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# A Critical Analysis of Neural Buddhism's Explanation of Moral Transformation

## **Abstract**

As non-theistic arguments for morality become increasingly sophisticated and complex, they are harder to criticize without first admiring their skillful design and near-artistry. One such argument involves a relatively new innovation that is the child of naturalism and eastern philosophy—Neural Buddhism. Like two world-renowned designers collaborating on a new garment, Naturalism and Buddhism have come together in this distinct program to offer something inventive, especially in its explanation of moral transformation. However, this critical analysis will ultimately reveal that Neural Buddhism's explanation of moral transformation is incapable of providing good answers to several compelling criticisms.

## **Keywords**

Buddhism, Morality, Moral Transformation, Apologetics, Critical Analysis, Neural Buddhism

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Jeffrey Dickson holds an MDiv from Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and is currently pursuing a PhD.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the warmly welcomed and perhaps largely unintended consequences of our present *sitz em leben* is the blurring of the distinct lines erected by Kant in the philosophical world and Newton in the scientific world between the noumenal and phenomenal.<sup>1</sup> The impermeable membrane between these two dimensions that has guided nearly every enlightenment and post enlightenment figure is being transgressed more and more as individuals in multiple disciplines begin to recognize that distinctions between the physical and the metaphysical are not nearly as strident or unrelated as once believed. However, the question becomes, which worldview is able to best account for a richly spiritual/physical world in which both realms supervene on each other in copious ways?

Any worldview prepared to delineate a robust view of the universe fits into one of two categories: theistic and non-theistic. As non-theistic arguments for phenomena such as morality (which is both a physical and spiritual consideration) become increasingly sophisticated and complex, they are harder to criticize without first admiring their skillful design and near-artistry. One such argument involves a relatively new innovation that is the child of naturalism and eastern philosophy—Neural Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> As will be concluded later, Neural Buddhism might be defined as a synergistic amalgamation of naturalism and an eastern non-theist spirituality on the grounds of reason and experience that affirms the following: the impermanence of all things, a deterministic cosmology, and moral realism. Like two world-renowned designers collaborating on a new garment, Naturalism and Buddhism have come together in this distinct program to offer something inventive, especially in its explanation of moral transformation that is both a physical as well as a spiritual phenomenon. Inasmuch as it deals with the spiritual and physical together, Neural Buddhism offers a non-theistic explanation for how morality works and how individuals achieve moral maturation. However, this critical analysis, after delineating Neural Buddhism and explaining its program of moral transformation, will ultimately reveal that this non-theistic worldview is incapable of providing good answers to several compelling criticisms—criticisms that do not so easily threaten theism.

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete analysis of the epistemological and philosophical disjunction witnessed in Kant and Newton and its effects on copious scholars see John Morrison, *Has God Said?: Scripture, the Word of God, and the Crisis of Theological Authority* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, “The Neural Buddhists,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2008, accessed November 10, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/opinion/13brooks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/opinion/13brooks.html?_r=0). In his discussion of this new program, Brooks concludes the following: “In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other. That’s bound to lead to new movements that emphasize self-transcendence but put little stock in divine law or revelation. Orthodox believers are going to have to defend particular doctrines and particular biblical teachings. They’re going to have to defend the idea of a personal God, and explain why specific theologies are true guides for behavior day to day. I’m not qualified to take sides, believe me. I’m just trying to anticipate which way the debate is headed. We’re in the middle of a scientific revolution. It’s going to have big cultural effects.”

## BUDDHISM AND SCIENCE CONVERGE

First, this argument must reach a robust delineation of exactly what is meant by Neural Buddhism. At its core, this hybrid worldview is an inimitable amalgamation of naturalism and spirituality that seeks to mix science with spiritual considerations of consciousness. In its attempt, Neural Buddhism strives for empirical consistency while avoiding dogmatic belief systems (religious or otherwise).<sup>3</sup> That Buddhism is able to be thusly construed is due to its underlining commitments. Many Buddhists affirm two such commitments that prove integral to the present discussion: reason and personal experience<sup>4</sup> (two convictions that immediately attract Buddhism to some proponents of naturalism).

