credited with transforming 木 from a type of representational theater, not unlike Western stage plays, into a symbolic and highly stylized form of drama. And although elements of Confucianism and Shintoism are evident in his writings, his approach to 木 is most heavily influenced by Buddhism and especially Zen. He is well-known for his theory of the “non-attached view” or rišen no ken, through which an actor can learn to see himself as if from the perspective of the spectators. In the essay “Mask and Shadow in Japanese Culture: Implicit Ontology in Japanese Thought,” the twentieth-century philosopher Megumi Sakabe explores Zeami’s logic of the non-attached view. Whom does the actor view when he views himself as if from an external perspective? Is the one who views and the one who is viewed the same actor? These questions of self-reference are multiplied when one considers that the 木 actor performs while masked. That is, when he turns to view himself, he sees not himself but a mask—a mask, however, through which his own eyes look out.

As if to enhance this sense of identity displacement to its highest pitch, the spiritual preparation undertaken before the actor ascends to the stage involves entering a room of mirrors, a sacred space called the kagami no ma. Sakabe writes:

In the Kagami-no-Ma, the actor puts on the mask; he sees in the mirror his own face or his own mask; at the same time, he is seen by his mask in the mirror and, finally, he sees himself transmogrified in some deity or demon. Afterward he walks onto the stage as an actor who has changed into a

deity or demon or—which is to say the same thing—as a deity or demon who has taken the bodily form of this actor. To say it differently: The actor enters the stage as a self transmogrified into an other or as an other transmogrified into the self.\textsuperscript{37}

The last line of this quote seems to violate the principle of asymmetry established in the last chapter, which held that the self can experience itself as another but \textit{cannot} experience another as itself. That is, Sakabe’s statement seems to uphold a symmetrical view of the self-other relation in which the self can experience itself as another \textit{and} another as itself. But that Sakabe makes this claim in the context of a discussion of theatrical performance marks an important difference. Sakabe is not talking about one person becoming another person, but one person becoming a character in a performance. So it would be more correct to say, in this context, that the self can experience itself as a character and a character as itself.

This theatrical aspect of self-identity is not restricted to the \textit{nō} stage. In Japanese culture at large, Sakabe writes, “slightly ritualized movements penetrate daily life almost everywhere.”\textsuperscript{38} As he points out, the word \textit{omote} means both “mask” and “face” (especially, the human face), and he asserts that there is no ontological difference between the two uses: “What is surprising to me is that ‘\textit{omote},’ with the connotation of surface, does not mean in the Japanese language or thought ‘the appearance’ as opposed to some ideal entity (as in the case of Platonism) or to some real substance (as in the case of Kant’s ‘thing-in-itself’).”\textsuperscript{39} The mask is not a false front concealing a true form, just as the human face is not simply an exterior surface hiding the core self within. The individual \textit{is} her embodied performance.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Sakabe (1999), 245.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Sakabe (1999), 243.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Sakabe (1999), 246.
\end{itemize}
Sakabe writes: “Nothing exists but surfaces, grids of surfaces. Nothing but ‘omote.’ Nothing but reflections. Nothing but shades. Therefore, there are no substantial beings, no being that has been fixed in its sameness.” Sakabe’s notion of a grid of surfaces stresses the non-transcendental aspect of the self’s paradoxical relation to itself. The lack of a core self situates all performances on the same grid, where they may relate to each other horizontally while bearing no vertical relation to a “higher” or “deeper” self. Thus, for Sakabe as well as for Butler, the performance of identity is pure performance, not the performance of any underlying essential self. Differing performances cannot be judged against each other as more or less authentic, if authentic means the best expression of the true core.

In line with his ideas about the nonexistence of a permanent core self, the “implicit ontology” of Sakabe’s title refers to the displacement of being with becoming in Japanese thought in general. Because there are no substantial beings fixed in their sameness, each self is always a self-in-transition. That is, since “being” does not hinge on the persistence of some self-same entity, the self’s capacity for continued existence depends upon its capacity for continual change. Here Sakabe’s ideas are in line with the Buddhist idea of impermanence and the doctrine of no-self—the self exists not by being itself but by becoming other. Sakabe not only links the nonexistence of a core self to the transitoriness of identity, but he makes a further link between transitoriness and the theatricality of identity. As he shows, becoming-other is like becoming a character, where the “self” and the “mask” are indistinguishable.

Sakabe (1999), 247.
Near the beginning of his essay, Sakabe laments that the implicit ontology of becoming is nearly forgotten in the Japan of his day, and that people have lost the special sense of sadness associated with impermanence. He explains: “I mean the traditional feeling for the ephemeral nature of human beings and the feeling related to death.” He takes as evidence of this loss the decline in those “ritualistic gestures” that were once pervasive in the culture. He reflects on this interplay of sadness and ritual while living in Paris and going to see the film *Kohayagawa-ke no aki (The Autumn of the Kohayagawa Family)* by Ozu Yasujirō:

> What impressed me in the film is that some of the simple movements (such as sitting down or getting up) of the women (particularly the two daughters who are about twenty or thirty years of age) are very similar to those of *nô* theater. I do not know whether this is the result of Ozu’s conscious planning, or whether it is due to the fact that, at least until the age of twenty or thirty, the movements of bourgeois or petit-bourgeois women in Japan are strongly influenced by the tea ceremony or by the traditional dance that originates from *nô*. We can say, however, that until the age of twenty or thirty it is a remarkable characteristic of Japanese culture that slightly ritualized movements penetrate daily life almost everywhere.

As this passage shows, Sakabe connects the aesthetic appreciation of impermanence, and the sadness that accompanies it, to the theatrical performance of identity expressed in *ritualized behavior*. This reflection on the Ozu film is meant to frame his essay, the rest of which is dedicated to the ontological implications of theatricality under a doctrine of no-self; Sakabe does not follow up specifically on the connection between impermanence

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41 Sakabe (1999), 243.
and ritual. What might be significant about the ritual behaviors of daily life in terms of the implicit ontology of emptiness of which Sakabe speaks?

The Confucian notion of *li* 禮 refers to ritualized behaviors expressing the various types of relations that hold amongst people. *Li* occupy a central role in Japan’s unique mingling of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. A common observation, or sometimes complaint, of foreigners in Japan concerns the highly scripted nature of almost all interpersonal interactions: there are set phrases for entering a room and leaving it; beginning a meal and finishing it; greeting one’s acquaintances in the morning, at midday, or in the evening; and commenting on the lateness of the hour or the state of the weather. There are also set phrases for what other cultures might regard as personally expressive statements: remarking on how tired one is due to being overworked; describing the beauty of cherry blossoms; or appreciating the taste of tea. Countless such scripted phrases serve to ritualize daily life in Japan, marking the beginning or ending of commonly observed social activities, signaling what behavior is appropriate in what context, and in general setting the rhythm and tone for interpersonal interactions both public and private.

As Steve Odin claims, Watsuji’s project in *Rinrigaku* is to construct a synthesis of the Buddhist notion of emptiness and the Confucian notion of ritual. The result, Odin says, is an aestheticization of social relations. He points out that the *gen* 間 meaning “between” in *ningen* 人間 has another pronunciation in Japanese aesthetics, where *ma* 間 refers to the role of blank space in artistic compositions or of silence in musical and

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42 Odin (1996), 19.
theatrical performances. In other words, the character *gen/ma* 表/空 expresses both inter-
relationality (*gen*) and emptiness (*ma*). Since ritualized behavior is associated with the 
relations of people in society, with the term *gen*, it stands to reason that the understanding 
of ritual will be affected by the scope of meaning in Japanese from *gen* to *ma*.

This scope is evident in Zen, which sees the ordering of the natural world and the 
ordering human society as being punctuated by the gaps and empty spaces that speak to 
the ultimate transience of all order. In this light, social order exists only precariously 
against the backdrop of emptiness, and people must work creatively to sustain the 
harmony of their daily interactions. Relationality as *ma* emphasizes not continuity in 
human order but the discontinuity that leaves open the gap where creativity becomes 
possible. Here, ritual does not mean the perfunctory reiteration of rote behavior. Rather, it 
means the creative expression of social bonds that must be forged anew from moment to 
moment.

This understanding of the interplay of ritual and impermanence helps make sense 
of Sakabe’s comments about the loss of a certain aesthetic depth related to the 
diminishing of social ritual in Japan. These social rituals he refers to are imbued with a 
sense of aesthetically relevant sadness because they bring into sharp focus the transience 
of human bonds. Due to—and not in spite of—their repetitive nature, ritual actions 
remind us that repetition is all that sustains the self and its relations. There is no 
underlying core self apart from these reiterative acts. The culture of ritual in Japan is an 
aestheticized expression of this sense of emptiness that permeates daily repetitive

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43 Odin (1996), 59.
behaviors. In this way, ritual always has a double meaning: it refers to a social order, and, at the same time, it refers to the impermanence that threatens to undo all order.

This interpretation of ritual brings Sakabe’s writings on theatricality into dialogue with Butler’s notion of performativity. Earlier, Butler’s solution to the problem of agency was shown to hinge on the instability of the subject, which allows it to subvert the power that it reiterates. But this instability is a seemingly small crack in the wall of much larger and dominating power structures. The machinations of power easily determine the subject, whereas the subject must exert great effort to find a sense of freedom or agency within its subjection.

In contrast, for Sakabe, “the ephemeral nature of human beings” refers both to the subject and to the social order through which the subject is constituted. A philosophy of emptiness would ascribe no more reality, no greater ontological status, to what Butler calls “power” than it ascribes to the self. Sakabe and Butler may have similar views on the self’s nonexistence, on performativity and subjectivity, and on the paradoxes related to an absence of an originary core at the beginning of the self’s reiterations; but Sakabe’s recourse to the language of ritual provides an alternate framework in which to articulate the idea of social power. Within this framework, Sakabe points to the fragility of social order and the transience of all relations. He emphasizes reiterative behaviors as expressions of coordinated social harmony that is sustained and made relevant only through the application of aesthetic standards. With reference to the traditional aesthetics of Japan, the standards to which Sakabe appeals focus on the connection between beauty and mournfulness.
Whereas Butler’s subject is melancholic because it cannot mourn its own nonexistence, Sakabe’s subject is perpetually mournful because it is acutely aware of, and appreciative of, its own constant passing away. In answer to the earlier question, regarding what standards differentiate mere instability from empowered subversion and creative freedom, one may now say that the move from melancholy to mourning is the standard against which autonomous action may be judged. Because the life of the self is not separable from the life of the power that constitutes it, any resistance to power must involve *self-loss*. This means not only that all change involves loss, but that all empowered subversion is an occasion for mourning, and any attempt to seize one’s freedom must partake in a process of mourning. The following section charts a path out of the paradoxes of self-reflexivity that seem to weigh the self down with melancholy and prevent self-oriented acts of grief.
IV. From Melancholy to Mourning: Autonomy and the Psychic Health of Performativity

Given the emphasis on sadness in both Butler’s and Sakabe’s notions of performatively personhood, one might ask whether these theories are enabling or disenabling with regards to psychic health. After all, why subscribe to a theory which requires one to be perpetually sad or even depressed? This question of psychic health is especially relevant when one considers that such health is traditionally considered as necessary for autonomy. That is, conventionally, psychic health is associated with authentic individuality, which means maintaining the integrity of the core self that makes autonomy possible. However, the doctrine of no-self allows for the possibility that the series of the self’s changing states do not represent different versions of one and the same self, but different selves. Like a nō actor stepping into the room of mirrors where the masked self is infinitely multiplied, a person faces within herself numerous masked selves. From one perspective, this sense of the multiplicity of one’s own identity is not unfamiliar: for example, an individual may assume one mask while standing at the head of a classroom, another while standing at a conference podium, and yet another while simply standing in line at a store. But, if there is no authentic core to control the competing identities associated with a single individual, then it seems the self may not only be a “false front” but a potentially unpredictable, uncontrollable, and incoherent collection of false fronts.

Indeed, from a Freudian perspective, subjective multiplicity can lead to internal strife and self-directed violence. In Freud’s early work, one of the main differences
separating mourning from melancholia is the attitude of self-beratement associated with
the latter, which follows from the fracturing of subjective integrity. In “successful”
mourning, the mourner, through his or her love for the lost other, can internalize an
idealized image of the other which preserves, generally, only positive associations.
Melancholia arises when this process of internalization is frustrated by ambivalent
feelings the mourner may harbor for the dead other, feelings which are taken into the self
during the process of identification initiated in grief. The psyche aims to preserve the
positive idealization of the dead other by turning all negative feelings upon the ego. The
integrity of the ego splinters, as it seeks to adopt a critical stance on itself, judging itself
as if from the perspective of another, with increasing self-directed violence and
aggression.

1. Graham Parkes and Improvisational Autonomy

In Graham Parkes’s extended engagement with the psychological aspects of
Nietzsche’s philosophy, he discusses the possibility of embracing multiplicity without
internalizing the violence associated with a fracturing of identity. As he says, the notion
of a single authentic identity that reflects the integrity of a core self is misleading: “The
changing identity of the ruler apparent is concealed by the mask of the first person
singular: the realization dawns that a variety of inner parties may, according to the
situation, be voicing the word ‘I.’”\(^{44}\) But, as he further points out, the tradition in which
Nietzsche worked was unable to conceptualize the lack of a controlling center at the heart

\(^{44}\) Parkes (1994), 353.
of selfhood in any terms other than chaotic: “The Western tradition has been grounded for so long in a monarchy of the I and a tyranny of univocal reason that we cannot believe that there could be psychical spontaneity without anarchy, polyphony without discord, or pluralism without psychosis.” For example, rather than deeming the multiplicity of the masked self “unpredictable” and “incoherent,” why not instead call it “spontaneous” and “non-totalizable”? Rather than understanding multiplicity as the fracturing of a once-unified self, why not instead understand it as a deep complexity which is not, and never has been, reducible to the simplistic coherence of a one-dimensional personality?

To capture a positive understanding of subjective multiplicity, Parkes suggests adopting a new model for the theater of selfhood: instead of a director and his actors, an improvisational ensemble. He wonders: “In terms of theatrical discourse, once the players have become familiar with the repertoire and each other, why not simply let the appropriate character come forward and play his or her part accordingly to the occasion?” Those who have witnessed improvisational theater or music performances may be impressed by the coordinated actions of the players. Such coordination would seem to require extensive premeditation—a script, a director, or a score to control the group and impose order. But the performance is not premeditated, and the apparent order arises entirely spontaneously.

This reminds one that, even for Kant, autonomy at its best comes to resemble spontaneous creativity. Consider, for example, his concept of the genius artist, who creates original works that follow no pre-established rules. The artist acts, in Kant’s formulation, “autonomously” when he or she not only acts without regard for rules but

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also cannot predict what his or her next action will be, such that the artwork comes into being spontaneously: “if an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he came by the ideas for it.”\textsuperscript{47} Far from presenting the autonomous artist as a figure possessed of great self-control, Kant imagines a man entirely lost in the process of improvisational creation. Parkes’s account of the multiplicity of subjectivity evokes a similar notion of improvisational autonomy, through which the self needs no dominant identity to act efficaciously in the world.

