

Individual identity and union with the Absolute: An analysis of Dabrowski's critique of Asian religions

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I begin by describing Dabrowski's criticisms of Asian religion, with special emphasis on his principal objection—i.e., his objection to religious, or philosophical, monism—which he believes characterizes the “majority of Hindu, Buddhist...systems” of religious thought. I then show how Dabrowski's objections follow from the way he conceives of advanced personality development. Next, I argue that Dabrowski's generalization regarding the views of Asian religions on the question of individual personality misrepresents the actual positions of many Hindus and Buddhists. Further, I suggest that when scholars and practitioners of Asian religion interpret philosophical monism psychologically, their description is very close to Dabrowski's portrayal of advanced personality development. Finally, I end with a plea for a separation of Dabrowski's empirically based theory of personality development from his religious or metaphysical views.

Kazimierz Dabrowski's five-stage theory of personality development is familiar to many readers of *Advanced Development*. In addition to identifying the distinctive characteristics and underlying structure of each level of personality, the theory also provides an explanation as to why some persons undergo the growth process, and others do not, in terms of a set of temperamental characteristics (overexcitabilities) and environmental conditions. The growth process is described as one of personality disintegration and reintegration. The lowest level of personality disintegrates and is simultaneously replaced by a less stable, but potentially more flexible and adaptable, personality structure, which in turn is replaced by a higher level structure, etc., until the final goal of secondary integration of personality is attained.

The penultimate personality level is called organized multilevel disintegration, and is characterized by the increasing dominance of a personality ideal, as well as active dispositions (referred to by Dabrowski as dynamisms) toward self-understanding and self-control. The final level of personality, secondary integration, is one in which the personality ideal is even more present along with personality dynamisms such as authenticity, autonomy, and responsibility. While very few persons, in the general population, ever arrive at the two highest levels of personality, in this journal and elsewhere, I have remarked on the correspondences between the three highest levels of personality and the various models of development found in the world's mystical traditions.¹ In fact, Dabrowski himself refers to individual mystics (from many religious traditions) as exemplars of higher levels of personality development. It is therefore something of a surprise to learn that his evaluation of Asian mysticism is quite negative and even harshly so.

What I want to do in here is to give some sense of Dabrowski's negative evaluation of the Asian religious traditions by extensively quoting his own words. This assessment needs however

to be qualified by the fact that Dabrowski not infrequently cites Asian mystics as exemplars of advanced development, and by the fact that he allows for a certain measure of what he refers to as monism in advanced levels of personality. Dabrowski's negative evaluation also needs to be placed in a larger context—i.e., Dabrowski is just as severe in his criticism of dominant Roman Catholic theological and mystical traditions. His critique is by no means restricted to Asian religions.

Next, I identify and articulate the reasons why Dabrowski takes the position he does on Asian religions. Dabrowski sees the goal of personality development as being the creation of an authentic, autonomous, and unique self, a self which over a lifetime has cultivated a set of irreplaceable and unique relationships, and he cannot countenance the disappearance of such a self at death. Therefore, he argues that there must be life after death and, further, that this post-mortem existence cannot be one where the unique individual self loses its identity by merging into a sea of divinity, which in his opinion is the teaching of most Asian religious traditions. He rejects, then, what he sees as the philosophical monism of Asian religions, in part, I believe, because he assumes that philosophical monism is equivalent to psychological monism.

My response to Dabrowski's assessment of Asian religions is to argue that Dabrowski's generalization regarding the views of Asian religions on the question of monism misrepresents the actual beliefs of many, even most, Hindus and Buddhists. I also argue that when scholars and practitioners of Asian religion interpret philosophical monism psychologically, their description is very close to Dabrowski's portrayal of advanced personality development. Further, I suggest that when attempting to describe a level of personality as rare as secondary integration, we should be open to ideas from other cultural traditions, and above all, try to understand them in their original interpretive tradition, before rejecting them out of hand. Finally, I end with a plea for those who make use of the theory of positive disintegration to keep separate Dabrowski's empirically based theory of personality development from his personal metaphysical and religious views.

Dabrowski makes a number of criticisms of Hinduism and Buddhism. For example, in a work entitled, *In Search of Mental Health*,¹ he says that Eastern religions force a fixed hierarchy of values upon individuals rather than allowing them to discover their own unique hierarchy of values:

In the area of development of our individuality, empathy, responsibility for our own development, our goals and strivings, Eastern religious systems put us under pressure and force upon us strange views, a foreign sense of life, strange forms of love and development, and a strange hierarchy of values. Such transcendence is a construction reminding us of an authoritative, absolutist rule of bloody despots, fixed on their own vague visions. It is not we who create these values, nor we who evaluate the most appropriate for us hierarchies. They are forced upon us, without our participation and choice. In this manner, we are treated like slaves by "the higher powers." (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 157)

Specifically, Zen Buddhism is criticized because it is anti-intellectual and its teachings are vague and imprecise:

Zen systems are vague; they promote rejection of rationality, analysis, discussion and endorse waiting for some mystical resolutions, which in their pure intuitiveness contradict the higher human nature, contradict its new creative structure (feelings, desires and intellect). They offer us a cosmos of imprecise images, visions of unaware

existences, consoling us that we will understand these existences “later.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 156)

Most of these derogatory generalizations about Asian religions could be applied to any religion. But Dabrowski has chosen to apply them only to Asian religions, because in Dabrowski’s mind Asian religions present a very particular threat.