Through reason and experience (contra revelation in a theistic worldview) Buddhism promotes several important principles that form an intricate framework known as the “four noble truths”: the truth of suffering, the source of suffering, the cessation of suffering together with its source, and the path leading to that cessation.<sup>5</sup> Again, proponents of this eastern philosophy want to root these conclusions in reason which, according to eastern philosophy, “...consists of practical intelligence (phronesis) to see things as they are, assess a situation for what it is, evaluate means-ends relations, and settle on an appropriate course of action in conformity with the doctrine of the means.”<sup>6</sup> This definition of reason betrays this worldview’s pragmatic concern. Just as a scientist observes a problem worth solving, the first task in the Buddhist program is to apprehend the nature and full range of suffering to which humans are vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> Careful observations of one’s experiences are able to provide the data necessary for this first step. Next, a hypothesis is posited for the source of the perceived suffering and various means of alleviating this suffering are tested (see the second and third noble truth). Finally, a program is introduced that is representative of the data collected and the results achieved in the first three steps, offering an integrated path of ethical discipline through which suffering ceases.

The findings that Buddhism has published as a result of this process suggest that everything in the world is impermanent in at least two ways: eventually everything passes away, and everything that exists it is in a state of constant change.<sup>8</sup> These realizations inevitably eradicate the concept of a permanent essence (i.e. that which corresponds to the form of something/someone or what is necessary for a thing/person’s existence), even in considerations of the “soul” which, according

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<sup>3</sup>Alan B. Wallace, *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>4</sup>Keith Yandell & Harold Netland, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 17.

<sup>5</sup>Wallace, *Contemplative Science*, 23. See also Nikkyo Niwano, *Shakyamuni Buddha: A Narrative Biography* (Tokyo: Kosei, 2001), 58ff.

<sup>6</sup>Owen Flanagan, *Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>7</sup>Wallace, *Contemplative Science*, 23.

<sup>8</sup>Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 36.

to this worldview, is “really no more than an ever-changing combination of psychophysical forces.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike a theistic worldview that roots existence in the essence of a changeless and all-powerful being, in Buddhism generally and Neural Buddhism in particular the only root is change and impermanence,<sup>10</sup> removing the potential for divine essence and human essence (the soul) along with it. That the soul is delimited to psychophysical forces is in keeping with the Buddhist belief that everything can be divided into the “five aggregates” of matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formation, and consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

As all items lack permanence, everything in the Buddhist system depends for its existence and properties on the existence and properties of something else.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Buddhism and its new “neural” manifestation endorses a relatively sophisticated cosmology that is comparable to evolutionary causation.<sup>13</sup> Though

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<sup>9</sup> Psychophysical sources are ultimately understood as pertaining to brain activity and the unique chemistry therein that produces psychological phenomena realized in what is popularly referred to as “the mind.” Mind is a more fluid term than soul in that the mind is ever-evolving (“plastic”) and impermanent while the soul is understood as an immortal essence (the unchanging form that is required for a person’s identity and existence). Yandell & Netland, *Buddhism*, 122. Calling a soul a construct and applying reductive analysis are two ways the Buddhist devalues the concept of a soul. There is also the concept of an item lacking its own being or its not having an essence. See also Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to Its History and Teachings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 46. “For the Buddha, it was the belief in self, the belief that among the various constituents of mind and body there is something that lasts longer than an instant that is the cause of all suffering.”