An identity performance that reflects this improvisational autonomy is enabled in part through pursuing new criteria for self-analysis. That is, when one realizes that all identities are “false” at least to the extent that they reflect no “true” self, then one obtains new standards for judging one’s own behavior. As Parkes says, “falseness is impossible to avoid: but a good conscience can be enjoyed as long as one faces up to that upon which one is putting a better face, as long as one becomes conscious of playing a part.”\textsuperscript{48} With this shift in focus, the question is not, “Did I act well in accordance with who I really am?” but “Did I act well in accordance with the situation in which I found myself, and with respect to the relations that shaped that situation?” The question of who one really is arises in response to a disjunct between one’s immediate lived experience and the various idealized versions of one’s core self that may inhabit the psyche. These idealizations are, in a Freudian sense, remnants of internalized others and thus are fraught with ambivalent and aggressive feelings. As a result, the question “Who am I really?” readily becomes a self-berating accusation, such as “How could I have done that? That’s not who I really am!” The mistaken belief in a core self only invites a person to

\textsuperscript{47} Kant (1987), 174–175, \textsuperscript{48} Parkes (1994), 343.
ceaselessly compare herself to an unattainable ideal and punish herself for failing to live up to it. In contrast, relinquishing the wish for a stable core identity invites a person to judge herself by caring, compassionate, and ethically informed standards, which take into account the particular contexts in which all actions—in which all “selves”—take place.

As Parkes discusses, achieving efficacy in improvisational identity performance is a learning process. An individual who initially relaxes her concern for utter self-control will not immediately exhibit the virtuosity of a seasoned ensemble cast. Accepting Parkes’s portrayal of virtuosic self-improvisation as an example of autonomy in action, the question becomes: How does one become empowered to claim such virtuosity?

In her work on psychoanalysis, Clewell entertains the possibility for a more positive account of mourning. She argues that, although Freud focuses on self-oriented violence and aggression in his later theory of mourning, these are not necessary features of the process, since he admits that both love and hate can be associated in varying degrees with the lost other: “There is no reason to assume, therefore, that internalization creates the kind of aggression ascribed to the postoedipal superego. Consequently, Freud’s text raises the possibility for thinking about mourning as an affirmative and loving internalization of the lost other.”49 As she points out, the subject comes into being as a subject only through the series of identifications initiated in infancy, and despite whatever ambiguities and conflicts these identifications may introduce into the self, the self nonetheless cannot exist without them.

She concludes her essay:

But in recognizing there can be no final severance of attachments without dissolving the ego, Freud’s late theory suggests a different alternative: the

49 Clewell (2002), 64.
mourning subject may affirm the endurance of ambivalent bonds to those loved and lost others as a condition of its own existence. Freud’s work counsels us, then, to relinquish the wish for a strict identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other or the past. In doing so, we realize the possibility of mourning beyond melancholia, a response to loss that refuses the self-punishment entailed in blaming the lost other for our own contingency and that enables us to live in light of our losses. Freud’s work on mourning helps us, finally, to establish an intimate, indeed ethical, relation between past and future as we embark on the present work of endless mourning.50

This last passage in Clewell’s essay invites further consideration, regarding possibilities for the psychological health of the melancholic, performative, multiple subject. Her sense of “endless mourning” enables a person to endure ambivalent bonds, to relinquish the wish for a strict identity, and to accept the contingency of subjective existence related to loss and impermanence. In other words, the continual process of mourning enables the psychic health necessary to achieve the improvisational autonomy that Parkes envisions. To mourn one’s own passing while remaining emotionally engaged with oneself and others, a person must learn to practice non-attachment and compassion at the same time. As the following discusses, the bodhisattva ideal expresses this delicate balance between letting go and holding on.

2. Compassion and Non-Attachment: Being a Bodhisattva in the Here and Now

In the article “The Self in Medieval Japanese Buddhism: Focusing on Dōgen,” Kiyotaka Kimura considers the central importance of compassion to Dōgen’s overall philosophy. As Kimura asserts, for Dōgen compassion is not “self-sacrificing” but “self-

50 Clewell (2002), 65.
realizing.” In other words, compassion constitutes not the denial of the self but the very life of the self. This accords with the claim in the previous chapter that the self who is no-self pursues its existence through its other-oriented relationality; or, lacking a core atomistic self, the individual exists through her relations with others, such that caring for others amounts to caring for the self’s own continued existence. As Dōgen repeatedly stresses in his writings, the life of the self cannot be separated from a compassionate concern for the life of the other and for the life of the world in which all exist. This points to his radically non-transcendent view of nirvāṇa, which locates enlightenment in the everyday world of impermanence. As he says, “Understand that birth-and-death itself is, just in other words, nirvāṇa. There is nothing one should avoid as birth-and-death, and there is nothing one should seek as nirvāṇa.” No enlightened state offers an escape from the interpersonal involvements of everyday life or overcomes the impermanence of such involvements. To the contrary, realizing liberation involves a compassionate commitment to the world in its lived immediacy.

In line with this non-transcendent view of nirvāṇa, Dōgen’s presentation of compassion stresses the Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal of an enlightened being who remains committed to the everyday world through compassion for other beings. As Dōgen defines it, “the bodhi-mind means striving unceasingly with all your energy to help all sentient beings to generate the bodhi-mind and lead them to the Buddha Way.” Usually the bodhisattva ideal is discussed in terms of the bodhisattva’s commitment to put off entering nirvāṇa until all sentient beings have entered nirvāṇa, and, generally

53 Qtd. in Kimura (1991), 334.
speaking, Dōgen’s references to the bodhisattva are no exception. However, if one takes seriously his non-transcendent identification of nirvāṇa with everyday impermanence, it stands to reason that the bodhisattva who “enters” nirvāṇa has no place to go outside of the world as it already is. Thus the bodhisattva ideal can also be interpreted non-transcendently as representing a commitment to the world for the sake of the world as it is, not for the sake of a future or better world that presumably can be entered only by leaving behind the present state of impermanence. Accordingly, the bodhisattva represents compassion for the other person as she is, as an ethical other whose freedom outstrips any plans or desires I may have for her self-development, her improvement, or even her candidacy for enlightenment.

Under this interpretation, the aesthetic appreciation of impermanence through mournfulness is a paradigm for the ethical awareness of impermanence through compassion. Just as aesthetic appreciation requires a deep commitment to the world via an acceptance of the world’s transience, the bodhisattva ideal requires the utmost commitment to care for others while accepting their impermanence—which is to say, while remaining non-attached. As shown in the last chapter, non-attachment with regards to the other’s transience means being open to the freedom of the other as an ethical other. But here we add that impermanence means not only freedom to change but also susceptibility to change. In this susceptibility, the other is always passing away in ways she cannot control, both in the sense of eventual physical death and in the sense of the continual minute-to-minute changes that characterize the transitoriness of all identities.

This compassionate commitment to care for living beings, while experiencing fully the mournfulness of this commitment, has been presented so far as a feature of
other-oriented compassion. It indicates the resolve to care for others even in their transitoriness, being aware that no one or no thing is permanent. But, considering the self’s own transitoriness, compassion can also be discussed in terms of the self’s attitude toward itself, that is, in terms of self-oriented compassion. This compassion enables the move from melancholy to mourning—or, from an appreciative awareness of the sadness associated with impermanence to the action taken to work through this melancholy.

3. The Aporia of Mourning

In line with the non-transcendent view of Buddhist practice, “working through” the emotional engagement with impermanence in a process of mourning does not mean escaping or overcoming impermanence. As with all self-reflexive actions, the self-oriented compassion that enables self-oriented mourning takes a paradoxical turn, aptly expressed in Jacques Derrida’s discussion of mourning as an “aporia” related to alterity ethics. As explained earlier, successful mourning means to let go of the other as a separate person, in exchange for an internalized idealization of the other; while melancholy is a refusal to let go of the other as an other, through a failure or frustration of internalization. Derrida complicates the idea of interiorization by casting it as the ultimate violation of alterity, such that “successful” mourning in a Freudian sense appears grossly unsuccessful from an ethical perspective. He writes:

Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a possible mourning which would interiorize within us the image, idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite
The possibility of mourning the other means that the griever can erase the ethical alterity that once marked the other’s living presence; the impossibility of mourning means to refuse this ethical erasure by preserving the alterity of the one who’s presence has become an absence. Faced with this dilemma, the mourner is left in what Derrida describes as a state of aporia, in which he or she is unable to distinguish the successful resolution of grief from an unsuccessful one.

Derrida speaks of mourning in the context of grief for another person who has died, but Butler speaks of grieving for one’s own self. What happens to Derrida’s aporia when it is situated in the framework of the subject’s relation to its own nonexistence? On the one hand, the possibility of mourning my impermanence would mean the successful interiorization of my own identity, but as Butler shows all such interiorization is fraught with paradox: a nonexistent subject has no interiority that might contain what is being interiorized. On the other hand, the impossibility of mourning would mean that I resist interiorization and, in Derrida’s language, preserve my own alterity. Thus, whereas Butler characterizes the impossibility of mourning oneself as the melancholia of subjectivity, Derrida’s aporia characterizes impossible mourning as the self’s preservation of its own alterity.

Discussions of ethical alterity usually focus on the limitations on what the self can or cannot demand of another. We have already seen several examples of these limitations: in Lévinas’s terms, the self cannot thematize or totalize the other, and now, in Derrida’s terms, it cannot mourn the other successfully. Due to the constant changeability

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of performative identity, the self cannot thematize or totalize itself, either—but perhaps
the self can mourn itself in a way that it cannot mourn other people. If to mourn myself
would be to violate or nullify my alterity, then perhaps this is precisely what I must do if
I am to exert any control over my identity. The melancholy of performative identity—the
impossibility of mourning the nonexistent subject—is simultaneously the possibility of
mourning all the others, the masks, whom I once was and am no longer. That is, although
the nonexistent self cannot mourn itself as a “self,” it can yet mourn the arising and
passing of those masks—the multiple and changeable identities—by which it exists. As
Freud might say, to appreciate the present, one must make peace with tomorrow’s
mourning; or in terms of the self, I must make peace with the idea that whoever “I” am
today will need to be mourned tomorrow.

Now, in tomorrow’s mourning, I do violate the alterity of the other whom I used
to be, but here violation means identifying with that other as “interior” instead of viewing
her as a separate entity. Were this overcoming of separation to occur with reference to
another person, it would be as ethically dubious as Derrida describes; but when it occurs
with reference to myself, it indicates the emotional bond of identification that I endeavor
to maintain with myself, despite the pain of loss this bond always involves.

Thus, mourning both binds me to my past selves and allows me to let them go.
When I mourn my past selves, I identify with them emotionally; but when I identify with
them emotionally, I violate their alterity and accept their loss. The creative potential of
becoming-other can only be claimed when the dead others within me are mourned and let
go, keeping in mind that to “let go” is to reaffirm the emotional bond of identification. To
accomplish this act of mourning—which violates alterity in order to affirm alterity and
which lets go in order to affirm connection—one needs both self-oriented compassion and self-oriented non-attachment guided by the bodhisattva ideal.

As mentioned earlier, Dōgen’s reading of Buddhist enlightenment denies that nirvāṇa means transcendence of the world of impermanence; and in terms of the bodhisattva ideal, this invites the conclusion that the bodhisattva has nowhere to go outside of the present world. Taken instructively, as an attitude the self may cultivate toward itself, the bodhisattva ideal is at once a refusal of ego-transcendence as an appropriate response to the doctrine of no-self and an affirmation of the possibility for self-creativity contained within the idea of impermanence. That is, the bodhisattva represents both a refusal to abandon the self and a commitment to preserve the self’s alterity by remaining non-attached to any one presentation of the self. As implicated in the themes of melancholy and mourning associated with transience, practicing compassionate non-attachment with regards to the self does not mean detached acceptance of the self’s passing away; rather, this passing is always an occasion for mourning. But such mourning only reinstates the aporia and recommits the individual to the paradoxical persistence of the nonexistent self.

4. Autonomy as Self-Loss, and Its Implications for the Concept of Power

The previous chapter characterized the self as becoming-other, and this chapter has shown that becoming-other is simultaneously a process of self-loss. Under these conditions, a person can attain autonomy when she approaches self-loss with an attitude of self-oriented mourning, and such an attitude is cultivated through an aesthetic
sensibility that is attuned to the interplay between beauty and impermanence. This chapter has stressed that the capacity for self-determination is increased when a person remains aware of the mournful feelings that will inevitably accompany autonomous action, and, accordingly, self-determination is limited when a person tries to avoid such mournful feelings. Mourning can be avoided, for example, when the self remains attached to the status quo, refuses to act, shuns creativity, and rejects critical thinking—in short, when it avoids the changes that bring about self-loss. Self-oriented mourning, as the standard against which autonomous acts are measured, unites self-loss and self-rule in a mutually sustaining relationship.

To return to one of the framing questions of this chapter, we may now say that although the self is constituted by relations, it is not thereby determined by those relations. Indeed, it is the belief in some non-relational core, to which the self’s identity is thought to be anchored, that invites determinism. The illusion of a core can be maintained only through a strictly defined self-concept, which stifles creativity and inhibits critical resistance. With the capacity for reflective resistance weakened, a person becomes determined not simply by her own self-narrative, but by the imposing power structures of race, class, and gender that sustain the coherence of the framework in which an essentialist account of the subject even makes sense.

In contrast, the relational self suffers no illusions about the permanence of her identity, and she is aware that her self-concept is deeply affected by her community and by the various power structures at play in it. Non-attachment offers critical distance from these structures, not only as an intellectual experience, but as an emotional one. In the fullness of this emotional experience, one realizes the extent of one’s indebtedness to the
various narratives—social, cultural, political, and interpersonal—that shape one’s identity, while at the same time finding oneself capable of facing the self-loss necessary to effectively resist power structures that are disenabling or abusive. Importantly, this resistance does not mean exiting the matrix of relations in which all selves are born and sustained. It means, instead, realizing that the matrix is contingent, particular, and flexible. In altering one configuration of relations, acts of resistance always produce yet another, newly configured, context of interpersonal relationality.

What, then, is the relation of the “context” to the person? In other words, what is the relation of one person to the community in which she lives, shaped as it is by social, political, and other forces? The account of autonomy developed in this chapter can be used to critically evaluate the understanding of “power” as it appears in Butler’s work, usually in terms of essentialized notions of race and gender, or the socio-economic structures that benefit from essentialized identity-constructs. As mentioned earlier, a philosophy of emptiness would ascribe no more reality to power than it ascribes to the self, and Nishida Kitarō’s logic of contradictory identity can articulate an alternative account of the subject/power relation not readily available within Butler’s Foucault-influenced framework.

The first chapter questioned Nishida’s conflation of interpersonal relationality with experiential relationality, but here Nishida’s formal analysis of experiential relationality, as an activity through which subjectivity constitutes and is constituted by objectivity, can address the relation between self and power in ways instructive for the issue of autonomy. As he explains, the self is the absolutely contradictory identity of subject and object, where subject means phenomenological consciousness and object
means the “human-historical world.” The contradictory identity refers to the experiential unity of a perceiver with what is perceived. The perceiving self has no independent existence, for it is constituted through the objects of its perceptions; but this does not mean that the perceiving self is an object. Objects of perception also have no independent existence, for they are constituted in the act of being perceived; but this does not mean that the objects are subjective, or projections of a perceiving mind. The subject is not different from the objects it perceives, but it is not thereby objective; and objects are not different from the subject that perceives them, but they are not thereby subjective. Thus subject and object are absolutely identical to one another and absolutely contradictory at the same time.