At the core of Dabrowski’s critique of Hindu and Buddhist views of the world is the charge that they are monists, i.e., that they describe the highest human attainment as a permanent obliteration of one’s individual self through a merger with a larger whole:

Presenting, by Buddhism, the highest principle as the moral law, telling us about becoming one (with God) and the necessary obliteration of individual identity, with the simultaneous sentencing a man to a senseless, ever higher differentiation of feelings and consciousness only to cut their roots and turn man as an individual into nothingness, is promoting the fundamental moral evil and crime against humanity. Hindu monistic systems, which reject (the survival of) the “small personality” (Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda) while showing the human race the agony of reincarnation, acquiring the subtlest and most individual personality; and which then, against the developmental hierarchy, sentence it to existence united with God, and so to non-existence—are a dark grotesque, dressed up in verbal excesses. (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 156)

Dabrowski’s concern about monism is not restricted to a few pages of his yet untranslated book entitled, *W Poszukiwaniu Zdrowia Psychicznego (In Search of Mental Health)*. It can be found also throughout his other writings. Put in a nutshell, Dabrowski sees monistic religious systems as teaching that individuality will eventually be obliterated in a permanent union with ultimate reality, thus denying the unique, unrepeatable and enduring nature of the individual and of human relationships. Before examining in detail the reasons for Dabrowski’s concerns about monism, I would like to point out a few facts which will nuance what Dabrowski has said about Asian religions. First, Dabrowski does not object to mystical experiences in which individual identity is *temporarily* lost. Second, Dabrowski’s critique of Asian religion is not absolute—several practitioners of Hinduism and Buddhism are presented as examples of advanced development. Third, Dabrowski does not limit his critique to Asian religions alone. And fourth, Dabrowski allows that it is not only possible, but even likely, that many persons at the level of organized multilevel disintegration will hold monistic views.

Individual identity may be temporarily lost in mystical experiences

It is important not to interpret Dabrowski’s remarks on monism as a rejection of those mystical experiences in which the awareness of individual existence is *temporarily* extinguished. In a passage critical of monism, Dabrowski makes it clear that his criticism does not apply to temporary states of identity loss:

Delight, empathy toward another, toward a work of art, toward the object of love disappear, [without consciousness of one's separateness]... We are not talking here about a temporary loss of one's sense of identity, which makes sense only if it is preceded and followed by states of awareness of one's identity and uniqueness. (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 127)

Therefore, Dabrowski's comments on monism cannot be interpreted as a rejection of the kind of experience reported by the Hindu swami Satchidananda, while on a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash in 1958:

I suddenly became aware of a pleasant feeling, both within and without, that words cannot express. Reluctant to stay in the tent, I put on a woolen shawl and left for the shore of the lake. There I sat in meditation. What calmness! What peace! What joy! The Lord blessed me with the wonderful bliss of sleep with consciousness [i.e., an experience of samadhi]. I lost myself in that bliss.

I did not realize how much time had passed until the first brilliant rays of morning sunlight reflected off the glaciers, piercing my eyelids. The inner light gradually sank back into the heart, while the eyes became alive to the outer light.... Little by little I became conscious of the outer world. But even while moving about in the world, that bliss within—once experienced—is never to be forgotten. (Satchidananda, 1984, pp. 47-48)

The swami's remark that the experience of union with the divine, once experienced, is never forgotten seems to parallel Dabrowski's description of religion at level V, in which he says that temporary union with God eventually results in a dual awareness of an ongoing union with God along with a simultaneous awareness of one's individual existence (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 217).

Individual practitioners of Asian religion as examples of advanced development

In his discussion of the discipline of psychology at different levels, Dabrowski suggests that the teachings of Hindu sages like Sri Aurobindo and Ramakrishna are, along with those of Christian saints like Teresa of Avila and Gregory the Great, examples of level V psychological thinking (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 208). Ramakrishna is also considered to be, along with Francis of Assisi, an example of positive infantilism at level V (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 203). In a discussion of courage in cases of higher level existential anxiety, Dabrowski cites Kierkegaard and the Buddha as examples (Dabrowski, 1972a, p. 200). The fasting of Gandhi and the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhist monks are given as examples of frustration (in the form of moral protest) at level V (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 166). And in an account of psychiatry at level V, Dabrowski cites yoga as an expression of the dynamism of self-education (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 211).

Thus, for a balanced picture of Dabrowski's position on Asian religions, it is necessary to take into account his positive assessment of individual Hindus and Buddhists and religious practices like yoga as well as his rather strongly expressed reservations regarding the dangers of Asian monism. It is also necessary to realize that Dabrowski's critique of religious views is not limited to the religions of Asia.