<sup>10</sup> For a more robust definition of impermanence see *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, William Edelglass & Jay L. Garfield Eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4. “Central to any Buddhist view of reality is the insight that all phenomena are impermanent, without essence (or selfless,) and interdependent...Impermanence is understood in a Buddhist framework in two sense, usually referred to as ‘gross’ and ‘subtle’ impermanence. The gross impermanence of phenomena consists simply in the fact that nothing has been here forever, and nothing lasts forever. All phenomena arise at some point, when the proper constellation of causes and conditions is present, age constantly during their existence, changing in various ways as they age, and eventually pass out of existence. At a more subtle level, on this view, all phenomena are merely momentary... Everything arises, exists, and ceases at each and every moment. On this view, the observable phenomena that we take to be enduring, including ourselves, are causal continua of momentary phenomena to which we conventionally ascribe as identity that is nowhere to be found in the things themselves.”

<sup>11</sup> Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 124. This is known as the doctrine of dependent co-arising or dependent origination (pratitya-samutpada). See also Samyutta-nikaya II, 64-65 in *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, Trans. and Ed. by Edward Conze, I. B. Horner, David Snellgrove, & Arthur Waley (Oxford: Oneworld, 1995), 66. In this text the Buddha described dependent origination as follows: “If this is that comes to be; from the arising of this that arises; if this is not that does not come to be; from the stopping of this that is stopped.”

<sup>13</sup> Niwano, *Shakyamuni Buddha*, 38ff. “Various sutras tell us that among the truths on which the Bodhisattva meditated was the teaching we know as the Law of the twelve causes, which makes clear that the law of cause and effect lies behind all phenomena and changes in the world. For example, billions of years ago the earth had no life; volcanos poured for torrents of lava, and vapor and gas filled the sky. However, when the earth cooled sufficiently and the energy of the lava, vapor and gas came into contact with the appropriate conditions, or cause, the effect was the birth of microscopic single-celled living creatures.”

evolutionary determinism has its own issues in explaining what is moral, exalting the flourishing of the species as the litmus test for behaviors and decisions, Buddhism wants to affirm a moral element in its promotion of karma: good actions yield positive consequences while bad actions yield negative consequences. In addition to the kinds of actions performed, the moral quality of actions (decided on the basis of intention) is also relevant.<sup>14</sup>

These specifically Buddhist findings comport well with scientific tradition and even help shade in some of the un-nuanced areas of naturalism.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the cognitive sciences have yet to develop adequate methodologies for the first-person study of the mind and, as a result, have largely delimited their investigations to studying behavior. Buddhism embodies a wealth of insight drawn from the first-person exploration of the mind by means of personal experiences and reason, thereby supplying cognitive scientists with helpful data. This is one reason why the scientific tradition is beginning to join the Buddhist tradition in its pursuit of understanding the nature, origins, and potential of the mind in a program that some are beginning to call “Neural Buddhism.” This practical collaboration along with several shared philosophical commitments render these two worldviews uniquely capable of working together to provide a more robust explanation of the world in general and moral transformation in particular. Moral transformation in this system is preoccupied with the alleviation of suffering (first conceptualized in the Buddhist tradition as witnessed in the “four noble truths” mentioned above and clearly witnessed in multitudinous ways through scientific observation).

Neural Buddhism's proposed solution to the problem of suffering involves an integrated path of ethical discipline that is achieved by means of a specific state of mind complete with its own set of appropriate mental attitudes.<sup>16</sup> Such attitudes/mental states, to be discussed later, have causal bearing on the manifestation of virtue in the life of the individual who practices these with regularity. This is what Alan Wallace means when he concludes:

...such well-being is a natural consequence of developing mental balance in ways that fortify the ‘psychological immune system,’ so that one rarely succumbs to a wide range of mental afflictions. A state of calm presence, emotional equilibrium, and clear intelligence are all characteristics of such

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<sup>14</sup> Yandell & Netland, *Buddhism*, 132. “In Buddhism, the karmic connections—positive consequences for good actions, negative consequences for bad actions—are not based on the hidden hand of a powerful moral agent who sees to it that the proper consequences for actions occur. That the proper consequences—the ones that fit the action—occur is simply a brute fact of nature. This adds complexity and sophistication naturalistic determinism.”

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, *Contemplative Science*, 15. As Wallace points out, neither Buddhism nor the scientific tradition on its own embodies “a rigorous, unbiased, multifaceted science of consciousness that includes the detailed, integrated study of the broadest range of mental phenomena and their neural correlates.”