Keep in mind that by “object” Nishida often means the human-historical world: “[A]s this contradictory identity that is constitutive of the act of consciousness itself, we are only active as formative positions in the world’s own calculus of self-expression.” In this mutual constitution of self and world, does the self have agency? Or is it determined by the “calculus” of the human-historical world? In accordance with the broad contours of his thinking, Nishida asserts that free will and determinism are bound in a relation of contradictory identity. Thus the conventional understanding of personal freedom is, for him, clearly a fiction. The self is part of an experiential matrix in which it is thoroughly determined by objects of its perception. Yet the matrix itself is free, which is to say, not bound by an ultimate purpose. The self, whose own actions are

56 Nishida (1987), 52.
57 See Nishida (1990), 25: “We usually contend that the will is free. But what is this so-called freedom? Our desire essentially is something imparted to us—we cannot produce it freely. . . . It is not so much that I produce desires, but that actualized motives are none other than me.”
contradictorily identical to the matrix, is in this sense also free. In other words, the self is not determined by the world, and the world is not determined by the self, but the two are co-determining.

Applying Nishida’s system of contradictory identity to the relation between the subject and power (and since Nishida himself applies it to every pair of terms he comes across, the interpretation seems warranted) one could say that subject and power are bound in a co-determining relation, in which neither term dominates the other. A person is not simply subjected by power, but she also actively expresses it and thereby determines what “it” is. At the same time, as a reflection of dominating narratives that have already conditioned the social landscape into which a person is born, power also determines personal identity-constructions. In other words, Nishida’s style of reasoning allows the subject and power to be placed on a par with each other, just as he places self and world on a par with each other in a mutually determining relation. On the one hand, this formulation is perhaps naïve. Nishida creates abstractions out of terms such as “self” and “human-historical world,” which limits the relevance his ideas will have for actual people in actual communities. Yet on the other hand, Nishida’s logic demystifies the notion of power and brings it down to a human scale, making it easier articulate how critical resistance is possible within this co-determining framework.

Much as Butler herself might say, personal resistance to power must at the same time be a modulation of that power. No subject can escape the conditions that make subjectivity possible. But, in taking Nishida’s stance that co-determining structures are on a par with each other, one can say that individual resistance is possible only because power structures themselves are capable of radical change. Likewise, a large and
seemingly well-entrenched power structure, even the totalizing structure of hetero-
normative gender, is capable of radical change only because individuals have an 
extraordinary capacity for resistance. In short, I can resist the system only because the 
system *lets* me; but the system lets me resist it only because *I resist*. In this way, *a 
recognition of the systemic nature of oppression is at once an optimism for the possibility 
of system-wide change.*

The next chapter follows up on this optimism by taking the portrayal of the 
subject developed so far—the self as becoming-other through self-loss—and applying it 
to questions of community life and social order. Instead of accepting the conventional 
portrait of the citizen as a rational free agent, the next chapter explores what 
governmental policies and institutional structures best reflect the constitutively relational 
self.
Lévinas is the genius of negativity, yet he cannot articulate a positive architectonic of the mediations in favor of the Other.
—Enrique Dussel

The politics of liberalism advocates a well-entrenched concept of human nature: people are free, equal, and reasonably self-interested. The principle of justice as fairness, arguably the dominant regulative ideal in Western political thought, reflects this liberal view of the subject. Combining the ethics of alterity and the doctrine of no-self, this dissertation has developed a different view of human experience, which conflicts with liberalism: (1) people have responsibilities that take precedence over their freedom; (2) relations between people are asymmetrical, meaning that my responsibilities to others are not necessarily reciprocated; and (3) the relationally constituted self cannot divorce “self”-interest from a concern for others. It is unclear whether the principle of fairness as traditionally conceived remains relevant in a context shaped by these premises.

This chapter explores the political ideals best suited to the view of human experience grounded in a philosophy of emptiness. These ideals include particularity and partiality, as opposed to fairness and impartiality; the relevance of extenuating circumstances to matters of justice, as opposed to the relevance of personal accountability; and the proactive dispensation of reparations as the paradigmatic function of governmental institutions, as opposed to the contracted meting out of compensatory

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1 Dussel (2006), 81.
protections. The solution to the problem of alterity developed in the first chapter, the notion of self-alterity, forms the foundation for this proposed intervention of no-self in the ordering of the public domain.

This chapter first considers problems in the philosophy of John Rawls, the leading liberal theorist, who seeks to tailor politics to suit the needs of self-determining rational agents as opposed to socially situated, relationally constituted selves. The discussion then turns to Lévinas, who, despite his obvious disagreements with a thinker such as Rawls, still appeals in political matters to the liberal model of society as composed of free and equal citizens. That Lévinas’s ethics has been criticized for being apolitical is not surprising, considering that the model of politics he relies on is so conceptually at odds with his ethics. With reference to the doctrine of no-self, this chapter develops a general political outlook that better accords with Lévinas’s ethical insights. The notion of self-alterity, which was derived from self-emptiness in the first chapter, makes the critical difference in pushing alterity ethics into the realm of the political. That is, the relationally constituted self-as-other is already a politicized subject. The characteristic feature of this political subjectivity is the experience of relationality as complicity, that is, the experience of being implicated with others in systems of oppression and privilege.

Next, I explore what would constitute a well-ordered society for persons understood not as free and equal agents but as politicized selves-as-others bound together as accomplices in webs of mutual interdependence. I turn to the notion of reparations, with reference to Elizabeth Spelman’s work on repair, to help articulate the requirements for thinking of justice beyond fairness. The doctrine of no-self is a necessary component for mapping the interplay between the Lévinasian sense of the inordinate responsibility
one bears for the other and the inherent difficulty of holding individuals accountable for systemic oppression. While acknowledging the complex and entangled power structures that shape this social landscape of complicity, the reparative model of politics insists on the optimism that systemic oppression is evidence of the potential for system-wide change.
The power of John Rawls’s philosophy lies in the intuitive plausibility of the equation of justice with fairness. As a standard for political and social order, fairness appears unassailable, and Rawls’s means of securing fairness—the original position and the veil of ignorance—speak to many people’s basic assumptions about the nature of moral reasoning. The idea of stepping back from a situation, surveying a problem from a neutral standpoint, and making a decision that can be accepted as both rational and reasonable by other neutral observers captures what many assume to be the very essence of moral thinking.

As Rawls argues, this picture of moral reasoning secures fairness in the public domain while allowing for as much diversity as possible in people’s private values and life goals. He makes a distinction between liberalism as a moral vision for the “good life” and liberalism as a political system. As a moral vision, liberalism embraces the Kantian concepts of autonomy and individuality as necessary for leading a rich and fulfilling life. As a politics, liberalism makes no claim to know what enriches or fulfills the individuals under its rule; it claims only that individuals qua citizens must be defined as free and equal beings. Rawls takes care to present “freedom” and “equality” as political terms that apply only to people in their the public roles as citizens. In their private lives, people are free to define themselves in other terms, even going so far as to reject liberalism as a moral vision: “persons can accept this conception of themselves as citizens and use it when discussing questions of political justice without being committed in other parts of their life to comprehensive moral ideals often associated with liberalism, for example, the
ideals of autonomy and individuality.”² Here Rawls relies on a version of the familiar church and state separation: When different groups of people disagree dramatically over what constitutes the good life, they must agree to a political structure that will allow each of them to pursue their own vision of it. In many cases, this means that an individual understands that the government will tolerate people whom the individual personally cannot abide.

Yet Rawls later admits: “We must note, however, that when justice as fairness is fully realized in a well-ordered society, the value of full autonomy is likewise realized.”³ For the liberal, then, there is a happy convergence of moral vision and political system. She believes that individuality and autonomy are basic values necessary to the good life, and coincidentally the model of citizenship that she embraces turns out to promote these values. Other people, with competing life goals and visions for the good life, may not find such a happy convergence between their private and public personas. Some people may have to tolerate a gross gap between their personal values and the values of the government they nonetheless are expected to support.

By not questioning this happy convergence of liberal politics and liberal moral theory, Rawls fails to make clear how he distinguishes the political ideals of freedom and equality from the moral values of autonomy and individuality. Indeed, that one would invoke a church-and-state-style distinction between political ideals and moral values exposes one’s prior commitment to a liberal conception of the good life. The political ideals of freedom and equality do not appear out of nowhere but are firmly grounded in liberal moral theory, making it impossible to divorce political systems from moral visions

² Rawls (1985), 245.
³ Rawls (1985), 247.
in the way that Rawls proposes. This undermines his assertion that the concept of justice as fairness makes no “claims about the essential nature and identity of persons.” To the contrary, all reasoning proceeds from premises (unless one sticks to tautologies), and the premises that ground reasoning in the original position reflect a conventionally liberal view of human nature: (1) people are free, with no prior moral commitments that might hinder their reasoning about the principles of justice; (2) people are equal, that is, situated symmetrically with respect to their interests; and (3) people are reasonably self-interested, meaning that they wish to secure a political system that affords them as much liberty as possible to pursue their own ends.

As Seyla Benhabib points out, an “epistemic incoherence” confounds the reasoning in the original position that follows from the above premises. Because people seated behind the veil of ignorance know nothing of their race, gender, economic class, religion, life goals, or even basic likes and dislikes, they cannot be said to differ from each other in any coherent way. They are all identically free, equal, and rational; which is to say, they are all identical, since freedom, equality, and rationality are their only characteristics. Yet, despite this identity, the principles of justice that they are expected to develop must reflect their ability to imagine themselves in each other’s places. In other words, what is fair from person A’s perspective should also be fair from person B’s perspective, and to determine this, person A must imaginatively adopt person B’s point of view, and vice versa. But since person A’s perspective will never be different from person B’s, according to the constraints of the original position, this reversal of roles is meaningless. And without a meaningful reversal of roles, the principles of justice cannot

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4 Rawls (1985), 223.
5 Benhabib (1992), 161.

be deemed fair, at least not according to the standards that Rawls sets up. The original position is thus not a round table but an armchair from which one veiled and ignorant person decides how to organize society.

Rawls explains his rejection of diversity in the original position: “This is done to achieve a clear and uncluttered view of what for us is the fundamental question of political justice: namely, what is the most appropriate conception of justice for specifying the terms of social cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal persons. . . .”

The question remains: what is the most appropriate conception of justice for embodied, socially situated, relationally constituted people? What appears free and uncluttered for Rawls may seem naïve and simplistic from the perspective of Japanese philosophy, for example, which does not share his views on rational self-determination as the defining feature of subjectivity. Without taking into account the complicated web of inter-relationality in which people locate the concrete concerns of their daily lives, the ideal of fairness will remain unhelpfully abstract.

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6 Rawls (1985), 234.
II. The Face-to-Face Relation and the Original Position: Fairness as a Miracle in Alterity Ethics

By insisting on the absolute alterity of the Other Lévinas sacrifices the possibility that his ethics can open up a radical politics.
—Robert Bernasconi

Although Lévinas takes a starting point quite different from Rawls—the face to face relation versus the original position—his philosophy is still troubled by an inability to consider social, cultural, religious, or racial differences between people as being relevant to ethical reasoning. Because of his difficulty transitioning from ethics to politics, his philosophy is often accepted as a descriptive phenomenology with no prescriptive force. The difficulty stems from the role of the “third party” in Lévinas’s phenomenology of ethical experience. The third party makes possible the conceptualization—what Lévinas calls “thematization”—of the absolute other. Through thematization, what is absolute and thus incomparable becomes relativized; the absolutely other becomes one amongst many others in political society. Politics thus compromises the face-to-face ethical relation, by turning the absolute alterity of the other into the relative alterity of differences between groups of people. Lévinas’s problems with politics become clear through a review of his phenomenology of ethical experience, with a focus on the order in which he presents it.

7 Bernasconi (2006), 248
A. The experience of alterity as eluding conceptualization

As discussed in the first chapter, Lévinas describes the experience of alterity by first re-imagining the Cartesian meditation on infinity.\(^8\) Like infinity, alterity is the experience of an ongoing process that cannot be summed up in concepts. Concretely speaking, the other person always differs from any idea I may have of her. Like the absolute distance separating the finite from the infinite, the fluidity of the other means that my concept of her never coincides completely with her living presence.

B. The face-to-face relation

As also discussed in the first chapter, the self’s relation with the other is not one of knowledge but of discourse. In this the “face to face” relation, a conversational attitude is the appropriate response to the ever-changing presence of the other. The face to face is the paradigmatic experience of the inordinate responsibility the self feels to and for the other, which precedes the self’s sense of its own freedom.

C. The entry of the third party

Problematically, for Lévinas, I face not only one other, but numerous others, all placing upon me the inordinate demand: consider my needs first. The face to face relation, despite its foundational role in Lévinas’s phenomenology of alterity, is always already mediated by what Lévinas refers to as “the entry of a third party, a permanent entry, into

\(^8\) Lévinas (1969), 48–49.
the intimacy of the face to face [my italics].” As a permanent disruption of the face to face relation, “the relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at.” The asymmetry of the face to face relation reflects the inordinateness of the demands the other places upon me; the incessant correction of this asymmetry treats what is inordinate as if it might be proportioned fairly. The third party represents the fact that I must turn from one other to face another, I must divide my time between many others, and I must, as Lévinas says, compare the incomparable.

The entry of the third party thus marks the transition from ethics to politics. In the face to face relation of ethics, the self finds itself inordinately responsible for the other; in the political relation with the third party, this inordinate responsibility is mediated through the need to view all others fairly, and to consider the concerns of many others without favoritism. The absolute other who once eluded conceptualization become what Lévinas calls thematized, or rendered knowable as a fellow citizen sharing certain common features with all citizens.

D. The self-as-other as a member of political society

Justice demands not only that I consider all others fairly, but that I consider myself fairly as well. Thus, the final stage in this phenomenology of ethical experience is the experience of myself as an other, as an other amongst others, all of whom should receive equal consideration under the law. Lévinas draws a clear line from the

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9 Lévinas (1981), 160.
10 Lévinas (1981), 158.
11 Lévinas (1981), 158.
instantiating experience of the infinity that eludes conceptualization to the emergence of the self-as-other in political society: “Is not the Infinite which enigmatically commands me, commanding and not commanding, from the other, also the turning of the I into ‘like the others,’ for which it is important to concern oneself and take care?”¹² This passage lays out in seemingly chronological order events that happen, experientially, all at once. The self is never simply an isolated self secure in its knowledge but always a self whose freedom and knowledge are called into question by the face to face relation with the other; and this face to face relation never involves simply two people but is always complicated by the presence of a third party who demands not only ethical responsibility but also political justice. So, finally, subjectivity is never simply an ethical experience alone but is always already an experience of the self-as-other in political society. Lévinas refers at times to the confluence of these phenomenological qualities of the ethics of alterity, but certainly he favors the face to face as lying at the heart of subjective experience, and all other experiences of politics and justice and third parties are viewed in the light of this urgent yet irrecoverable situation.

2. The Face-to-Face Relation and Solipsism: There but by the Grace of God

As Robert Bernasconi points out, Lévinasian alterity is not applicable to differences between groups of people: “On Lévinas’s account, to encounter the Other one must overlook the colour of that person’s skin or indeed his or her cultural identity, just

as one must not notice the colour of his or her eyes.” Religious, cultural, or racial differences are relative varieties of alterity, in which one group is defined in relation to the other, and not the absolute alterity marking the face to face relation. In this rejection of cultural, racial, or religious alterity, the ultimate situation of the face to face relationship has an affinity with Rawls’s original position.

Like the original position, the face to face is a hypothetical situation, in that it is not a chronologically locatable event involving one particular “other,” but a temporally ambiguous phenomenological experience involving the alterity of all others. Certainly, Lévinas does speak of specific others, such as widows, orphans, and strangers, but these all function as paradigmatic, not particular, examples of alterity. That is, I do not stand in a face to face relation with one particular widowed woman; rather, out of the eyes of every other stares a potential widow or orphan—a potential castoff from or resistor to the order of totality in which all people have a proper place.