Dabrowski's critique not limited to Asian religions

Dabrowski is as critical of Christian theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, and of Catholic mystics, such as John of the Cross, as he is of Asian religions. A passage from *In Search of Mental Health* succinctly states Dabrowski's objections to Thomism:

St. Thomas in his theology invalidates individual personality, since he dismisses feelings which are essentially human, and entangles us in ways of abstract thought, ways of reason, which exclude and reject all, even the most spiritual individual structures. He

creates a vision of "unity with God," with a complete absorption by the deity. (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 156)

And in *Fragments From the Diary of a Madman*, Dabrowski (using the pseudonym Pawel Cienin) accuses Aquinas of favoring a purely volitional and intellectual type of undifferentiated love devoid of human feelings (Cienin, 1972b, p. 50).

To this day, Thomas Aquinas remains the dominant theologian in the curriculum of Catholic seminaries. So, given that Dabrowski had a Catholic background, his objection to Thomist theological conceptions is no small matter. Neither is the criticism he makes of John of the Cross, a man that most informed Catholics regard as one of the most important theorists in the domain of Catholic mystical theology. Of John of the Cross, Dabrowski says the following in *Fragments from the Diary of a Madman*:

St. John of the Cross...elaborates the love of God and destroys the differentiated love of a man; he curtails the right for us to possess exclusive feelings for friends and people close to us. Everything should be given to God; he is rapacious, all-powerful and cannot stand exclusive emotional relations between people.

How contradictory it is to Christ's concept that the highest commandment is "love thy neighbor." God becomes here an all-powerful, jealous tyrant who demands obedience.... (Cienin, 1972b, pp. 50-51)

The point to be made here is simply that Dabrowski's criticisms of religious thought are in no way uniquely directed toward the Asian religious traditions. Furthermore, in spite of his very strong feelings about Asian monism, he admits that nevertheless such views can be held by persons at a relatively high level of personality.

Monistic view acceptable at level IV

While Dabrowski strongly disapproves of the monistic philosophical position, in a discussion of philosophy at level IV, he grants that a monistic view could be entertained at the level of organized multilevel disintegration, although certainly not beyond this level:

Two directions of philosophy emerge as most characteristic for this level: monistic (in the sense of accepting total identification with the first cause, the principle of being, or the highest being) and essential (in the sense of accepting individual essence as having indestructible existence not to be dissolved in ultimate oneness). [But there will be a] Gradual transition toward the orientation of individual essence. (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 215)

In other words, a monistic philosophical view is not incompatible with a very high level of personality development. At this point, in order to better understand why Dabrowski finds monism so abhorrent, we need to look at his view of the individual, of human relationships, of immortality and of the relationship between individual humans and some form of ultimate reality.

Dabrowski's view of the individual

For Dabrowski each person possesses a unique, authentic, and eternal essence, as he says in *Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms*:

There is no true human existence without genuine essence. The condition of a truly human existence is awareness of and choice of what is quintessential, unique and enduring in a man, without which existence itself would be valueless. (Cienin, 1972b, p. 11)

In *Fragments from the Diary of a Madman*, Dabrowski explains that individual essence is emotional and eternal, and it includes unique interests and talents:

If I am an individual, I have needs for identification, development and empathy, if I want to be unique, unrepeatably, if I want the same for others—that is to say, I want to see them as separate and unrepeatably—my essence must be emotional.

I desire lasting friendship and unrepeatably, unique feelings; I want to have deep interests. The same talents I now have, in my more or less infantile longing, I want to keep in transcendental life.

Essence is a value which I would not renounce because it determines the meaning of my life. Should I have to choose between existence without it and nonexistence, I would choose the second. It is emotional essence which gives the meaning to existence. (Cienin, 1972c, pp. 72-73)

On the one hand, Dabrowski seems to say that the basic essence of the person is a given, if not from birth, at least from very early in life. This can be seen by the fact that in the passage just cited, Dabrowski associates individual essence with “deep interests” and “talents,” and elsewhere he makes it clear that such interests and talents manifest very early in life (Dabrowski, 1972a, p. 8). On the other hand, for Dabrowski, an authentic human nature, or a more developed human essence, is an acquisition attained through effort (Dabrowski, 1973, pp. 93-94).

Whatever may be its source, a person’s unique, eternal, emotional essence is discovered through the process of positive disintegration and positive secondary integration. Given this understanding of human individuality, it is clear that whatever might threaten its existence would be, for Dabrowski, a cause for alarm. Going hand in hand with his understanding of human individual essence is Dabrowski’s understanding of unique unrepeatably relationships with significant others.