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

genuine happiness, which naturally expresses itself in a harmonious, altruistic way of life.<sup>17</sup>

In light of all of these considerations, Neural Buddhism might be defined as a synergistic amalgamation of naturalism and an eastern non-theist spirituality on the grounds of reason and experience that affirms the following: the impermanence of all things, a deterministic cosmology, and moral realism.

## NEURAL BUDDHISM'S PROGRAM OF MORAL TRANSFORMATION

Though a much larger study is required to demonstrate how this emerging worldview explains moral value, moral obligations, and moral knowledge, this paper has decided to limit its scope to Neural Buddhism's argument for moral transformation. Though this may not seem like an appropriate place to begin, as will soon be demonstrated, Neural Buddhism's pragmatism and fascination with reaching an enlightened state over and above more ontological considerations render the transformative facet of morality especially significant in this program.

One reason why considerations of virtue/transformation supersede considerations of the good and the right in Neural Buddhism involves its commitment to a postmodern view of morality. This commitment is witnessed in its adoption of "an intentionally general notion of human flourishing that leaves it up to the individual reader to determine what virtues are 'the best and most complete.'"<sup>18</sup> Others who delineate the post-transformation state achieved by means of a virtuous life admit to using terms like *eudaimonia* in an effort to maintain the polysemous character of the concept of flourishing, fulfillment, and meaning.<sup>19</sup> These proclivities ultimately yield a relatively flexible understanding of exactly what a virtuous life looks like following moral transformation.

Though Neural Buddhism appears to have vaguely defined goals, a definition of the desired outcome of a virtuous life is offered by Owen Flanagan:

I have offered an analysis of *eudaimonia* Buddha. *Eudaimonia*— flourishing, or happy flourishing, or happiness and flourishing, or more likely flourishing that often or usually leads to some sort of happiness of a serene sort— involves reaching a state, better: achieving a way of being, feeling, and acting constituted by wisdom (prajna) and virtue (sila, virtue, or karuna, virtue of the sort where compassion is the highest or master virtue) and mindfulness.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Owen Flanagan, *Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 66ff. Though *eudaimonia* is more Aristotelian and Western than it is Buddhist, Flanagan uses this term in an effort to describe the "happy" result of a virtuous life according to the Neural Buddhist program.

That all possess the potential for reaching this state by means of transformation is central to the Buddhist tradition.<sup>21</sup> However, there exists an incredible tension in all of humankind as most do not realize their potential because of their attachment to “desires and illusions” (considerations involving ego and essence respectively).<sup>22</sup> Therefore, much of the moral transformation that takes place in Neural Buddhism involves the relieving of this tension in a way that brings about “*eudaimonia* Buddha.”

The ever-present tension within humanity is something well documented by naturalists and Buddhists alike. Anthropologists and other secular scientists affirm mankind's ability to desire what is beyond their present reality by means of imagination and the cognitive enterprise.<sup>23</sup> This is what is meant by some when they suggest that humans are exocentric. However, while this exocentric tendency might be rooted in the biological processes of the brain itself,<sup>24</sup> self-centeredness keeps mankind's desire for virtue from being realized as it preoccupies the mind with the present self (i.e. when exocentricity meets egocentricity). According to Neural Buddhism, mankind's quest for satisfying this tension is understood as the catalyst behind all sorts of suffering within the individual and in the world.

What does Neural Buddhism offer by way of transporting people from a place of tension/suffering to a place of their version of virtue? The answer involves emptiness “as a necessary condition for liberation from mental defilements.”<sup>25</sup> Neural Buddhism postulates that to the degree the mind is uncontrolled, it is susceptible to anger, frustration, craving, envy, and other mental afflictions contributing to tension and subsequent suffering.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, an *arhat* (man/woman of worth), is an enlightened person who after realizing his/her attachment to desires and illusions, empties his/herself of all the cravings<sup>27</sup> that lead inexorably to a troubled mind, thereby achieving a virtue—i.e. “*eudaimonia* Buddha.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Niwano, *Shakyamuni Buddha*, 39-40. “Wonderful, Wonderful, all living beings possess the wisdom and the virtuous sign of the Tathagata (the highest epithet of a Buddha).”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch 6th Ed.* (Bonn: Athenaum-Verlag, 1958), 144.