Moreover, like the original position, the face to face relation is meant to inform one’s moral reasoning in actual situations. Lévinas claims in many places that the mediating forces of politics and justice are only tolerable when grounded upon the originary absoluteness of the ethical demand. As has been shown, however, transitioning from the originary face to face relation to the everyday relations of others and selves-as-others in political society is difficult for Lévinas. The ethical force of the face-to-face relation is necessarily rendered less forceful by the mediating relations of politics, which distribute rights and responsibilities equitably amongst all others.

How, then, in Lévinas’s words, does the transition from *ethics* to *politics*—from *face-to-face* to *self-as-other in society*—occur? He writes:

[I]t is only thanks to God that, as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as an other by the others, that is, ‘for myself.’ ‘Thanks to God’ I am another for the others. . . . The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society.\textsuperscript{14}

The sudden reference to God in *Otherwise than Being* is more than rhetorical flourish. I suggest instead that Lévinas finds himself in a position very similar to Descartes, certain of his subjective experience but entirely uncertain about anything else. Caught in the face to face relation, I do not have doubts *that* the other exists (Cartesian doubts) but doubts about *who* the other is. Because the other always exceeds my understanding of her, I can never rest in the assurance that my knowledge of her is correct. Trapped thusly *in my own perspective* on the other, I never know if I “read” her correctly, if I meet her demands, or if I have taken care of her needs. This trap may not be identical to Cartesian solipsism, but it nonetheless marks a strict limit on the possibilities for epistemological certainty.

On the other side of this trap lies political society, where I must assume some working knowledge of others, not only of their needs, but of their rights and duties. I must make demands on others based on these duties; I must pass judgment on them even when I cannot fully understand them; and I must divide my time and resources equitably. How does one escape the quasi-solipsistic trap of the face to face relation to get on with business of daily life? Like Descartes, at this point in the argument Lévinas turns to God. It is only by the grace of God that the inordinate responsibility of the face to face

\textsuperscript{14} Lévinas (1981), 158.
relation is mediated, for only through a miracle can what is absolute and thus by
definition immune to mediation be nonetheless mediated and rendered relative.

For Rawls, the transition from the original position to political society is relatively
smooth: the rationality and pure equality that characterize the original position lead
naturally to a social order based on egalitarianism and principles of justice based on
fairness. For Lévinas, the absolute responsibility before a singular (not particular) other
does not lead naturally to either egalitarianism or fairness but instead seems to prevent
them. However, fairness is still a regulative ideal for Lévinas in his understanding of
politics. Indeed, it is as if Lévinas remains Lévinasian when addressing ethics but
suddenly becomes Rawlsian—adopting the language of free and equal citizens—when
attempting to address politics. As he states, “the original locus of justice,” instituted “with
the help of God,” is where the subject can become “a citizen with all the rights and duties
measured and measurable which the equilibrated ego involves, or equilibrating itself by
the concourse of duties and the concurrence of rights.\(^\text{15}\) Considering the difference
separating the philosophy of Lévinas from that of Rawls, it is not surprising that Lévinas
must rely on a miracle to transition from the inordinate demand of the face to face
relation to the fairness of egalitarian society.

\(^{15}\) Lévinas (1981), 160.
III. Relationality as Complicity: Rethinking Thematization under the Doctrine of No-Self

The interpretation of self-alterity developed in the first chapter can both avoid the trap of solipsism and provide an understanding of alterity that does not render miraculous the shift to politics. The first chapter held that the self, from the start, is no-self and exists only by becoming-other. Moreover, the mutually interdependent relations that sustain the self as becoming-other already situate the self as a self-as-other in community. Here, I suggest that this self-as-other in community is comparable to Lévinas’s self-as-other in political society. That is, the interpretation of alterity in the first chapter begins where Lévinas ends, with the self-as-other as a political being. The quasi-solipsistic bind of the face to face relation does not maintain pride of place under this reinterpretation of alterity; rather, the complicated terrain of political community, already involving numerous others, is emphasized as the context in which personal identity first becomes possible.

To have any identity at all, the impermanent self must take what is in constant motion and begin to craft a narrative, or in Lévinas’s words, must begin to thematize itself. Thematization involves a degree of abstraction and conceptualization, capacities that one does not develop on one’s own but as a function of education in society. That is, the abstractions and concepts through which I thematize myself always refer, even if implicitly, to the assumptions I have about the identities of others. Indeed, the fact that I conceptualize “identity” at all is made possible because I learn to recognize others as having identities of their own. Identities are thus relational constructs; and the differences
between identities are not absolute differences but relative ones. I define who I am by differentiating myself from you. In differentiating myself from you, I make assumptions about what you are or are not, and thus I begin the process of thematizing you.

Identity is thus already a matter of mediating the force of the face to face relation, for it imposes concepts upon the other. Following Lévinas, then, identity is already a transition into politics. He seems to recognize as much when he states: “Consciousness is born as the presence of a third party.”\textsuperscript{16} The third party, who troubles the face to face relation and initiates the transition from ethics to politics, introduces the thematization that makes possible the distinction between my identity and the other’s identity. Here, Lévinas admits that the impossible, inordinate, and absolute relation of the face to face cannot produce a consciousness of oneself as a “self” with an identity distinct from the other:

If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would not have been any problem, in even the most general sense of the term. A question would not have been born, nor consciousness, nor self-consciousness. The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters.\textsuperscript{17}

The alterity discussed in the second chapter begins at the moment of being troubled; it is already a mediated and politicized alterity. The self, who is from the start becoming-other, is always thematizing itself in a way complicit with others. It is always facing multiple others and always taking itself into consideration as an other amongst others. Because such mediation enters the realm of politics, all identity-formation of the self-as-other can

\textsuperscript{16} Lévinas (1981), 160.
\textsuperscript{17} Lévinas (1981), 157.
be seen, at the same time, as a political move. Thus for Lévinas, the birth of politics is the birth of personal identity, both for myself and for the other.

The thematizing force of identity, which defines one identity in relation to others, leads to a relativizing of alterity that Lévinas rejects when he refuses, in a 1982 radio interview, to think of the Palestinians as “others” in relation to Jews. All identity-constructions referring to historically situated groups of people must appeal to relative differences. For example, my concept of my own whiteness refers necessarily to blackness, in the specific context of American culture. The common identity of black people in America is a product of the history of slavery and of the diasporic experience that united previously unrelated people from various regions of the African continent. The common identity of white people in America reflects a history of privilege conferred upon those Europeans who, sharing little else in common, were all categorized as not black.

Due to this capacity to render absolute alterity relative, thematization is treated with suspicion throughout Lévinas’s work, even though he admits that it is necessary to the development of political society. He describes thematization at times as inevitable, as a necessary “betrayal” or “blasphemy,” as “suppression or possession of the other”; and at other times he says that it makes possible community, the sharing of knowledge, and teaching. Thematization is on the one hand an attempt to grasp the other in knowledge, which is for Lévinas an attempt to exert power over her; on the other hand, it is a gift from the other to the self—the other offers herself in language and makes herself available as an object of knowledge. Thus, thematization is my only means of

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18 Bernasconi (2006), 247.
understanding the other and, at the same time, an affront to her freedom. As a gift from other to self, it must be received with the utmost humbleness.

The potential for positive growth through thematization must be reexamined in terms of the alterity of the self-as-other laid out in the second chapter. Specifically, Lévinas’s claim that “[t]he Other alone eludes thematization” will not hold when the self’s own identity as becoming-other is linked to the process of thematizing.20 One’s own identity can only develop with others who are complicit in the process, who are simultaneously conceptualizing their own identities; all people are accomplices in the political project of identity formation. I thus suggest that “complicity” is the key feature of thematization, which accounts for both the positive and negative connotations Lévinas associates with it. The related words “complicity” and “accomplice” share their roots with the word “complicate,” from the Latin complicare, meaning to fold (plicare) together (com). Complicate connotes combining, entangling, or entwining, and thus it has come to mean “to make more difficult or confusing.” Both accomplice and complicity, along with their cousin “implicate” (to “fold in”), are associated in contemporary usage with criminal or illicit activity. Guilty parties are implicated in crimes, accomplices are partners in crime, and those who do not act to stop a crime are complicit in it.

These associations with the language of complicity accomplish several goals for rethinking thematization: the association with criminality preserves Lévinas’s conviction that politics is constantly susceptible to corruption; the negative connotation also preserve the suspicion, seen in Buddhism, that egoic identity is the root of all manner of suffering; yet at the same time, the idea that accomplices are not only partners in crime but may be

20 Lévinas (1969), 86.
co-conspiring dissidents helps keep open the possibility that politics can become a site of radical change. For, on the one hand, if I identify myself as “white” then I am complicit in the system of privilege and oppression that maintains the distinction between black and white in America. Furthermore, oppressed groups are in many ways complicit with the power structures that oppress them—this is why hooks is concerned with the internalization of negative images of black people, or with the black community’s adoption of the sexist power structures characteristic of the dominant white society. But, on the other hand, the view of the oppressed person as an accomplice in oppression returns a sense of agency to the oppressed—she is not simply a victim but a player. And her actions to resist oppression affect not only herself and other oppressed people but all of those complicit in the system that she resists.

Far from blaming the victim, the language of complicity highlights the fact that oppression is a systemic affliction. And far from downplaying the actions of resisters to affect the system, the language of complicity amplifies the effects of resistance throughout the web of relations tying all accomplices together. Complicity thus reflects both the empowering and the limiting aspects of the self’s relational constitution.21

To sum up, if the phenomenology of Lévinas’s subject is the experience of alterity as described in the face to face relation, then the phenomenology of the relational self is an experience of politics. The constitutive relationality that follows from the doctrine of no-self reflects not the ethical immediacy of the face to face relation, but the political complexity of a socially informed identity already shaped by relations with numerous

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21 See Mark Sanders (2002), *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*. He relates the idea of complicity to the ethical entanglement (the “folded-togetherness”) of human beings in general, and addresses in particular the complicated web tying together perpetrators and victims under oppressive political systems.
others. A person is complicit in political structures from the moment of birth. She is responsible for her complicity not because of any actions she chooses freely to do but through the developmental trajectory of her identity over which she initially has little control. As such, this complicity entails neither praise nor blame—rather, it simply reflects the commonplace impression that we are born innocent into unfair circumstances. We are born into and grow to occupy roles such as oppressor and oppressed before we are capable of agreeing to our involvement in the political landscape that has defined these roles. Given that the doctrine of no-self already speaks to this politicization of subjective experience, the question becomes: What sorts of political ideals and institutional structures accord with the philosophical account of emptiness underlying the doctrine of no-self?
As stated earlier, part of the reason Lévinas has trouble transitioning from ethics to politics is that his portrayal of politics reflects a conventional understanding of free citizens bearing equal rights and duties. Perhaps the problem is not that Lévinas has failed to show how his ethical relation can lead to a concept of justice as fairness; rather, the problem is that he has failed to articulate a new model for political justice that reflects his ethical insights. The solution, then, is not to bridge the gap to fairness, but to reevaluate fairness as suitable model for politics.

The concept of fairness becomes strained especially in those thought experiments involving family members meant to illustrate ethical dilemmas in which one cannot mediate between competing demands; e.g., two of your family members are both drowning, whom do you save? There can be no fair or equitable solution to problems where fulfilling one obligation means necessarily reneging on another. In trying to address these situations, one may become like Carol Gilligan’s Amy, faltering on the Kohlberg scale of moral development. The source of the confusion is that it is not fair to be drowning in the first place. One’s moral reasoning will be frustrated as long as one addresses an irremediably unfair circumstance by imposing a fair framework upon it.

Like drowning, the prior responsibility with which a person is saddled through her complicity in power structures is not fair; it is not even of the order of fairness. To borrow a phrase from Kierkegaard, the “teleological suspension” of justice is the rule and not the exception. A woman need not go meet her God on Mount Moriah to see that

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22 See the well-known Heinz dilemma discussed in Gilligan (1982), *In a Different Voice*. 
people in everyday life face unreasonable demands, bear undeserved burdens, and fulfill their obligations without ever being fairly compensated. In short, people routinely carry out their responsibilities without expecting reciprocation; which is to say, they respond to others as if in the ultimate situation of the face to face relation. A politics that addresses itself to these realities of daily life must not focus on the fabrication of fairness; political society must instead be reconceived as a system of interlocking institutions aimed at the creative development and dispensation of reparations.

In a socio-political context, reparations are often criticized as being either unfair or only naïvely fair. One the one hand, it is unfair to require people in the present to pay the price for past injustices. On the other hand, it is naïve to believe that such reparations will actually “make up for” a past crime whose victims are already dead. In most instances of reparations, the providers of the funds are not those accountable for the crime under consideration, and the recipients are not the original victims. Although reparations defy the logic of reciprocity, they make sense when understood in the context of a philosophy of emptiness. In what follows, repair and reparative activities are examined as models for constructing alternatives to the ideal of fairness in politics.

In her 2002 book *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*, Elizabeth V. Spelman suggests that the activity of repair is so central to human life that we should rename ourselves *Homo reparans*. She speaks of political reparations in particular in the context of the still-emerging restorative justice movement, as seen for example in South Africa’s post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). However, Spelman’s appraisal of restorative justice is largely pessimistic, as will be discussed later. First, the following two sections describe two aspects of repair that Spelman does not
consider: the reparative value of learning to appreciate damage on its own aesthetic merits, and the reparative value of feeling sorry for circumstances for which one is not accountable. The failure to take seriously these two aspects of repair explain why Spelman does not explore in more detail the potential of the restorative justice movement for political thought. However, within the framework of emptiness and no-self, these aspects of repair take on new significance. They help articulate the ideals of restorative justice in terms of a larger political vision that places emphasis on the reparative function of governmental and public institutions.

1. The Aesthetics of Repair: Celebrating versus Disguising Damage

Spelman comments on the variety of reparative activities, from restoration, to preservation, to renovation, and then remarks:

As crucial as such distinctions are, the family of repair activities shares the aim of maintaining some kind of continuity with the past in the face of breaks or ruptures to that continuity. They involve returning in some manner or other to an earlier state—to the bowl before it was broken, to the friendship before it began to buckle under the weight of suspicion, to the nation before it was torn apart by hostility and war.23

The activity of repair can be thought of in two ways, which reflect an aesthetic distinction: repair can mend an object, relationship, or situation in such a way that all traces of the damage are made invisible; or repair work can leave the damage noticeable. Both types of repair maintain a connection to the past, but throughout her book Spelman focuses attention only on the first one. Considering the seemingly trivial example of repairing a broken bowl, she elaborates: “Even though taking superglue to the bowl

repairs it without fully restoring it to its preshattered condition, both repairer and restorer want to pick up a thread with the past.” The image of taking superglue to the bowl invokes a certain aesthetics of repair: the damage will not be so noticeable, because the glue is clear; and from an aesthetic standpoint, this disguising of damage is desirable.

Contrast this aesthetic sensibility with the Japanese repair activity—really, an art form in itself—known as kintsugi or “gold joinery.” Dating back to at least the fifteenth century, broken pottery was repaired using a special resin coated in powdered gold. The resulting veins of gold, tracing the contours of the original crack, were considered especially attractive and were thought to increase the value of the object. Today, one can walk in a Japanese craft store and buy a product unheard of in the West—a kind of gold-colored superglue. The idea here is that one will use the colored superglue to fix one’s broken dishes and the result will resemble the traditional (and more expensive) gold-dusted resin.