Persistent exclusivity of friendships and relationships in this world and the next

As one might expect, for Dabrowski, friendships and relationships are expressive of the developmental level of those involved. So, for example, higher level relationships are characterized by empathy and the goal of mutual encouragement of personality development. Emotional ties are considered unique and unrepeatably—i.e., not replaceable (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 169). Another cardinal feature of friendships and relationships is that they are “exclusive” (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 169), and long-lasting. Dabrowski says that within marriage, for example, there is an “exclusive and unchangeable emotional attachment, even in conditions of fading or loss of the partner’s attractive physical features” (Dabrowski, 1973, p. 122). In Dabrowski’s view this exclusive endurance of feeling is not limited to the period when both persons involved are alive. Authentic emotional ties survive the death of one of the partners and the relationship continues to remain an exclusive one. Furthermore, if the surviving spouse is at a higher level, he or she will not remarry (Dabrowski, 1973, p. 131). Thus in Dabrowski’s view, a person functioning at a higher level will be guided by a moral imperative to remain faithful to a deceased spouse.

Furthermore, persistent exclusivity is not, in Dabrowski's view, limited to marital or romantic relationships. In *Fragments from a Diary of a Madman*, Dabrowski laments the lack of persistent exclusivity of friendship, which he interprets as a lack of sincerity (Cienin, 1972c, pp. 54-55). In a passage in *Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms*, Dabrowski not only emphasizes post-mortem fidelity for a meaningful friendship, but even recommends never again having such a relationship:

One should remember a close and deceased person as a fresh flower and living wound, but not only this...one should live with him as with a person, at least in thought, imagination and longing; one should create his transcendental form, and if possible—never again have such a close relationship. (Cienin, 1972b, p. 28)

True friendships and relationships are unique, exclusive and continue beyond the grave. In addition, certain aspects of the relationship or friendship may not be fulfilled in this life. This could even be a deliberate choice.

Dabrowski proposes, that for some persons at an advanced stage of development, there may be a willingness to put off until the next world, the actualizing of a relationship which exists in this life only in potential. He cites as an example the case of Soren Kirkegaard and Regina Olsen:

[At the level of secondary integration] The individual experiences and realizes eternal relationships. For example, Kirkegaard, in order to preserve the absolute and the ideal aspect of his relationship with Regina, made her believe that he was a scoundrel and was merely playing with her emotions. In this manner, he made her free of her attachment to him. Kirkegaard believed that their union, impossible on earth, was possible in the absolute. (Dabrowski, 1977, pp. 169-170)

In Dabrowski's view, then, immortality is clearly a necessity, if exclusive, unique and unrepeatable relationships are to persist, and because there is a need for immortality, there must therefore be such an immortality. This argument can be found in a passage from *In Search of Mental Health*:

To what conclusions do these thoughts lead us? The structure and strength of an individual essence, and so, among other things, lasting, unique, exclusive love and friendship do not have to fall apart, if there is any meaning to our existence. Otherwise the highest teachings about the supremacy of love, of the utmost importance of friendship and love, would be just empty phrases. (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 137)

For Dabrowski, if there were no immortality, it would not be possible to have the kind of relationships which are characteristic of persons at higher levels of functioning. Or to put it more precisely, an essential requirement of those relationships—i.e., persistence—would not be possible. But for Dabrowski, not every type of immortality will meet the requirements of higher level relationships. It must be an immortality in which individuals preserve their unique essences. To understand this better we need now to look at Dabrowski's view of the proper relationship between individuals and ultimate reality, or God.

Dabrowski's View of the Relationship with the Absolute

Dabrowski's point of departure is his understanding of the unique nature of the human person and of human relationships. For Dabrowski, both authentic individual existence and

authentic human relationships would be compromised if there were no post-mortem continuity, or if that continuity consisted in some form of obliteration of individual identity in a union with the Absolute. This is the reason for Dabrowski's unequivocal rejection of any form of religious monism, whether it be found in the east or in the west.

Dabrowski's protest against the monistic interpretation of the universe is expressed in somewhat passionate terms in the following passage from *In Search of Mental Health*:

If...[monistic] systems in any way reflect reality, then, in the name of human dignity, we cannot accept them. We should protest against them through our own moral criteria, our empathy, love, our own sense of justice. These systems supposedly show some elements of knowledge, express some kind of love. In fact, they do not represent any knowledge or love. (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 156)

Any view that sees the ultimate human goal as a permanent dissolution of the self in a sea of divinity is therefore quite unacceptable to Dabrowski.

But Dabrowski goes further. The development of personality requires that individuals not identify with *anything* outside of themselves. In *The Dynamics of Concepts*, Dabrowski puts it as follows:

We can have sympathy, love, high regard for others or we can fraternize with others, but we can't identify with them. It may be possible for a short period of time. Global permanent identification with others would not only be profitless, but destructive of our and other's identity. We can have love and worship even for God, but we can't aspire to identification with him because that is harmful for oneself. From a philosophical point of view the author presents a personalistic and anti-monistic attitude. (Dabrowski, 1973, pp. 84-85)

So what would a higher level relationship with God or the Absolute be like? Dabrowski says that the religious attitude at level V would be characterized by:

Development of the relationship "I" and "Thou"... Such an attitude develops through an intuitive synthesis of one's own personal relationship with the divinity... There may occur breaks and interruptions in such a dialogue leading to the "dark night of the soul," but the need and search for the dialogue remain intact and unassailable. (Dabrowski, 1977, pp. 143-144)

For Dabrowski, the type of relationship that Martin Buber calls an I-Thou relationship is what characterizes religious experience at level V. Only this kind of relationship, he feels, will preserve the important achievements of someone who has arrived at an advanced level of personality. And only this kind of relationship will allow for the persistence of intimate friendships and relationships.