<sup>24</sup> James B. Ashbrook, “The Human Brain and Human Destiny: A Pattern for Old Brain Empathy with the Emergence of Mind,” *Zygon* 24 No. 3 (Spring 1989), 335.

<sup>25</sup> William Edelglass, “The Bodhisattva Path: Santideva's *Bodhicaryavatara*,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, Eds. William Edelglass & Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 391. This view of emptiness stems from the understanding “that phenomena are dependently originated and thus lack essences and ultimate, substantial existence beyond the conventional meanings ascribed to them.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>27</sup> Niwano, *Shakyamuni Buddha*, 39-40, & 59-60.

<sup>28</sup> See discussion on the result of perfect consciousness in Noa Ronkin, “Thervada Metaphysics and Ontology: Kaccanagotta (Samutta-nikaya) and *Abhidhammatthasangaha*,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, Eds. William Edelglasas & Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13-26.



This emptiness is achieved through a combination of meditation and mindfulness. First, moral transformation requires that the individual implement specific meditations utilized to neutralize particular mental defilements. These include but are not limited to meditations on loving-kindness to overcome hatred and meditations on the foulness of the body to counteract perverted sexual desire, etc.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Neural Buddhism believes, in part, that transformation involves emptying the mind of natural desires for things by intently focusing on certain moral qualities like compassion and purity by means of something similar to intense cognitive therapy—the kind first proposed by Albert Ellis.<sup>30</sup>

This revolutionary psychotherapist is many ways responsible for the current cognitive revolution taking hold in the psychological/psychiatric community. His innovative contribution involved,

the development of the A-B-C method of cognitive and behavioral analysis change. Following the Greek philosopher Epictitus [sic], who said, “Men are not disturbed by things but by the view they take on things,” Ellis argued that the belief (B) about the activating event (A) leads to the consequence (C), rather than by a direct A-C connection. Therefore, one could change C by changing B, even if A did not change.<sup>31</sup>

This kind of therapy can be easily applied (and is compared) to the Buddhist practice of meditation. For the Neural Buddhist, the belief (B) in need of change involves the affirmation of a permanent substantial self, which, in keeping with the commitment to impermanence, is a falsity that leads to selfishness, egoism, and subsequent suffering.<sup>32</sup> In light what is observed (A), belief in (B) must change by means of meditation on the impermanence of the self and the alleviation of desires in an effort to yield consequence (C)—transformation (i.e. enlightenment, nirvana, “*eudaimonia* Buddha,” virtue, etc.).

Meditation understood in this way is an integral part of the more general practice of mindfulness that is central to the Neural Buddhist program of moral transformation. In current research contexts, “mindfulness is typically defined as nonjudgmental attention to experiences in the present moment.”<sup>33</sup> This practice is often employed by focusing attention on the experience of thoughts, emotions, and body sensations as they arise and pass away. Mindfulness can be subdivided into several components as follows:

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<sup>29</sup> Edelglass, “The Bodhisattva Path,” 391.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Ellis, *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1962). See also W. Dryden & Albert Ellis, “Rational-Emotive Therapy” in *Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches to Psychotherapy*, Eds. W. Dryden & W. Golden (London, Harper and Row, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> E. Thomas Dowd, “Cognition and the Cognitive Revolution in Psychotherapy: Promises and Advances,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 60 No. 4 (April 2004), 420.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 37. See also Yandell & Netland, *Buddhism*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Britta K. Holzel, Sara W. Lazar, Tim Gard, Zev Schuman-Olivier, David R. Vago, & Ulrich Ott, “How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work? Proposing Mechanisms of Action from a Conceptual and Neural Perspective,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6 No. 6 (2011), 538.