Superglue-type products in the West are inevitably clear. The whole point is to fix one’s dishes and disguise the presence of the crack. Colored glue would defeat this purpose. But the practice of kintsugi makes sense when articulated within the framework of Japanese aesthetics. Firstly, the philosophy of emptiness underlies an aesthetic concern for impermanence, as seen in the aesthetic values of wabi and sabi associated with the tea ceremony, which express an appreciation for aging, broken, or worn-out objects. Secondly, the notion of self-emptiness underlies a non-agent-centered view of artistic creativity. Many of the most popular styles of glazes for pottery are produced through accidents of heat and pressure inside the kiln. The potter can manipulate the outcome

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through the arrangement of the pieces within the kiln, or through the timing of the firing and cooling cycles, but the glaze effects cannot be controlled directly. To acknowledge the artistic contribution of forces beyond the potter’s control, he or she leaves offerings of food and sake to the spirit of the kiln.25

Only a small step separates the aesthetic appreciation of these abstract, randomly occurring glaze patterns from the appreciation of the abstract, randomly occurring patterns that are created when a cup is broken. Rather than mark an abrupt rupture with the past, as Spelman suggest, the breaking of the cup marks a new stage in its aesthetic life. The impulse to emphasize the damage for its aesthetic value, to leave the breaks in the cup visible for all to see, represents one possibility for repair that Spelman does not consider.

2. Reparative Apologies: Being Sorry and Being Accountable

Spelman states clearly that apologies are reparative only when accountable parties admit their accountability without making reference to extenuating circumstances:

One can apologize only for acts for which one has no excuse: If one has an excuse, there is nothing to apologize for, even if there is something to feel sorry about ("I’m sorry that you are hurt,” even “I’m sorry that my actions hurt you,” is quite different from “I’m sorry that I hurt you”). A genuine apology thus . . . strips away any suggestion that there are extenuating circumstances that could relieve one of blame. . . .26

Apologies of the first sort (“I’m sorry that you are hurt”) are generally considered disingenuous compared to apologies of the second (“I’m sorry that I hurt you”). The first

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25 Moes (2003), 22.
articulation ever so slightly removes the focus from the apologizer as the agent of the offending action and leaves open the possibility that part of what hurt the offended person was beyond the apologizer’s control.

At the risk of making a gross generalization, one might say that apologies of the second type are rare in conversational Japanese. Consider the familiar cry of late students, “Osoku natte sumimasen!” This means, loosely, “I’m sorry, but I have become late!” although the subject “I” does not appear in the original. The grammar of the Japanese sentence leaves open the possibility that becoming late has happened to the student, due to circumstances beyond his or her control. That is, the phrase expresses that the student is genuinely sorry for the state of affairs involving lateness, without naming the student as the one accountable for those affairs.

Spelman’s rejection of apologies that invoke extenuating circumstances as somehow less genuine is inappropriate in a Japanese context. Indeed, one might say that extenuating circumstances are at the heart of Japanese moral reasoning. Ronald McLaren elaborates upon this claim in his article “Kawaišō, Justice, and Reciprocity: Themes in Japanese and Western Ethics.” As McLaren notes, in Japan the language of fairness has largely been imported from the West, and fairness is not the de facto standard for judgment in the ethical dilemmas of daily life. In circumstances where an American might naturally proclaim “That’s not fair!” a Japanese person is most likely to invoke the concept of kawaišō, which means roughly “pitiful” or “pathetic.” For example, in America, if a teacher refuses to let a non-native English speaker use a dictionary during a test, an American student might protest, on the other student’s behalf, “But that’s not fair!” In similar circumstances, if a teacher in Japan refuses to let a non-native Japanese
speaker use a dictionary, a Japanese student might say, “But look at her! She’s so pitiful!”

The accusation “That’s not fair!” identifies the teacher as the cause of the unfairness and puts him in a position to either defend his decision or accede to the student’s criticism. The observation “She’s so pitiful!” does not blame anyone for the pitiful state of affairs, and the teacher is not put in a defensive position; rather he is asked to simply recognize the sorry circumstances and have compassion. McLaren points out that the regulative ideal of fairness is linked to a politics of individually vested rights, whereas the value of kawaisō is linked to a politics of interpersonal responsibility. In a system that stresses individually vested rights, individuals are unambiguously accountable for their actions: if I have wronged another person, I am liable for the damage; and if I have been wronged, I am entitled to fair compensation. However, because this system is also predicated upon the notion that individuals are prone to pursue their own interests, institutions of distributive and retributive justice must be put in place to enforce the fulfillment of one’s obligations to others.

McLaren claims that, despite Japan’s adoption of a Western-style legal system, in daily life very little behavior reflects ethical reasoning based on entitlement and liability. Rather, ethical reasoning takes as an assumption that one is responsible to help others—not just others whom one has wronged, but any others who are in need of assistance. This sense of responsibility is also at the heart of Ninomiya Sontoku’s proposed “economy of thanks,” as described by Sueki Takehiro:

27 McLaren (1984), 53. McLaren’s version of this anecdote comes from a Japanese colleague in whose classroom a similar event apparently occurred.
We ought to give some part of our own property to others, because to aid others is to thank them for what they have done for us, even if our contribution is not given to those who directly benefited us. This “mutual aid of thanks” (suijo) is based on the mutual dependence of all things. Since we are all mutually dependent, we cannot recognize ourselves as human beings if we do not recognize others. To thank others for their favor to us is to recognize others as human beings in order to recognize ourselves.  

Who can be thanked for the web of mutual interdependence that sustains life? Under a philosophy of emptiness, there is no supreme creator to whom one might give thanks. In the Japanese mix of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, one gives thanks to one’s ancestors, but, in the spirit of non-reciprocity, the ancestors do not receive their due until they are dead. In the present moment, there is only the amorphous net of extenuating circumstances in which each person is always implicated. Thus, we cannot simply reciprocate “those who directly benefited us” for we have been benefited indirectly by so many others. Hence the institutionalization of charity occupies a central role in Ninomiya’s economic model.

This is not simply blind altruism. Both the institutionalization of charity and the ethical reasoning grounded in extenuating circumstances reflect a mature and sober recognition that life’s complexity makes the unambiguous identification of accountable parties a naïve endeavor. The web of extenuating circumstances surrounding any action makes the neat assignment of praise and blame a gross over-simplification. This ethical reasoning also reflects Buddhist articulations of no-self that deemphasize the self’s role

29 McLaren elaborates on this point: “The intergenerational relationships whose sanctification is the primary function of ancestor worship are nonegalitarian, and the forms of indebtedness and responsibility connected with them are asymmetrical. The child or descendant has a debt of considerable magnitude—he can perhaps be said to owe everything.” See McLaren (1984), 62.
as the agent of actions. The relationally constituted self is implicated in a variety of contexts—extenuating circumstances—in which her actions reflect not simply her own free agency but the depth and complexity of the relations that constitute her. The ability to be sorry for circumstances for which one is not directly responsible—and to take actions to resolve the situation motivated by how sorry one feels, not by how accountable one feels—marks another difference with Spelman’s account of repair. Just as *kintsugi* offers a non-agent-centered account of artistic creativity, the ethical reasoning grounded in extenuating circumstances reflects a non-agent-centered approach to questions of justice.

In terms of the experience of relationality as complicity, this non-agent-centered approach seems particularly apt where there is a large-scale, state-sponsored system that perpetuates damage, such as apartheid in South Africa, for which no one person can effectively claim accountability. Even perpetrators have access to reasoning based in extenuating circumstances, and one should not dismiss the extent to which their hands are tied by the system. Contrary to what Spelman says, then, what is reparative about an apology is that the paper-pusher in a government of apartheid *feels sorry* for the damage he enabled with the paper he pushed, even when both he and his victims know he cannot effectively hold himself *accountable*. Just as the web of mutual interdependence supports the institutionalization of charity, to thank others who have not directly benefited us, so does it support the institutionalization of reparations, to assign responsibility to those who have not directly harmed us but who are complicit in system-wide harm.

However, given that no single individual can effectively claim accountability for system-wide harm, no single individual should be expected to bear the burden of
reparations. As the following section discusses, bearing the reparative burden is the paradigmatic function of governmental institutions.
IV. Reparative Politics: Making Room for the Unprecedented

The above observations do not imply, of course, that people cannot be held personally accountable for their actions. The identification and potential punishment of accountable parties can certainly be a part of the reparations process. Even in South Africa, where guilty parties received amnesty for telling their stories, the language of personal accountability was considered cathartic for both victims and perpetrators. Moreover, in Japan, it is increasingly common to see corporate executives standing at press conferences, tears in their eyes, announcing that they are solely responsible for their company’s failures and that there is no one else to blame; although these situations represent a breakdown in the language of extenuating circumstances that usually prevents such drastic and embarrassing scenes. One might argue that it is much easier to design political institutions that address these times of breakdown—that is, systems of retributive justice—than it is to design institutions flexible enough to work within the fluctuating field of extenuating circumstances. However, the emerging field of “restorative justice” offers instructive alternatives, which come to light when repair activities are understood with reference to the art of kintsugi and the moral relevance of extenuating affairs.

1. Restorative Justice and the Aesthetics of Repair

Restorative justice addresses the inadequacies of the dominant retributive justice model. As Spelman describes: “Proponents of restorative justice point out that the harm
done the victim is not necessarily repaired by the formal endorsement of the victim’s rights not to have been injured nor by the victim’s knowledge that the tormentor has been punished.\(^{30}\) In this model, the law is required only to identify accountable parties, punish the guilty, and offer monetary or other compensation to the victims. Additional services, such as counseling for victims or rehabilitation programs for offenders, may be available but are considered supererogatory. Justice is adequately served by the bare meting out of punishment and reward.

In its “tit-for-tat” mentality, retributive justice, metaphorically speaking, uses superglue to repair damage. If a victim has lost a piece of her property, then she is compensated for its value. If she has been injured, then she is compensated for her medical bills. If she has lost time in which she would otherwise have been working and earning money, then she is compensated for her income. These compensations are *fair*, because they correspond dollar for dollar to the value of whatever the victim lost. As metaphorical “superglue,” such compensations aim to repair damage by disguising that it ever existed—once the victim has been paid dollar for dollar for her loss, it should be as if the loss never occurred.

Of course, the superglue metaphor fails when considering violent and traumatic crimes. No one expects the court to “fairly compensate” a victim of assault or murder, but the retributive justice system still models such cases according to the regulative ideal of fair compensation. The results will surely be inadequate, but retributive justice still, as it were, does the best it can with the resources at its disposal.

\(^{30}\) Spelman (2002), 54.
Restorative justice seeks to expand the resources available to the legal system to aid and counsel victims, to rehabilitate offenders, and to heal the communities that often have ties to both. Spelman writes:

One alternative to incarceration that some proponents of restorative justice find promising is what Australian criminologist John Braithwaite has dubbed “reintegrative shaming.” Offenders appear in the courtroom in the presence of significant community members who make clear their disapproval of the offenders behavior but also shoulder responsibility for figuring out how the offender might be brought back into the fold of the community.  

Reintegrative shaming operates less like superglue, which disguises damage, and more like *kintsugi*, which works with the contours of damage to find a creative resolution. Offenders are not whisked away, to be kept out of sight in prisons; victims are not expected to return to their communities, with their fair compensation, as if nothing ever happened. Rather, the incident between offender and victim leaves a permanent mark on the community, and its resolution highlights the relational ties binding together the numerous community members—beyond victim and offender—affected by the event.

Yet Spelman does not characterize the activity of restorative justice in this way. To the contrary, she accedes to its detractors who claim that restorative justice misguided attempts to erase all traces of conflict. She describes a paradigmatic instance of repair work: “Rips should be mended in such a way as to suggest that they were never there in the first place.” Then, she criticizes such repair work as an inappropriate model for justice: “But in the eyes of some of the critics of restorative justice, democracy . . . should not tolerate attempts to cover over the history of conflict.”

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31 Spelman (2002), 57.
32 Spelman (2002), 76.
33 Spelman (2002), 76.
attributes this opinion to “some critics,” she does not offer a counterargument and indeed seems pessimistic about the possibility of doing so. I argue that restorative justice need not be understood as covering over conflict, and the reason Spelman cannot articulate an alternative account is that she cannot envision an alternative to the aesthetics of repair whose primary aim is disguising damage. Because she does not imagine repair activities such as *kintsugi* that highlight and preserve the traces of damage, she does not imagine a model of restorative justice that similarly preserves the traces of conflict as a part of the healing process.

2. Restorative Justice and Reparative Apologies

Spelman’s pessimistic attitude toward restorative justice is also influenced by her emphasis on the admission of accountability as a prerequisite for a sincere apology. The emphasis on individual accountability is at the same time a devaluation of extenuating circumstances as relevant to the assignment of praise and blame. Restorative justice, in its attention to extenuating circumstances, treats each case as unique. An appropriate resolution for theft in one situation may not be appropriate in another. As Spelman points out, however, this tendency toward particularity is “at odds with a basic requirement of justice; that similar cases are to be treated similarly.”

She elaborates: “It’s just not fair if Betty gets a lighter sentence than Bob when each was caught stealing roughly the same amount from the till.”

But what if Betty is a single mother of four who was stealing the money to buy her son an asthma inhaler? And what if Bob is a compulsive gambler who

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stole the money to buy lotto tickets? Why shouldn’t Betty receive a lighter sentence, if
the extenuating circumstances warrant it, and if her community deems it appropriate?
Again, Spelman voices her objections to the possible unfairness of restorative justice as
reflecting the opinions of its opponents, but she says nothing to counter these opinions.

She also does not explore what I find to be the most interesting feature of
restorative justice, its reexamination of the role of precedents in legal and political
reasoning. Spelman asks, disapprovingly: “What’s to guide the problem-solving session,
or negotiations, or mediating process? Legal precedent does not have to be
consulted. . . .”36 In other words, working on a case by case basis, those engaged in
restorative justice activities may drift far afield of legal precedents in their quest to give
each individual situation individual attention. Reasoning from precedent forms the
backbone of the American legal system, and on this issue more than on any other,
restorative justice marks a radical departure from the norm. To reason based on precedent
means to identify important similarities between past events and present ones and to
judge the present on the basis of the past. Too much attention to the extenuating
circumstances in any given case inevitably frustrates reasoning from precedent. Too
much attention to detail reveals the unique features of the case at hand, the differences
between this case and past ones, which make the application of past judgments
inappropriate.

The problem with focusing on extenuating circumstances in legal cases is not, as
Spelman suggests, a problem of unfairness, but rather it is problem of time and effort: it
simply takes too much time to give each case the individual attention it deserves,

especially in large-scale institutional contexts such as the American legal system. One of the largest-scale examples of restorative justice at work, the TRC in South Africa, faced daunting questions of how to assign reparations to victims, including the question of whether precise monetary amounts should be granted on a case by case basis, or whether a generally adequate standard amount should be awarded across the board. As Brandon Hamber, director of the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE), explains: “The TRC opted for an approach that did not utilise a means to test for each victim. Seemingly, this is dismissed owing to cost, and the resources necessary for grading the psychological and physical injuries of the approximately 20,000 victims.” Yet, as Hamber also makes clear, the ideals of the TRC move in the direction of increased particularity, toward viewing each and every victim’s situation as unprecedented.