Dabrowski's accusation that most Hindu and Buddhist schools are monistic

Dabrowski is under the impression, and here we have to take into account, the nature of his sources,³ that most forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, and by implication, most Hindus and Buddhists are monists—i.e., that in one way or another they deny the eternal existence of an authentic individual essence. Dabrowski does not say absolutely all Asian systems of thought are monistic, but that "Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, and esoteric systems, *most often* express

monistic views” [emphasis mine] (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 136); or that “A *majority* of Hindu, Buddhist, Zen, Tibetan, and even scholastic systems are opposed to this approach” [emphasis mine] (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 126).

My response is threefold. First, Dabrowski does not reject Catholicism because he is critical of its leading theological voice, nor does he reject the Carmelite tradition because of his critique of John of the Cross. On the other hand, his fear of monism leads him to a harsh, sweeping denunciation of Asian religion as can be seen in the quotations given above from *In Search of Mental Health*. Therefore, I think it important to point out that the average Hindu and the average Buddhist are not monists anymore than the average Catholic is guilty of creating “a vision of ‘unity with God,’ with a complete absorption by the deity,” which is the accusation Dabrowski makes of the theology of Thomas Aquinas.

My second response is that there are articulate and knowledgeable scholars and practitioners of Asian religions that interpret the philosophical monism of their respective traditions in a manner that is more or less compatible with the descriptions Dabrowski gives of personality development. Finally, my third response is that when speculating about advanced levels of personality development that are far from common, it is precipitous to unconditionally reject the philosophical reflections of mystical systems, which have been tested over centuries, without first considering their arguments. Perhaps they contain at least a grain of psychological truth. Or perhaps they may have some heuristic value. In any case, rejecting them a priori by accusing them of “promoting [a] fundamental moral evil and [a] crime against humanity,” is not just extreme. It represents a departure from calm and reasoned social-scientific analysis into provocative polemics.

Are most Hindus monists?

The Hindu philosophical tradition is a very rich one and includes a number of approaches. Since the medieval period the most widespread (both in India and abroad) of these is the one known as Vedanta, which consists of several distinct schools. At the core of each of these schools is their position on the relationship between Brahman [the supreme being] and *atman* [the soul] (Shattuck, 1999, p. 56). The more popular schools within Vedanta, e.g., Dvaitadvaita and Vishishtadvaita, posit the existence of an eternal self, and so do not fit the stereotype of Hindu philosophy condemned by Dabrowski.

On the other hand, the school known as Advaita Vedanta (or non-dual Vedanta) is the one that fits Dabrowski’s description of Hindu monism. The Hinduism scholar, Cybelle Shattuck describes it as follows:

The Vedanta most familiar in the West is associated with Shankara (c. 788-820 C.E.)...who...described Brahman [or the supernatural] as non-dual. There is only one reality and that is Brahman. The individual *atman* [or soul] is identical to Brahman...but people see themselves as distinct entities in a world of diverse forms because of *maya*, “illusion.” When that illusion is pierced, one realizes that there is nothing but Brahman. The cycle of rebirth [i.e., reincarnation] ceases and, at death, the individual *atman* merges into Brahman. (Shattuck, 1999, pp. 56-58)

Clearly, Advaita Vedanta seems to fit Dabrowski’s description of Hindu philosophy as “telling us about becoming one (with God) and the necessary obliteration of individual identity” (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 156).

Shattuck explains that this form of Hindu monism was meant for a rather limited audience, i.e., Hindu renouncers. Hindu lay persons are almost always dualists:

Shankara's system, which was not designed for householder life [but rather for renouncers] and [which] demoted theistic devotion, is far less representative of majority Hinduism than the teachings of Ramanuja. Ramanuja (c. 1025-1137) utilized the theism of the medieval literature in his interpretation of the Vedanta texts to formulate the school known as Vishishtadvaita, "qualified non-dualism" [in which]...the supreme Brahman is the personal Lord... Brahman is the ground of existence, but individual souls and matter are eternally distinct parts of Brahman. So, although Brahman is everything, and therefore non-dual, that non-dualism is qualified by the distinct existence of souls and matter. (Shattuck, 1999, p. 58)

This means that for the vast majority of Hindus:

.... the world is real and souls retain their individuality even in [spiritual] liberation [i.e., in eternity].... Ramanuja describes this devotion as self-surrender and constant contemplation of God. [And] This Brahman is a personal God [and].... There must be a distinction between the soul and God to make [a]... relationship possible. [For Ramanuja]...the experience of the *atman* merging into the attributeless Brahman (which is the highest attainment of Advaita Vedanta) is a preliminary stage of purification before the self regains a sense of personal identity and passes on to attain a higher stage of permanent communion with the personal Lord. (Shattuck, 1999, pp. 58-59)

From Shattuck's remarks, it would seem that ordinary Hindu lay persons, or householders, are non-monists, whereas the Hindu renouncers are monists. In fact, however even the ascetics who adhere to Advaita Vedanta are not exclusively monists—there are both monistic and non-monistic ascetics in this tradition.