1. Attention regulation
2. Body awareness
3. Emotion regulation, including
  - a. Reappraisal
  - b. Exposure, extinction, and reconsolidation
4. Change in perspective on the self<sup>34</sup>

Because of its commitment to reasonable observation of experiences, its fascination with the present state, and its goal of changing one's perspective on the self, mindfulness employed by neuroscientists and psychologists is in keeping with the Buddhist commitment to reason and experience, understanding of impermanence, and meditation which seeks to rid the self of desires in order to achieve transformation.

Inasmuch as Neural Buddhism understands immorality as pertaining to the suffering that pervades the world and identifies selfish desires in an essence and an ego as its cause, moral transformation according to this worldview is achieved when these selfish desires are removed by means of meditation and mindfulness, both of which seek to replace ideas like essence and self with impermanence and the non-self. That Buddhism and science work together in the promotion of this program is witnessed in recent articles that summarize the growing connections between eastern philosophy and modern western psychology and neuroscience. In many cases, these appear to be written at the same time by a cognitive behavioral therapist and a Buddhist monk.<sup>35</sup> In fact, collaboration between Buddhist monks and neuroscientists has been recently lauded in many publications.<sup>36</sup>

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This kind of collaboration should be commended and much can be learned from how the Buddhist spiritual worldview has fearlessly investigated the sciences for areas of common ground. However, it should be noted, especially given the tension that often surfaces between religion and science in contemporary western

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 538ff. For a brief delineation of each of these components see pages 539ff.

<sup>35</sup> See Wallace, *Contemplative Science*, Flanagan, *Bodhisattva's Brain*, and Rick Hanson & Richard Mendius, *Buddha's Brain The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, & Wisdom* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> M. Barinaga, "Buddhism and Neuroscience: Studying the Well-Trained Mind," *Science* 302 (October 3, 2003): 44-46. In this article Buddhist monks and western scientists compare notes on how the mind works and collaborate to test insights gleaned from meditation. See also, Jonathan Knight, "Buddhism on the Brain," *Nature* 432 (December 9, 2004), 670. This brief work highlights the reasons why neuroscience and Tibetan Buddhism are not at odds as he sits down with the Dalai Lama. See also, A. Yee, "Tibetan Monks and Nuns Turn their Minds Toward Science," *New York Times* (June 30, 2009), Section D, 3. This article describes how ninety-one Tibetan monastics spent a month in intensive study of physics, biology, neuroscience and math at Emory University. As a part of the Emory Tibet Science Initiative, this study abroad reflects the active efforts by the Dalai Lama to introduce modern science into the traditional monastic curriculum.

society, that Buddhism's commitment to reason and experience above all along with its pluralistic understanding of virtue, render it uniquely capable of melding well with naturalism.<sup>37</sup> Although this specific understanding of virtue and delineation of moral transformation comes together like an intricately woven and aesthetically pleasing lace garment (equal parts gossamer fabric [Buddhism] and intricate design [naturalism]), the remainder of this paper will demonstrate how ultimately this theory is ill-equipped to keep out the cool winds of criticism.

First, though it is clear that a strict observational understanding of the world might yield the conclusion that everything is in a constant state of change and eventually passes away (impermanence), it is unfortunate to delimit one's understanding of the world to that which is perceived with the senses. While Neural Buddhism claims to endorse reason in its program, reason should remind those in this newly formed camp that a commitment to impermanence requires impermanence as a permanent feature of the universe. This renders their firm belief in impermanence at least questionable and at most self-defeating.

The Neural Buddhist foundation of impermanence is essential to its erosion of essence and the deconstruction of the soul. Without permanence and with pervasive change and temporality in its place, a lasting and ideal essence is called into question. However, so much of what the system offers by way of understanding virtue and its proposal of a path toward transformation seems to suggest that mankind has a preferred state and that positive change has a lasting trajectory in mind. Even the acknowledgement of suffering suggests that men and women are not living in their greatest or most enlightened state. Though these claim that this does not pertain to a soul or essence, the preferred or enlightened state seems to be the same horse with a different name. This issue is of no consequence in a theistic program. Because theism endorses a firm belief of permanence, it is capable of consistently advocating for a lasting and ideal state along with a clear path toward that end.