These ideals are of course regulative and not necessarily attainable. Excessive costs and inadequate resources will always be challenges in the application of restorative justice. But these challenges should not prevent the ideal of increased individual attention from gaining a stronger foothold in legal systems. After all, fairness is also a regulative ideal, and one that is never perfectly achieved. But, as the dominant ideal of most courts, it still has a large impact. For example, when Spelman says that it is not fair to treat similar cases differently, she seems to mean that fairness is a matter of treating everyone the same: what’s good for you should be good for me, as well, given that our circumstances are sufficiently similar. The determination of fairness thus hinges on what is meant by “sufficiently” similar. A legal system tied to the regulative ideal of fairness will seek to establish, with greater and greater clarity, standards for identifying

similarities. As the body of precedents grows, claimants and defendants in courts across the nation can expect roughly similar outcomes for roughly similar cases. Such rough similarity is “fair.”

However, the negative consequence of adopting fairness as a regulative ideal is that in cases of widespread harm, such as cases in which large-scale reparations are appropriate, individual victims do not receive individual attention, and this approximation of fairness is accepted as satisfactory. The result is that everyone receives treatment that is generally adequate, and no one receives treatment that is just right. In contrast, by adopting a regulative ideal of increased individual attention, and committing the system to look at each case on its own merits as much as is humanly possible, the blanket dispersal of generally adequate treatment will be a situation that demands improvement rather than one that is accepted as a suitable norm. In the debate between fairness and particularity, neither ideal can be rejected on the grounds that it can never be realistically attained, for the debate concerns not which ideal is the most realistic but which ideal one most wishes reality to approximate.

3. The Need for Reparative Politics: Beyond Contractual Agreements

To stand before a legal or governmental institution and be regarded as unprecedented is, I suggest, the political mode of alterity. It is to be “absolutely other” in the eyes of the law. To adopt particularity as a regulative ideal is to assert that politics should approximate the ethics of alterity as much as is humanly possible. Instead of aiming to treat all people equally, alterity ethics prescribes that governmental and legal
systems should attempt to regard every citizen as unique and unprecedented. Instead of aiming to treat people as fundamentally free and independent, alterity ethics prescribes that political systems should recognize the ties of responsibility that bind citizens together and should provide institutions such as childcare programs that help citizens meet their often overwhelming obligations to others.

The common assumption that Lévinas’s ethics is descriptive and not prescriptive does not reflect a necessary feature of alterity ethics. Rather it reflects a failure of imagination, perhaps on Lévinas’s part as much as on the part of his interpreters. It is a failure to think beyond the limits of time and money that constrain what can be realistically achieved under the large-scale institutions of society. However, with the conceptual resources of the doctrine of no-self, the prescriptive force and political relevance of alterity ethics becomes increasing plausible.

Reparations mark a move beyond the mere description of inordinate responsibility; rather, reparations prescribe that one should feel inordinately responsible for others, even when the circumstances are well beyond one’s control. The question then becomes: how can one realistically fulfill this responsibility? And the answer is simply that one cannot. The paper-pusher in a government of apartheid does not have the resources to personally provide money for reparations to the thousands of people he indirectly harmed. Therefore, Lévinasian ethics requires a political system that can step in and take responsibility for large-scale damage where individuals acting alone, no matter how sorry they feel, cannot.

38 For an imaginative portrayal of political possibilities, see Elizabeth Porter (1996) “Can Politics Practice Compassion?” in which Porter insists that a failure to attend to people on a case by case basis, on the part of politicians and government bodies, reflects a lack of effort for which there is simply no excuse.
The reparative function of political institutions is called for not only by Lévinasian alterity ethics but also by the doctrine of no-self. The doctrine of no-self underlies the philosophical framework that emphasizes extenuating circumstances over personal accountability. It is the interplay between these two aspects—the alterity ethics that prescribes feelings of inordinate responsibility and the doctrine of no-self that perpetually complicates the neat classification of accountable parties—that necessitates institutions capable of assuming the responsibility that is too much for one individual to bear.

In line with the values of restorative justice, I suggest that reparations are like gold joinery: they do not restore the past to pre-damage situation; they create a new present that preserves visibly the traces of trauma. Moreover, neither the creation nor dispersal of reparations depends on accountability alone; reparations can also be offered in the spirit of feeling sorry rather than feeling accountable. Politics modeled on reparations, then, will differ from a contractual model in which citizens exchange certain freedoms for governmental protection. The contract model is predicated upon the notion of individual accountability: the citizen and the government are each accountable for holding up their respective ends of the bargain. Neither party “owes” anything to the other beyond that for which each has agreed to accept accountability. The reparative model of politics does not ground governmental responsibilities in accountability, but instead locates governmental institutions’ very reason for being in their ameliorative value.

When there is a situation of damage for which no one can be held responsible—earthquakes, for example—citizens rightly expect governmental institutions to step in
with the resources to make repairs. In such situations, the government does not ask “Who is accountable?” but “How can I help?” When reparations are taken as a model for governmental institutions in general, the attitude of “How can I help?” becomes appropriate in more and more institutional contexts, such as welfare, child care, or health care. In these contexts, an institution’s aim would not be to “make things right,” to level the playing field, or to conceal damage, conflict, and trauma; rather their aim would be to make things better, to make difficult circumstances more manageable, and to simply help out. Such reparative institutions would be, in a concrete sense, of the people, by the people, and for the people.
EMPOWERMENT AND EMPTINESS: LIBERATORY AESTHETICS AND THE RADICAL

SUBJECTIVITY OF NO-SELF

The account of autonomy as self-loss developed in the second chapter makes use of the deceptively simple insight that *with all change comes loss*. In order to seize the creative potential of change, one must be emotionally equipped to deal with the inevitable loss. The doctrine of no-self speaks to the lived experience of the perpetual changes and losses of subjective existence. In the constant flux of impermanence, my own identity is a fleeting thing. I am constantly required to adapt myself to new contexts, to let go of past selves in order to move forward, and to manage the often-competing identifications that express the multiplicity of my subjective life. On the one hand, the doctrine of no-self speaks to a sense of freedom: Because I have no single core self, my constant negotiations with identity are not anchored to one dominating narrative. Yet on the other hand, the doctrine of no-self also invokes a perpetual sense of loss: Because I have no single core self, and because my present identity is fleeting, my past selves are *gone* in a very real sense. As the Japanese aesthetic tradition helps to make clear, in order to appreciate myself fully, I must appreciate my capacity for freedom as well as my capacity for loss. Hence non-attachment to the self is a liberatory practice focused on the creative potential of subjective existence in a world of change and instability.

Whereas the third chapter used the notion of self-alterity to reexamine questions of social order and public institutions, this final chapter uses the notion of self-loss to reexamine questions of personal empowerment under a doctrine of no-self. The doctrine
has repeatedly been presented as a form of identity critique, sharing similarities with anti-essentialist identity critiques of postmodern philosophy and critical theory. It is instructive to note that two of the most critical of the critical theorists, Eve Sedgwick and bell hooks, express a concern over the ability of critical theory to move beyond a stance of critique toward a position that is both constructive and empowering.

In Sedgwick’s 2003 book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, she questions Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which is widely accepted in critical theory, including Sedgwick’s own earlier works. As she describes it, the paranoid critical stance remains focused on the overwhelming persistence of systemic oppression. Paranoid critics keep their eyes open for the secret, and secretly oppressive, essentialist notion of gender a text imposes on the unwary reader. Or, they remain on the lookout for a universalizing, and thus totalizing and oppressive, liberal theory of human nature qua rational agency. But, as Sedgwick provocatively claims, the perpetual fine-tuning of paranoia within critical theory seems absurd when one considers the remarkably visible instances of oppression provided daily in the news, which require no esoteric hermeneutic analysis. Sedgwick asks: “How television-starved would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacra don’t have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?”

As an antidote to the tendency toward suspicious interpretation, Sedgwick suggests “reparative reading.” She uses “reparative” in the sense that Melanie Klein uses the term, and here the present analysis can only scratch the surface: Rather than aiming to uncover a vast, structured system of power with every interpretative act, reparative

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1 Sedgwick (2003), 141.
reading accepts the partial and fractured nature of information at hand and presumes to put the bits and pieces together in a way that is aesthetically pleasing and potentially healing. Paranoid critique devalues reparative reading as “merely” aesthetic or ameliorative, but Sedgwick wonders what is so negligible about pleasure and healing.\(^2\)

hooks seems to have similar concerns when she asserts, for example, that there is a “connection between our capacity to engage in critical resistance and our ability to experience pleasure and beauty.”\(^3\) In her more recent works on love, she focuses on articulating the healing value of critique. Is it a coincidence that Sedgwick and hooks, in addition to their shared concern over the empowering potential of critical theory, have both developed a personal interest in Buddhism? hooks has long been a contributor to magazines such as *Shambhala Sun* and *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Not surprisingly, little scholarly work has explored possible connections between hooks’s critical theory and the work she produces for these non-academic publications. Sedgwick’s turn to Buddhism is generally contextualized as part of a personal journey undertaken after being diagnosed with breast cancer. As in hooks’s case, scholarly research does not focus on what might link Sedgwick’s personal interest in Buddhism with her academic work.

In this chapter I suggest that the philosophy of Buddhism has much to offer that is both personally and politically empowering, and that these empowering elements have a conceptual affinity with anti-essentialist critical theories, especially with hooks’s work. The doctrine of no-self can articulate and elaborate upon hooks’s notion of *radical black subjectivity*, providing a more detailed picture of it than hooks herself does. The account of autonomy covered in the second chapter is the foundation upon which to construct

\(^2\) Sedgwick (2003), 144.
\(^3\) hooks (1990), 111.
what is called here the *radical subjectivity of no-self.* This term addresses issues of personal empowerment and critical resistance from within the framework of a philosophy of emptiness.

The second chapter focused on the emotionally complex process of mourning as necessary to the attainment of autonomy. Here, a similar point is made about the emotional dimension of critical resistance. The anti-essentialist identity critique is more than simply a theoretical exercise; it may involve questioning one’s own sense of self and letting go of aspects of that self-concept in which one has inevitably made emotional investments. Part of hooks’s motivation for suggesting radical black subjectivity as a step beyond the postmodernist identity critique is a desire to accommodate this emotional complexity. Her account of radical black subjectivity is presented in what follows as an explicit rejection of a disenabling “dialectic of self-overcoming.” This dialectic holds that essentialist accounts of the subject are oppressive, and overcoming their oppression involves overcoming the sense of self associated with them. Here empowerment and resistance are cast in reactionary terms: to be empowered is to react against forces of oppression and overcome them.

hooks envisions radical black subjectivity occupying a stance of critical resistance that is *oppositional* without being merely *reactionary,* and she describes this creative sense of oppositionality in *aesthetic* terms. hooks invokes this concept of non-reactionary oppositionality but does not clarify its precise workings. The very notion of opposition seems to imply a reaction against that which one opposes. The ideas of no-self and non-attachment, however, can shed light on non-reactionary oppositionality and how it relates to an overall aestheticization of critique that has liberatory and empowering dimensions.
In this light, to be non-attached to the self is not be “anti-self,” which is to say, non-attachment is not reactionary. Rather, non-attachment reflects a capacity to be appreciative of the self, and engaged with the self, while recognizing the self’s transience. Moreover, according to the Zen tradition in particular, non-attachment is not practiced for the sake of some future state of liberation but is a liberatory practice in the present moment. When oppositionality is understood as a practice of non-attachment, it also can be viewed as liberatory and non-reactionary. In this context, the radical subjectivity of no-self becomes a rich resource for critical discourse: It supports a notion of personal empowerment qua radical subjectivity without falling back into essentialist thinking; and it provides a coherent framework in which to understand the relation hooks sees between critical resistance and aesthetic experience.
I. “Black Orpheus” and the Dialectic of Self-Overcoming

I frame my reading of bell hooks in the context of a brief but illustrative episode from history involving Jean-Paul Sartre and the poets of the Negritude movement, an anti-colonial movement of the 1930’s involving black intellectuals and artists in France, francophone Africa, and the African diaspora. In this episode, Sartre writes the essay “Black Orpheus” as a preface to the first published volume of Negritude poetry. This project presents him with a challenge, for on the one hand, Sartre the philosopher is committed to debunking essentialist accounts of identity. On the other hand, Sartre the political activist is committed to the anti-colonialist agenda of the Negritude movement. Problematically, for Sartre the philosopher, the poets of his book are self-consciously preoccupied with the search for their essential black identity—their négritude.

Trying to navigate this issue, Sartre spends a portion of his essay explaining that “it is necessary through a poetic expression that the black man in his present situation must first take conscience of himself. . . .”⁴ In taking conscience of himself, Sartre admits that the black man may find it appropriate to speak of his racial identity in terms such as “the black soul.”⁵ But, as Sartre eventually concludes, one must at some point come to reject any belief in the “inner homogeneity” of négritude.⁶ He explains why this notion of black identity will one day be outdated:

In fact, Negritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and the blacks who

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⁴ Sartre (1976), 11.
⁵ Sartre (1976), 17.
⁶ Sartre (1976), 57.
employ it well know it; they know that it serves to prepare the way for the synthesis, or the realization of a human society without racism. Thus Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is passage and not objective, means and not the ultimate goal. At the moment the black Orpheus most directly embraces this Eurydice, he feels her vanish from between his arms.\(^7\)

In this passage, Sartre relies on a dialectical model to explain one’s progress toward the eventual overcoming of an essentialist account of identity. At an early stage of the dialectic, when one’s identity is damaged due to a history of oppression, one needs to build up a functional sense of self-worth, which may involve empowering talk of one’s “soul.” But this sense of self, no matter how empowering one may find it in the short term, must eventually be discarded. The ultimate goal lies in overcoming essentialist identities in the name of existential freedom.

On this dialectical model, the “black soul”—this fleeting Eurydice—is as illusory as the “white soul,” but the black man simply has yet to fully embrace this existential situation. Despite the attempt at a philosophically nuanced account of black identity, Sartre nonetheless implies that the Negritude movement is a reactionary position which must eventually be overcome, and that black identity is an illusion which must eventually be discarded when the black man reaches the existential crisis, and achieves the existential freedom, of the modern European male.

Versions of a dialectical model influence projects of identity politics to this day. Some may claim, for example, that the goal of feminism is to make feminism unnecessary. That is, after women have achieved a measure of political and legal equality, which situates them on a par with men, then their identity as a separate group with separate socio-political concerns becomes redundant. Feminists can stop being feminists

\(^7\) Sartre (1976), 60.
and become simply humanists. This raises a question about the goals of any people involved in identity politics: Are they working to make their own cause obsolete? That is, after working to expose and overcome the oppression that afflicts their particular group, will activists be out of jobs if and when their work becomes successful? As above, one may be tempted to answer this question affirmatively—after all, no one wishes to promote oppression simply for the sake of continuing the work of political activists. As Sartre says, the Negritude movement must be overcome to pave the way for a society without racism. And who doesn’t want that?

However, the idea that identity politics should one day be unnecessary reveals a kind of utopianism, which equates progress toward the utopian ideal with the progressive erasure of all conflict. But where does one draw the line between conflict and difference? When all disenabling self-concepts are overcome, including the once-empowering concepts of black identity or female solidarity, then there will be no conflicts between cultural, sexual, or racial groups but also no significant differences between their various group identities. From this perspective, it is difficult to say whether a society without racism is not simply a society without race.