In a study of ascetics living in the city of Bhubaneswar (in the state of Orissa), David Miller lists the various *mathas* (or monasteries) to be found in that location (Miller, 1976, Table 18). Ten of the 22 *mathas* followed, at least nominally, the teachings of Shankara, the eighth-century founder of the best known form of Hindu monism. The other 12 of the 22 monasteries followed the theistic teachings of Shankara's rivals (Ramanuja and Madhva), which means that they believed that the goal of religion was not to merge with an impersonal divine force, but to have a relationship with a personal divinity. These statistics, if typical, would make it seem as if almost half of the Hindu ascetics are monists in their beliefs. But the matter is somewhat more complex. Even those ascetics who belong to a monistic religious order usually engage in devotions to a personal god and at the same time encourage others to do so.

Miller cites the case of an ascetic named Jagadananda who received lay initiation from a guru at the age of 17 years and then for 10 years was torn between worldly life and a desire to experience *samadhi* [spiritual liberation]. Finally, at the age of 27 he committed himself to the ascetical life by joining one of the monistic religious orders founded by Shankara (Miller, 1976, p. 31). However in spite of this affiliation, Miller tells us that:

Philosophically, Jagadananda was a syncretist and an eclectic. He believed that *karma yoga* [or Brahmanic ritual performance], *bhakti yoga* [devotion to personal deities], and *jñana yoga* [the meditative study of monistic mystical texts] were equally important paths to the same goal. (Miller, 1976, p. 33)

Jagadananda's case is not atypical. In spite of belonging to a monistic religious order, an ascetic may personally understand, and teach others, that the way to relate to the supernatural is by entering into a (unique, unrepeatable and eternal) relationship with a personal deity—a relationship in which the worshipper does not lose his or her individual identity.

It would seem that for most Hindus Dabrowski's attribution of monism does not apply. In addition, even many of the renunciators, who are in principle philosophical monists, accommodate dualism at least at the pastoral level. Is it possible that philosophical monism does not automatically mean psychological monism?

Are most Buddhists monists?

What Cybelle Shattuck has said about the majority of Hindus is equally true of the majority of Buddhists. There are two major schools of Buddhism. One of these is Theravada, found mostly in Sri Lanka, and the southeast Asian countries of Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, and through immigration (and to a lesser extent conversion) in many other parts of the world, such as North America. The second branch is Mahayana, found mainly in China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, and once again as a result of immigration in many other parts of the world.

Both branches of Buddhism can be thought of as monistic, in the sense that Dabrowski finds objectionable, because they have in common beliefs in impermanence, selflessness, and the ultimate "emptiness" of existence. At least these concepts are part of the official teaching. It is a different matter altogether at the popular level.

In his classic study of Buddhism in a Burmese village, Melford Spiro found that there was not just one form of Theravadin Buddhism but at least three forms. These could even be seen as three levels of Buddhism. The first level could be referred to as the material level, in which practitioners hope to be relieved of daily problems and have the needs of this world satisfied. The second level is one in which adherents hope for a better rebirth. Spiro discovered that these two goals were the only ones that were relevant for the vast majority of Burmese Buddhists. Only a few forest monks had as their goal the immediate attainment of nirvana, in which the illusion of a permanent self would be overcome.

Spiro found that while the non-self doctrine was held by forest monks, this was not the case for the majority of Burmese Buddhists, who were anticipating a happier rebirth. According to Spiro, not only do the inhabitants of the Burmese village where he did his field research reject the notion of selflessness, they did not even know what it meant (Spiro, 1970, pp. 84-85). In fact, a belief in the survival of a self beyond the grave was seen as necessary psychologically and even morally:

For most Burmese concerned with merit and karma, the belief in a permanent ego which survives the death of the body is both a psychological necessity and a moral imperative. The psychological necessity follows from their hope to achieve a better and avoid an unpleasant rebirth. Without the notion of a permanent ego persisting from one rebirth to the next, this hope (so they argue) would be irrelevant, the belief in karma would lose its motivational significance, and behavior would lose its religious (Buddhist) underpinning. (Spiro, 1970, p. 86)

The same distinction that Spiro found among Theravada Buddhists can also be found in the Mahayana school. The two largest sub-groups within this school are Ch'an and Ching-t'u. The first is better known in the west as Zen (which simply means meditation) and is the form of

Mahayana Buddhism practiced predominantly, although not exclusively, by monks and nuns. The second sect, Ching-t'u or Pure Land, is the form of Mahayana Buddhism practiced by the overwhelming majority of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean Buddhist householders, or lay persons.⁴ The goal of Pure Land Buddhists is, at the end of their lives, to enter (as unique individual souls) into a heavenly realm where they will live in relationship with O-mi-to-fo, the heavenly Buddha.