Without permanence and with the loss of essence, there seems to be no real credible way to argue for a soul/non-physical consciousness. As mentioned earlier, the "soul" for a Neural Buddhist is "really no more than an ever-changing combination of psychophysical forces."<sup>38</sup> However, compelling arguments for the soul as a non-physical entity do exist. In J.P. Moreland's *The Soul*, a concise case is made for property dualism that demonstrates how mental states are in no sense physical as they possess five characteristics not owned by physical states:

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<sup>37</sup> Francisca Cho, "The Limits of the Buddhist Embrace of Science: Commentary on 'Compassion, Ethics, and Neuroscience: Neuroethics through Buddhist Eyes,'" *Science and Engineering Ethics* 18 No. 3 (September 2012), 539.

<sup>38</sup> Yandell & Netland, *Buddhism*, 122. Calling a soul a construct and applying reductive analysis are two ways the Buddhist devalues the concept of a soul. There is also the concept of an item lacking its own being or its not having an essence. See also. Lopez Jr., *The Story of Buddhism*, 46.

1. Mental states involve a raw qualitative feel for “what-it-is-like” to have a mental state.
2. Mental states promote intentionality—of-ness or about-ness—directed toward an object.
3. Mental states are inner, private, and immediate to the subject having them.
4. Mental states require subjective ontology.
5. Mental states fail to have critical features that characterize physical states and, in general, cannot be described using physical language (i.e. weight, color, atomic structure, etc.).<sup>39</sup>

As each of these capabilities are non-physical, they must find their source in something other than the brain (or any other physical organ). Therefore, belief in a soul/consciousness as the non-physical entity<sup>40</sup> behind mental states is no mere construct, but a conclusion reached after careful investigation into the capacities human beings have that cannot be classified physically. Theism, which adopts both a spiritual *and* a supernatural universe, contra Neural Buddhism, is able to embrace a non-physical entity within mankind that was bestowed by a non-physical source—God.

Though these more general criticisms of Neural Buddhism do not apply specifically to moral considerations, it is clear that while this worldview may team with sophistication (as it proves capable of transcending science and spirituality), it remains vulnerable to compelling criticisms. The same is true of this worldview's explanation of virtue and the moral transformation necessary to reach it. First, the faculties that yielded a commitment to impermanence (observation and reason) elicit a sophisticated cosmology in the Neural Buddhist program. Certain practices (meditations and mindfulness) bring about a proper mental state that causes virtue (incorporated in the idea of flourishing) in those who reach a state of enlightenment (a mind free of all afflictions/desires). However, little explanation is given as to how impermanent means and states are able to achieve a permanent result (i.e. enlightenment, “*eudaimonia* Buddha,” virtue, nirvana, etc.). In fact, a lasting nirvana (which appears to be the goal of the Buddhist program) seems to run contrary to the Buddhist and Neural Buddhist commitment to impermanence.<sup>41</sup> This inconsistency is not witnessed in a theistic worldview that gladly welcomes a permanent God with everlasting qualities who made people with permanent souls that, although in tension, are aiming for lasting values rooted in the divine's essence.

This inconsistency recognized in the Neural Buddhist program is compounded by the proposed result of moral transformation. In this system, the

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<sup>39</sup> J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know Its Real and Why it Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 74-110.

<sup>40</sup> And therefore not inextricably tethered to impermanence as physical entities are.