One may rightfully have suspicions about the seeming erasure of difference that this utopianism implies. But a negative answer to the question about obsoleteness and identity politics threatens to take us from the extreme of utopianism to an extreme of defeatism. If conflict and difference are permanent features of human society, and if every generation reenacts the same story of oppressor and oppressed, then any progress against oppression is only temporary. If the conclusive overcoming of all oppression is impossible, then why work to change anything at all? At both extremes, the question of
personal empowerment remains caught in the dialectical bind. At the one extreme, insisting on personal empowerment is dismissed as a naïve belief in one’s essentialized identity; at the other, personal empowerment can at best be articulated as an attempt to “make do” under present circumstances while remaining resigned to the idea that no lasting victory against oppression is possible.
II. Radical Subjectivity: Beyond the Dialectic of Self-Overcoming

In her work on radical subjectivity and elsewhere, bell hooks is searching for a way out of this dialectic. She recognizes that essentialist accounts of identity can themselves be oppressive, and that anti-essentialist philosophical projects have the potential to be liberating. She wants, on the one hand, to affirm black identity without affirming the essentialist baggage that often accompanies identity claims. On the other hand, she wants to explore the liberatory potential of anti-essentialist projects without deflating an individual’s sense of personal empowerment and self-worth. As she says, identity critiques “should not be made synonymous with the dismissal of the struggle of oppressed and exploited peoples to make ourselves subjects.”

With regards to Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” hooks’s words help to articulate the objections against his dialectic. He conflates two senses of overcoming: 1) overcoming racism, and 2) overcoming the racial identity that is the target of racism. As hooks helps to make clear, struggles against socio-political oppression and struggles against essentialist accounts of identity can have contradictory aims.

Pointing the way out of this dilemma, hooks offers the term “radical black subjectivity.” She says: “Part of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory.” This insistence on being both oppositional and liberatory makes her picture of radical subjectivity quite complex. To be in opposition to something suggests a reactionary stance: What is oppositionality if not a reaction against that which one opposes? To be

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8 hooks (1990), 28–29.
9 hooks (1990), 29.
liberatory suggests constructive and creative potential. That is, “liberation” on its own means little if one does not have a plan for what one will do with one’s liberty. Thus, oppositionality is usually associated with a negative stance of critique, whereas liberatory aims reflect a positive vision for the empowered living that will follow the successful struggle against oppression.

On this balance between critique and creativity, hooks asks: “How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle that also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive, self-actualization?”10 To answer this question, one must challenge the usual association between being oppositional and being reactionary. As long as empowerment is equated with a two-part process—the negative stance of critique followed by the positive vision for liberated living—then whatever is constructive or creative about liberation will always be deferred to some future date. In the present moment, one is left being reactionary and negative, with all that is positive about one’s supposed empowerment lying over the horizon. The solution to being both oppositional and liberatory hinges on finding what is liberatory in the here and now, which means viewing oppositionality as a liberating practice in and of itself.

To claim otherwise would be to imply that a person’s empowered capacity for resistance would no longer be necessary were the world to become just and peaceful. It would be to claim that the liberatory power of radical subjectivity is contingent upon the presence of oppressors from whom it seeks liberation. I argue, to the contrary, that radical subjectivity must not be interpreted as being dependent upon the continued existence of

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10 hooks (1990), 15.
oppression in the world; rather, it is a productive, creative, non-reactionary oppositionality, which is liberatory in the present moment, that can properly be called “radical.”

In short, radical subjectivity is defined as the identification of liberation with what is called non-reactionary oppositionality. This oppositionality will not be “radical” in the negative sense that it pits itself against one or another form of societal oppression. It will be radical in a positive sense, because its capacity for dramatic and creative transformation is relevant in the present moment and remains relevant even in contexts of societal harmony.

To cash out the implications of this definition, the next section takes a more detailed look at what hooks means by radical subjectivity. Although she often invokes the term, she rarely explains it, beyond a description of the sense of empowerment it is supposed to confer. However, three main features of radical subjectivity can be gleaned from hooks’s descriptions of it: (1) the multiplicity of identity; (2) the changeability of identity; and (3) the aesthetic dimension that accompanies this changeability and multiplicity. In addressing these three features, the philosophy of emptiness provides a conceptual framework in which to understand the empowering potential of radical subjectivity in terms of the doctrines of no-self and non-attachment; providing in the end a fuller and more coherent account of hooks’s basic ideas.

III. **Three Features of Radical Subjectivity**

hooks objects that many formulations of individual identity only uphold injurious power structures in society and block the creative expression of personhood: “Narrowly focused black identity politics do a disservice to black liberation struggle because they seek to render invisible the complex and multiple subjectivity of black folks.”

She criticizes modernist accounts of atomistic individuality and instead stresses the creative potential of inner-subjective diversity. In several essays, she explores the possibility that one person may have many selves and may speak in many voices, as when she (as Gloria Watson) interviews herself (as bell hooks).

Hence, *multiplicity* is one key component in her idea of radical subjectivity.

A second identifiable component is the *changeability* of identity, which hooks links to political empowerment:

Whether the issue is the construction of self and identity or radical politicization, African-American subjectivity is always in process. Fluidity means that our black identities are constantly changing as we respond to circumstances in our families and communities of origin, and as we interact with a larger world. Only by privileging the reality of that changing black identity will we be able to engage a prophetic discourse about subjectivity that will be liberatory and transformative.

Both multiplicity and changeability stress the potential for the creative reformulation of one’s sense of self. This creativity can be called radical because it allows for the possibility of complexity and changes so extreme that one might plausibly say, “I am no longer the same person,” or “I am of two minds.” Furthermore, importantly, this

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13 See, for example, hooks (1990), 215–230.
changeability is relationally constituted. In hooks’s vision, the construction of identity is always, at the same time, a matter of responsiveness to others.

The third key component of radical subjectivity lies in an often under-appreciated aspect of hooks’s political and cultural discourse, which is her emphasis on aesthetics. She writes:

I remain passionately committed to an aesthetic that focuses on the purpose and function of beauty, of artistry in everyday life, especially the lives of poor people, one that seeks to explore and celebrate the connection between our capacity to engage in critical resistance and our ability to experience pleasure and beauty. I want to create work that shares with an audience, particularly oppressed and marginalized groups, the sense of agency artistry offers, the empowerment.\(^\text{15}\)

Thus the empowering potential of \textit{artistry in everyday life} is a third component in hooks’s vision for radical subjectivity.

This aesthetic dimension helps to refine the radicalness of the creative changes that make possible statements such as “I am no longer the same person” or “I am of two minds.” One does not become a new person through a brute leap in consciousness, or through extreme detachment, in which the old self is unemotionally discarded. And one does not experience subjective multiplicity as the chaotic fracturing of identity. Rather, moments of personal rebirth or subjective complexity have an emotional resonance that can be described in aesthetic terms: such moments may be beautiful, moving, or even tragic. The capacity to appreciate the aesthetic dimension of one’s own identity, even when this involves emotional pain, is a mark of radical subjectivity. Thus the connection between one’s capacity to appreciate pleasure and beauty and one’s capacity for critical

\(^\text{15}\) hooks (1990), 111.
resistance lies in the empowering potential of having such an aesthetic perspective on one’s emotions as they relate to the creative crafting and re-crafting of identity.

Based on this empowering potential, hooks invokes the possibility for an aesthetic that can harness the creativity of subjectivity in ways that oppose social determinism and transform community life. She describes this creative potential while recounting her reflections on an essay in Japanese aesthetics, which she discusses with her sibling:

> After reading Tanizaki’s essay on aesthetics “In Praise of Shadows,” I tell this sister in a late night conversation that I am learning to think about blackness in a new way. . . . My sister has skin darker than mine. We think about our skin as a dark room, a place of shadows. We talk often about color politics and the ways racism has created an aesthetic that wounds us, a way of thinking about beauty that hurts. In the shadows of late night, we talk about the need to see darkness differently, to talk about it in a new way. In that space of shadows, we long for an aesthetic of blackness—strange and oppositional.16

As indicated earlier, radical black subjectivity is not “strange and oppositional” through being simply reactionary. The above turn to aesthetics now indicates that the driving force behind the capacity for non-reactionary oppositionality is artistic in nature. The drama and creativity of radical subjectivity are terms of this liberatory aesthetic. Here, hooks’s suggestion of “strange” oppositionality challenges normal associations with this word: What might it mean to be oppositional, not as a reaction against what one opposes, but as an end in itself? Can one appreciate oppositionality for its own sake? Taking a cue from hooks’s emphasis on artistic practice, one can look to the Japanese aesthetics tradition, which highlights the emotional complexity contained within the Buddhist idea of non-attachment, to address these questions.

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16 hooks (1990), 113
IV. Non-Reactionary Oppositionality as Non-Attachment

The doctrine of no-self has an immediate affinity with two of the above components of radical subjectivity: multiplicity and changeability. As stated throughout the dissertation, the Buddhist themes of emptiness and impermanence point to the perpetual transitoriness of individual existence. Thus the subject is necessarily changeable. Moreover, given that the self is a series of changing states, none of which correspond to any “true” self, the various states do not represent different versions of one and the same self, but different selves. Thus the subject is necessarily a multiplicity. This multiplicity was addressed in the first chapter through the notion of self-alterity and in the second chapter through Graham Parkes’s work on improvisational identity.

The second chapter also made links between autonomy and the aestheticization of experience. As discussed there, the aesthetic appreciation of impermanence calls for an attitude of non-attachment, which enables one to savor beauty while it lasts and let go of it when it passes. However, to be non-attached to beauty is not simply to be “anti-beauty,” just as non-attachment to the self is not simply “anti-self.” Non-attachment is not a reactionary stance. Rather, to be non-attached is to be open to, and to care deeply for, life in the present moment, while recognizing the futility of ever preserving, as if in stone, that for which one cares.

Dōgen’s anti-transcendent philosophy sheds light on this sense of non-attachment. Hee Jin Kim describes Dōgen’s philosophy as transformative and empowering:

As he probed the ethos of impermanence, thoroughly indigenized by the native Japanese mind, Dōgen did not indulge in aesthetic dilettantism and sentimentalism as a way to escape from the fleeting fates of life but, instead, examined the nature of impermanence and its ultimate companion,
death, unflinchingly, attempting to realize liberation in and through this inexorable scheme of things. In his view, things, events, relations were not the given (entities), but were possibilities, projects, and tasks that could be lived out, expressed, and understood as self-expressions and self-activities of Buddha-nature. This did not imply a complacent acceptance of the given situation, but required our strenuous efforts to transform and transfigure it.  

The transformative potential of Dōgen’s philosophy lies in his explicitly anti-transcendent view of the role of nirvāṇa as a so-called achievement in Buddhist practice. On his view, striving against or seeking escape from the continual birth-and-death of the self is counterproductive. By complicating the notion that the self is, in any simple way, to be overcome, Dōgen’s philosophy allows us to reject an interpretation of no-self as ego-transcendence. He advises: “You should know that there are innumerable ways-of-being within yourself; among them, there is birth, and there is death.” In this passage, Dōgen’s words cannily address notions of the multiplicity and changeability of identity. Based on his ideas, it is possible to envision a person living with her constantly shifting identity in ways that harness creativity while not denying the reality of self-loss—that is, she can practice non-attachment and be emotionally engaged at the same time.

When the notion of nirvāṇa as ego-transcendence or as liberation from worldly concerns is rejected, the practice of non-attachment can be interpreted neither as the attainment of a pure state free of all attachments, nor as a stance of knee-jerk reaction against that to which one is attached. Such a reactionary position attempts simply to shut out the immediacy of lived experience, and this impulse to retreat from life runs counter to both the teachings of Japanese aesthetics and the transformative philosophy of Dōgen. As these traditions show, non-attachment is a liberatory practice in and of itself.

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Thus, in the language of non-reactionary oppositionality, one might say that non-attachment promotes appreciation of the creative potential of oppositionality for its own sake. As discussed earlier, the solution to the problematic relation between critique and creativity, or opposition and liberation, involves conceiving of oppositionality itself as liberatory, not as a negative stance of critique that one day leads to liberation. By analogy, Dōgen’s non-transcendent view of Buddhist practice rejects the notion that one practices non-attachment for sake of attaining a future state of liberation; rather he emphasizes the liberatory value of non-attachment in the present moment.

Returning to the Sartre example, Dōgen’s anti-transcendent philosophy allows one to exit the terms of the dialectic altogether: Negritude need not be conceived as the negative stage on a dialectic of self-overcoming, nor need its struggle for liberation be equated to being dedicated to its own destruction. Rather, Negritude viewed through the lens of radical black subjectivity is a liberatory movement with value in the present moment. It may be dedicated to the destruction of those forms of oppression that make the expression of Negritude impossible, but its oppositionality is non-reactionary and thus not contingent upon the presence of oppressors.

Following hook’s intentions with the term radical black subjectivity, Negritude’s oppositional worldview must not become bound to one dominating narrative concerning the experience of black identity. One loses what is radical in radical subjectivity when one loses sight of the liberatory potential of the present moment, which always leaves open the possibility for dramatic change. Dōgen’s Buddhism shows that such liberatory oppositionality can be cultivated on the model of non-attachment as a practice and not an achievement. Unlike the Sartrean model, Dōgen’s anti-transcendent take on Buddhist
doctrine does not dismiss the quest for personal empowerment as a naïve attachment to an essentialist identity-construct. Rather it can be used to articulate the idea that the quest is a never-ending process and that empowerment is a sense of self-efficacy that must be continually renewed in response to changing circumstances.
V. Non-Attachment and Empowerment: The Radical Subjectivity of No-Self

When a person becomes overly attached to a given narrative of herself, her commitment to preserving its coherence actually undermines her capacity for critical resistance by preventing her from acting outside of the narrative’s boundaries. Self-attachment prevents her from questioning her assumptions about who she “really” is. This is why hooks not only objects to the modernist tendencies in some black identity politics but also sees empowering potential in the postmodern identity critiques aimed at challenging accepted narratives:

The nationalist insistence that black identity must be ‘saved’ by our refusal to embrace various epistemologies (ways of knowing), cultures, etc., is not a movement away from Eurocentric binary structure. It reinscribes the dynamics of binary thinking. The contemporary crisis of identity is best resolved by our collective willingness as African Americans to acknowledge that there is no monolithic black community, no normative black identity.\(^{19}\)

In resisting a monolithic notion of identity, the doctrine of no-self opens up the possibility of radically altering one’s self-conception through the practice of non-attachment. By enabling critical distance from the self as a relational construct, non-attachment denies the “binary thinking” associated with reactionary opposition, or with the simple pitting of one identity claim against another. Instead, non-attachment recognizes the web of interdependency in which all selves are constituted, while accepting the impermanence of these constantly shifting relations. Without the practice of non-attachment, communities risk becoming webs of unhealthy co-dependency, in which anxious and needy selves cling to their mutually disenabling identity-constructs.

\(^{19}\) hooks (1995), 247.
Sustaining the health of community life is one positive function of oppositionality, which, understood as a form of non-attachment, remains focused on the creative potential of the present moment.

Casting this creativity in artistic terms helps to unite hooks’s vision for liberatory aesthetics with the resources of the Japanese tradition. The aesthetic engagement with impermanence illustrates that non-attachment to the self unavoidably involves an awareness of self-loss and hence cannot be carried out in an emotionally naïve way. Because a person is relationally constituted, her resistance to the political, cultural, and interpersonal relations that shape her identity is, at the same time, a resistance to that very identity. A sense of mournfulness in the face of self-loss necessarily accompanies all instances of critical resistance. This mournfulness must become an ongoing process if the self is to seize the creative potential contained within the ever-changing reality of everyday life. In a similar vein, hooks’s liberatory aesthetic allows a person to question and resist her community’s practices and standards, while remaining appreciative of her deep connection to that community and her emotional involvement with the very practices that she questions. Her sense of oppositionality does not seek to sever the ties that bind communities together but instead prioritizes the health of these relational bonds by always leaving open the space for their creative reformulation.