At the popular level then, the majority of Hindus and Buddhists think more or less along the lines of Dabrowski. They expect to survive as unique, unrepeatable selves, eventually enjoying an eternal relationship to the supernatural conceived of in anthropomorphic terms, or in the case of the Theravadin Buddhists, they look forward to a better future life on earth.

However, even if most Hindus and Buddhists see themselves as having a continued existence in a manner that is not in striking opposition to Dabrowski's understanding of immortality, what of the many sophisticated and highly regarded representatives of those traditions who espouse views that do appear to be what Dabrowski refers to as "monistic." This is especially true of Buddhism, with its doctrines of impermanence, selflessness, and ultimate emptiness. It is not possible in an article to give a detailed (and adequate) presentation of Buddhist teaching on these topics, but perhaps a few words can be said about one of the most relevant Buddhist teachings—namely the Buddhist view of the self. At a purely literal level it would seem that Dabrowski's ideal of a real, unique, enduring individual essence is completely opposed by the Buddhist notion of *anatman* or selflessness. However, when we look at how the doctrine of *anatman* is interpreted psychologically by one Buddhist practitioner, the opposition is not so obvious.

Buddhist selflessness and the theory of positive disintegration

When Buddhists speak of the non-existence of the self, they are not necessarily referring to what Dabrowski calls the individual's unique, unrepeatable essence. Rather when they refer to the illusion of a permanent self, at least some Buddhists have in mind the various senses of self which Dabrowski calls lower level drives, impulses, wills, or centers. For Dabrowski, the true individual essence is found only in the personality ideal, and in Buddhist teaching there is an equivalent, which is referred to as one's true nature or one's Buddha nature.

The source on the Buddhist notion of selflessness and Buddha nature that I will cite here is a North American named Jack Kornfield. Kornfield spent many years in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia practicing meditation and learning from well-respected Buddhist teachers. Unlike Dabrowski's primary source on Asian religion, he is both a scholar and a serious practitioner. In *A Path with Heart*, Kornfield provides his readers with the following description of the Buddhist doctrine of selflessness:

...the Buddha...described us as a collection of five changing processes: the process of physical body, of feelings, of perceptions, of responses, and of the flow of consciousness that experiences them all. Our sense of self arises whenever we grasp at or identify with these patterns. The process of identification, of selecting patterns to call "I," "me," "myself," is subtle and usually hidden from our awareness. We can identify with our body, feelings, or thoughts; we can identify with images, patterns, roles, and archetypes. Thus...we might fix and identify with the role of being a woman or a man, a parent or a child... Sometimes we identify with our desires: sexual, aesthetic, or spiritual... We can choose the archetype of hero, lover, mother,...adventurer, clown, or thief as our identity... To the extent that we grasp these *false identities*, we continually... fulfill what

is limited or deficient in them.... Yet these are not our *true identity*. [Emphasis mine] (Kornfield, 1993, p. 199)

The patterns Kornfield describes are not unlike the ones that Dabrowski identifies when he describes the sense of self possessed by persons in primary integration, unilevel disintegration, and even spontaneous multilevel disintegration. In other words, when Buddhists make use of the doctrine of selflessness in their practice, the purpose is to encourage practitioners to relinquish identification with lower level conceptions of who they are, i.e., they are encouraged to relinquish identification with the “primitive drives and instincts” of primary integration (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 40); with the “influences directing behavior...from external sources, or desires, moods and primitive drives” of unilevel disintegration (Dabrowski, 1977, pp. 48-49); and, at the appropriate point, even the “various disposing and directing centers, representing antagonistic levels,” of spontaneous multilevel disintegration (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 42).

In a passage, on the disposing and directing centre, in *The Dynamics of Concepts*, Dabrowski says that, as the personality develops, lower level identifications (or conceptions of the self) disintegrate and are eventually replaced by a higher unified disposing and directing center:

We may say that at...[the] stage [of unilevel disintegration] there are many changeable, conflicting or cooperating centers of the same level of development. We may also speak of the activity of some or many “wills” as centers which alternately oppose or cooperate with one another.

When the development of the human individual is passing to the third phase—the phase of multilevel, spontaneous disintegration—these centers become less numerous, less differentiated in power and tension. The centers which represent hierarchically lower levels submit to the centers which represent higher levels. In this hierarchization, all the dynamisms of the third phase of multilevel disintegration take part.... Those dynamisms which slowly disintegrate themselves into one disposing and directing center, slowly gain ground. However this center does not yet operate in a definite and clear manner.

It is only in the fourth stage of disintegration that one center is definitely formed and that it acts synthetically as one center on a high level.