<sup>41</sup> For definition of impermanence, see footnote 10.

goal is the emptying of oneself along with its desires (stemming from considerations of the self) and illusions (which find their source in the belief of permanence) that brings about moral transformation.<sup>42</sup> However, the very idea of emptiness carries with it severely negative connotations. Many use “empty” language to describe an emotional malady or psychological problem—“I feel empty inside” or “I have a void I cannot seem to fill,” etc. In fact, moral transformation in the Neural Buddhist program is more about subtraction than transformation. Instead of reforming or correcting what is already present (desires), Neural Buddhism circumvents humanity’s yearnings altogether and explains transformation by means of their removal. Theism, on the other hand, endorses a far more robust view of these desires, explains from where they came (the *imago dei*), and delineates how to have these desires satisfied rather than thwarted (by means of an everlasting relationship with the purveyor of desire).

Though Neural Buddhism’s pivot around desire very skillfully settles the issue of transformation in a delightfully nuanced way, it ignores some of the very key characteristics that make humans human. For instance, one of the many distinguishing features of mankind is openness to the world along with its myriad of possibilities/potentialities<sup>43</sup> and the subsequent zeal with which men and women strive to reach these. Historians and anthropologists alike deal with the issues of “openness” in their work. One field studies “otherness” in space, the other in time.<sup>44</sup> Inasmuch as imagination, invention, and the entire cognitive enterprise are manifestations of openness and exocentricity, these proclivities seem to argue in favor of their cultivation and fulfillment, not their removal. In fact, without these yearnings, humanity would not be where it is today, and Neural Buddhists would be ill-equipped in constructing their program of transformation. A theistic worldview (which understands man as created in the image of God) explains these proclivities and how they can be used fruitfully by means of a right relationship with the divine over and above Neural Buddhism’s spiritualized naturalistic worldview that wants to remove these altogether.

One yearning that Neural Buddhism disdains more than the rest involves egoism. Though theism would agree that egoism left to itself is not capable of explaining morality in general and transformation in particular, one must ask if it is really all that bad. In many cases, careful considerations of self-interest are an eminently rational part of the moral life and a crucial part of many moral arguments. Joseph Butler argued at length that considerations of the self help produce a higher quality of life.<sup>45</sup> David Baggett (a theist) also points out that “a bare but sturdy commitment to egoism would often lead to more humane and

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<sup>42</sup> This conclusion, although appropriate to mention in this work, is deserving of more exploration that falls outside of the present purview.

<sup>43</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is man?: A Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, Trans. by Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, “History and Anthropology: The State of Play,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980), 198.

<sup>45</sup> See J. Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (London, J. & P. Knapton, 1736).

empathetic treatment of others, and would do away with much meanness, invective, and animus, too often wrapped with sanctimony.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, theism rightly confirms (over and above Neural Buddhism) that, although egoism must be kept in check, it is not altogether fruitless for the human person and as such should not be so quickly abolished.

## CONCLUSION

A robust theistic explanation of moral transformation and virtue does not fail, as Neural Buddhism does, to provide answers to these aforementioned criticisms. Like Neural Buddhism, theism is committed to experience and reason, but at the same time, it does not neglect intuition and revelation. This provides theism with a more robust view of reality and plenty of room for permanence. For this reason, theism affords itself the ability to account for essence and the soul as it affirms an eternally existing God in whose image man is created. In explaining moral transformation, theism does not circumvent mankind's desires, suggesting that humans ought to empty themselves of their humanity. Instead, theism acknowledges that while mankind's yearnings can lead to suffering, they can be tamed, reformed, and directed in such a way that virtue results. This includes, but is not limited to the ego, which, although does not exhaust virtue in the theistic system, is one yearning that can bear fruit. For these reasons, Neural Buddhism, while a sophisticated and alluring amalgamation of science and spirituality, is not impervious to compelling criticisms that call into question its explanation of moral transformation. In fact, every hole that this intricately woven lace garment contains can be filled in by at least one superior worldview—theism. Therefore, it would appear, at least as these two have been compared as potential hypothesis/explanations for the physical/spiritual world, that theism triumphs over Neural Buddhism, especially in its account for moral transformation which is both a physical and spiritual phenomenon.

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<sup>46</sup> David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *God and the Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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