As this chapter has shown, the interpretation of no-self relying on both Buddhist doctrine and Japanese aesthetic theory enters into a productive conversation with hooks’s cultural criticism. Instead of a merely theoretical identity critique, the doctrine of no-self offers a conceptual framework in which to situate and work through the emotional dimension of engaging in such critique. By connecting the capacity for critical resistance
with emotional development, it denies a strict divide between the political, the personal, and the interpersonal. In the final analysis, the radical subjectivity of no-self comes to resemble hooks’ vision for artistry in everyday life, which will be mournful as much as it is creative, relational as much as it is “strange and oppositional,” and empowering to the extent that it can tolerate the emotional complexity associated with self-loss.
CONCLUSION

EMPTINESS AND ANTI-UTOPIANISM

The faith that moves mountains and conceives of a world without slaves immediately transports itself to utopia, separating the reign of God from the reign of Caesar. This reassures Caesar.
—Emanuel Levinas

Ethical issues relevant to postmodern and poststructuralist critiques leave open a range of political questions. For example, how can an ethics premised on absolute alterity and the “face to face” relation be made relevant in the public realm? How can the critique of the subject preserve the sense of agency necessary for personal empowerment? This dissertation has demonstrated that the Buddhist doctrine of no-self can provide answers to these questions. Starting with the issue of ethical alterity, the first chapter showed that a philosophy of emptiness is amenable to the language of otherness, allowing for an understanding of the self as becoming-other. This understanding preserved the emphasis on non-reciprocity central to alterity ethics by showing that, although the self may experience itself as an other, it cannot experience an other as itself. Important ethical limits remain in place, then, regarding the inviolability of the other person.

The second chapter turned attention away from the ethical limits on what one person can demand of another and focused instead on what a person may demand of herself. Beginning with the portrayal of the self as becoming-other, this chapter explored how, in this process of becoming, a person can achieve autonomy. As was shown, autonomy is possible to the extent that a person can mourn her own transience, in a

1 Lévinas (1990), 101.
process of grief specific to the self’s relation with itself. This capacity for mourning was said to be developed through an aesthetic sensitivity to the relation between beauty and impermanence, as found in the Japanese tradition.

The third chapter built upon these ethically oriented characterizations of subjectivity—the processes of becoming-other and self-loss—to draw politically relevant conclusions. As discussed, the systemic nature of oppression points to the possibility for system-wide change. Governmental institutions that address themselves to the daily realities of living selves must be flexible and creative, capable of working on a case by case basis and devoting individual attention to individual situations without over-reliance on past precedents. Such governmental bodies do not follow a contract model, where citizens exchange freedoms for protections and where neither party owes the other anything beyond the contracted exchange. Instead, institutions are proactively ameliorative. In recognition of the burdensome responsibilities that persons bear, responsibilities that defy the ideal of fairness, institutions exist to share in this burden. As the third chapter discussed, such a picture of institutional structure makes sense within a philosophy of emptiness and its non-agent-centered approach to interpersonal relations.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, the radical subjectivity of no-self was presented as an empowered sense of political subjectivity possible within the context of a philosophy of emptiness. As discussed, an oppositional political stance may be appreciated as an end in itself, not as a means to an end, an appreciation which disrupts the conventional understanding of oppositionality as reactionary. This ability to value oppositionality for its own sake was linked to an aesthetic sensibility reflecting both the Japanese tradition and bell hooks’s own account of the relation between art and empowerment.
By way of wrapping up this discussion of the politics of emptiness, this conclusion addresses, in a preliminary way, some of the broader implications of the ideas presented so far by linking them to the anti-utopianism that Oona Eisenstadt identifies in Lévinas’s work. The sense of political subjectivity described in this dissertation accords well with the general political outlook captured by the term “anti-utopianism.” However, Lévinas’s own applications of this political outlook have been problematic. The following discussion will explore anti-utopianism as a valuable framework for political thinking through a critique of Lévinas’s writings on the matter and through a revision of the concept grounded in a philosophy of emptiness.

Eisenstadt begins with the widespread impression, discussed in the third chapter, that Lévinas’s philosophy is descriptive and not prescriptive. If there is one prescriptive moment for Lévinas, it is the exhortation, as Eisenstadt puts it, “Remember the description.” In other words, remember the face to face relation, remember the absoluteness of alterity, and be suspicious therefore of all political systematizing. This persistent wariness of political ideals, especially of the attempt to institutionalize political ideals, is what Eisenstadt calls Lévinas’s anti-utopianism. She writes:

It is not stretching the point too much to say that Levinas’s thought is a thought without hope. It arises from the understanding that everything we do is directed, in one way or another, to making other people happy and the world a better place, and that these efforts, after a potential limited success, always fail. The rejection of hope is manifest on a large scale in Levinas’s argument against the idea of a Meaning of History, his refusal of the consolations of a providence or a progress guiding the world toward salvation or perfection.²

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² Eisenstadt (2008), 123.
³ Eisenstadt (2008), 124.
As Eisenstadt points out, this hopelessness can lead to one of two problematic outcomes: defeatism, on the one hand, and false optimism, on the other.

Regarding the first, Eisenstadt worries that anti-utopianism drains people of their enthusiasm for political activism by showing that the drama of oppressor and oppressed will be reenacted from generation to generation, regardless of efforts to break the cycle. Regarding the second problematic outcome, Eisenstadt points out that the critical function of Lévinasian ethics within Lévinasian politics can easily be read as a quite liberal outlook already at least partly achieved in contemporary societies. The U.S. government, for example, is built upon a system of checks and balances already meant to guard against the dominance of one totalizing vision. The legal system is already designed to have a measure of flexibility, to be able to consider things on a case by case basis, and to give judges freedom in interpreting and applying legislation. Thus, in such a society that values open debate and open-ended policy-making, utopianism is already understood to be naïve.

Eisenstadt claims, however, that this sense of success in liberal society can be as damaging to political activism as a sense of defeatism. When one believes that the infrastructure is already in place—the arrangement of checks and balances, the voting practices, the list of guaranteed rights—that will prevent the rise of oppressive regimes, one is less inclined to entertain the need for system-wide change. Lévinas seems to consider a similar dilemma when he attempts to reconcile his anti-utopian political outlook with the Jewish doctrine of messianism. Conventionally, Jewish theology holds that the coming of the messiah will initiate an age of peace and fulfill the holy covenant between God and humans. As might be expected, Lévinas rejects this teleological and
utopian understanding, insisting instead that the meaning of Judaism lies not in divine salvation but in worldly responsibilities.

In “Messianic Texts,” he considers competing Talmudic interpretations of the meaning of the messianic age. The Talmudic scholar Samuel holds that the only difference between the present world and the future messianic age will be freedom from foreign (non-Jewish) regimes, but Jewish people will still have to deal with the realities of socio-economic life. Samuel cites for evidence Deuteronomy 15:11: “For the poor shall never cease out of the land.” However, as Lévinas points out, Samuel could not have been unaware that a nearby passage, Deuteronomy 15:4, holds that after the coming of the messiah “there will be no poor among you.” Lévinas thus interprets Samuel to mean by “the poor” the Other, who is always impoverished, always in need of assistance, always making an ethical demand. He concludes that the messianic age, according to Samuel, means freedom for the Jews from foreign powers but not freedom from the ethical demands of alterity.

He illustrates this point by contrasting Samuel with another scholar Johanan:

Contrary to Samuel, who does not therefore separate the messianic era from the difficulties encountered by morality and its attempts to surpass them, Rabbi Johanan envisages a pure and gracious spiritual life that is in some way stripped of the heavy load of things which is made concrete by economics. In his vision one can have direct relationships with the Other, who no longer appears as poor but as a friend; there are no more professions, only arts; and the economic repercussions of actions no longer have any bearing. Rabbi Johanan in some way believes in the ideal of a disincarnated spirit, of total grace and harmony, an ideal exempt from any drama; while Samuel, on the other hand, feels the permanent effort of renewal demanded by this spiritual life. 

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4 Qtd. in Lévinas (1990), 61.
5 Qtd. in Lévinas (1990), 62.
6 Lévinas (1990), 62–63.
In this passage, one sees the anti-utopian strain of messianism that Lévinas seems to accept. The messianic age does not initiate the end of ethical burdens but facilitates the permanent effort of renewal necessary to bear them.

There are striking similarities between this anti-utopian messianism and the Buddhist bodhisattva, who steadfastly refuses nirvana while remaining committed to alleviating suffering in the present world. Both the bodhisattva and the Lévinasian messiah illustrate the impulse to take on responsibility for the suffering of others; both are amenable to a kind of political anti-utopianism, which declines to attenuate such responsibility by confusing commitment to the present with dreams for the future; and both deny the possibility of otherworldly salvation. Lévinas writes:

> If Judaism is attached to the here below, it is not because it does not have the imagination to conceive of a supernatural order, or because matter represents some sort of absolute for it; but because the first light of conscience is lit for it on the path that leads from man to his neighbor.7

Judaism, as Lévinas sees it, focuses on human-to-human relations at the expense of all relations with the divine. He describes his sense of messianism as reflecting a certain “stubbornness” of the Jewish people, in their persistent refusal to locate value in otherworldly or “supernatural” salvation. Judaism is, as he says, a “religion for adults.”8

However, Lévinas’s attempts to fully integrate the concepts of messianism and anti-utopianism are unsatisfying, especially, one imagines, for non-Jews. His allegiance to Israel, despite mounting evidence against the justice of its policies, leads him into questionable territory over the interpretation of what it means to be a culturally distinct group of people with a messianic sense of “chosenness.” Judith Butler writes:

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7 Lévinas (1990), 100.
8 Lévinas (1990), 11.
This attribution of persecution to what “Israel” suffers dovetails with his view of the preontological structure of the subject. If Jews are considered “elect” because they carry a message of universality, and what is “universal” in Levinas’s view is the inaugurative structuring of the subject through persecution and ethical demand, then the Jew becomes the model and instance for preontological persecution. The problem, of course, is that “the Jew” is a category that belongs to a culturally constituted ontology (unless it is the name for access to the infinite itself), and so if the Jew maintains an “elective” status in relation to ethical responsiveness, then Levinas fully confuses the preontological and the ontological. The Jew is not part of ontology or history, and yet this exemption becomes the way in which Levinas makes claims about the role of Israel, historically considered, as forever and exclusively persecuted.9

This dissertation has argued, contrary to many interpretations of Lévinas, for the possibility of bringing alterity into the political realm. However, as Butler shows, Lévinas’s own attempts to draw political implications out of his ethics are some of the worst examples of what politics might be under a principle of alterity. As she describes above, Lévinas portrays the historical Jewish people as exemplifying the position of responsiveness to the ethical demand of alterity.

Problematically, then, by default, the state of Israel becomes the political manifestation of alterity ethics. It is the state of those who “remember the description,” who preserve the trace of the face to face relation when they enter the public sphere. As Butler rightly worries, this conflation of a historical people with an originary, atemporal, foundational phenomenological experience buttresses Israel and its policies against criticism, for its policies are always in line with a deeper ethical sensibility.

Butler’s concerns seem justified when one considers Lévinas’s account of the value of Zionism in “Messianic Texts.” He points out that, traditionally, from the Middle Ages until prior to WWII, messianism in Europe was linked to the retreat of Jewish

9 Butler (2005), 94.
communities from society at large. In the face of constant persecution by the
governments of countries in which Jews lived, Jewish theology kept its focus on the
coming of the messianic age and put little faith in the vagaries of persistently unstable
European states. However, with the founding of the state of Israel, the Jews joined, as
Lévinas puts it, world history. The modern state of Israel thus represents “an attempt to
reunite the irreversible acceptance of universal history with the necessarily particularist
messianism.” He continues that this “universalist particularism” constitutes the value and
meaning of Zionism, the preservation of which serves to forgive Zionism its many flaws:
“The hypocrisy of those who consider themselves to be outside History while benefitting
from it is annulled by the dangers and risks that the Israeli solution entails.” He concludes
by expressing his admiration for all the Jews living in remote desert kibbutzim who are
“indifferent to the seething world whose human values they nonetheless serve. They
display their indifference in their daily lives, lives composed of work and risks.”\(^\text{10}\)

In alterity ethics, all agreements amongst people are provisional, and the life of a
community is contingent upon the continued participation of the people that compose it.
The thematization necessary to sustain a community is always fraught with risks, though
these risks must be taken if the community is to live. Lévinas throws all of his support
behind the agreements and thematizations that sustain the state of Israel and hold its
people together as a unity, and he valorizes the risk-taking this involves. This idea of
joining world history while forging one’s own way, of remaining committed to this way
despite its dangers and risks, and of accepting that a certain amount of mistakes in
following this way are to be tolerated, smacks of an almost Sartrean sense of existential

\(^\text{10}\) Lévinas (1990), 96.
freedom and the responsibility that goes along with it. In Lévinas’s hands this existential freedom takes the place of hope, creating a new sense of hopefulness not for the coming of an unrealistic utopia but for the continued success of a very real contemporary nation. His “universalist particularism” then takes a dangerous turn, allowing him to sacrifice hope in universal peace for the sake of achieving peace for Israel and perhaps only Israel, no matter the cost to other peoples and other nations.

This dissertation holds that anti-utopianism can be a powerful framework for political thinking with its own transformative political agenda, although Lévinas’s version of it goes awry. He foreswears hope in universal salvation but then commits himself fully and uncritically to the limited salvation offered to Jews by the formation of the Israeli state. Why, however, is Lévinas speaking of universals at all? Why must the valuing of particularity occur alongside the denial of universality? The core of the problem is that the suspicious attitude that Lévinas advises toward politics is apparently reserved for political ideals that aim at universality; political ideals that aim only for limited application are within the scope of the risks and dangers that all people accept as part of community life.

A philosophy of emptiness allows one to forego the universal altogether and focus simply on the particular. As a result, any suspiciousness of political ideals is rightly directed to issues in the here and now. Moreover, any hopelessness regarding political projects need not be reserved for ones with universal ambitions. Both suspiciousness and hopelessness, by expressing a sober awareness of the impermanence of all political projects, can be fruitfully understood as attitudes of non-attachment. Hopelessness is not then simply a feeling of despair regarding the future but a commitment to work within
present circumstances without reducing the present to a means to what one hopes for in future ends.

Throughout this dissertation, the balancing of compassion and non-attachment has been critical to articulating a sense of political subjectivity that is empowered and oppositional while also vulnerable and emotionally engaged. By seeking such a balance, the interpretation of anti-utopianism as a political outlook can move away from Lévinas’s uncritical adventure in existential freedom. As stated in the introduction, this dissertation focuses not on the achievement of liberation but on the practice of liberation, modeled on Dōgen’s notion of practice-enlightenment. In refusing to devote attention to liberation as a future, achievable state, the idea of practice-liberation is anti-utopian in outlook. But in refusing to become attached to any one manifestation of liberatory practice, the idea of practice-liberation also avoids the Lévinasian mistake of replacing suspicion of the universal with uncritical enthusiasm for the particular.

Lévinas’s anti-utopian take on the messiah may express hopelessness, but Dōgen’s anti-transcendent take on Buddhist practice is not merely without hope—it is not even of the order of hope. As a political outlook that accords with the radical subjectivity of no-self, an anti-utopianism that is mediated by the twin practices of compassion and non-attachment provides a unique model with which to approach the often competing demands for flexibility and commitment in political action. This model, better than Levinas’s universalistic particularism, allows one to sustain, as Levinas reads Samuel, “the permanent effort of renewal” which would be necessary even if the messianic age were to arrive.
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