On the highest level...we have only one disposing and directing center which synthesizes intuitively all human tendencies. (Dabrowski, 1973, pp. 102-103)

Thus, in terms of the theory of positive disintegration, growth requires the practice of something analogous to selflessness, at least with regard to lower level “wills,” or “centers,” i.e., lower level conceptions of the self. Dabrowski does not, of course, say that the disintegration of these wills or centers, will be replaced by a vacuum, but that a center (or set of centers) will be replaced by a higher center.

Kornfield is not suggesting that persons should have no disposing and directing center. He is aware that some may think this way, but he makes it clear that such a conception is a misunderstanding of what is meant by selflessness:

Misconceptions about selflessness and emptiness abound....

Many students come to [Buddhist] spiritual practice with ... [the] problem some psychologists call a “weak sense of self” or a “needy ego,” with holes in their psyche or heart. This deficient sense of self is carried for years by our habits and bodily contractions, by the stories and mental images we have learned and tell ourselves. If we have a deficient sense of self, if we perennially negate ourselves, then we may easily

confuse our inner poverty with selflessness and believe it to be sanctioned as the road to enlightenment....

Similar confusion happens when “emptiness” is misunderstood as “meaninglessness.” This misperception can reinforce our underlying depression and fear of the world, justifying our inability to find beauty or lack of motivation to participate in life. (Kornfield, 1993, pp. 203-204)

Furthermore, Kornfield says that dissolving an inadequate conception of self is only part of the task of a Buddhist practitioner, the other side is for the individual to discover his or her true nature, or his or her Buddha nature:

Dissolving the sense of self or experiencing the selfless nature of life is only one side of the coin...the other is to develop a healthy sense of self...When we have reclaimed some measure of ourselves, the next task becomes the further development of character, of our wisdom, strength, skill, and compassion...the cultivation of...qualities such as generosity, patience, mindfulness, and kindness.

The development of self then leads to a more fundamental level, the discovery of the true self. This is the discovery that the positive qualities of character that spiritual life works so hard to cultivate are already present as our true nature. From this sense of true nature, we can also discover and honor our *individual* or *personal destiny*...the *unique patterns* through which our awakening will express itself. [Emphasis mine] (Kornfield, 1993, p. 207)

For Dabrowski the ultimate goal of personality development is that the disposing and directing center becomes “totally unified and identified with the personality ideal” (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 56). Kornfield’s description of the true self appears to be close to what Dabrowski refers to as the personality ideal.

What is so interesting is that Kornfield emphasizes the unique, unrepeatable, and personal character of the Buddha nature. Here are his exact words:

In awakening our Buddha nature, we find that there is one further aspect of self to understand, the need to honor our personal destiny....

The universal qualities of our Buddha nature must shine through each of us, evolving out of the individual set of patterns in each person. This *unique set of patterns* we could call our character, our destiny, *our individual path to fulfill*. To discover our destiny is to sense wisely the potential of our individual life and the tasks necessary to fulfill it. To do so is to open to *the mystery of our individual incarnation*.... To sense the patterns and gifts given to us and to fulfill them is a wondrous part of the development of self. It is an honoring of *our potential* and *our unique destiny*. In this we can bring together our practice, our particular tasks in our family and community, fulfilling our capacities, our gifts, and our heart as a *unique individual*. As we do so, our individual nature reflects the universal.

Then when these qualities of the Buddha nature and personal self are combined with a deep realization of the emptiness of the self, we can be said to have fully discovered the nature of the self. This true self is *both unique and universal*. [Emphases mine] (Kornfield, 1993, pp. 211-212)

Not only does Kornfield argue that the Buddhist understanding of a person’s true nature is an individual one with its own patterns, gifts, and destiny; but he further claims that, once

enlightened, this unique self, far from being absorbed into an empty void, co-exists with a universal absolute.

Kornfield's description of the coexistence of a unique individual true nature with a larger all-encompassing universal is, at least to some extent, parallel to Dabrowski's description of this relationship in religion at secondary integration. Religion at level V, Dabrowski says, has the following character:

Union with God is experienced in meditation or in strong intuitive projections, leading to an inner understanding of God, the so-called infused knowledge. The deepest respect and love of God do not obliterate the awareness of one's individuality. This means that the sense of affinity and union with God exists together with preservation of distinct permanent essence. (Dabrowski, 1977, p. 217)

This is not to say Kornfield's understanding of the Buddha nature, is identical to the view of Dabrowski on the personality ideal—simply to suggest that the differences may not be as great as Dabrowski imagined them to be.

Making a distinction between empirical psychology and theology

Of course there are interpretations of the highest form of personality development in both Hinduism and Buddhism that are monistic, at least philosophically. How this is interpreted psychologically by gurus and masters in the various traditions requires further study. Furthermore, without an effort to understand even the philosophical formulations of monism within their cultural and historical contexts, evaluation is presumptuous indeed.

Finally, in closing, I would like to raise a related, and in a way, more fundamental, point. Although it is not easy to separate Dabrowski's empirically based psychological theory from his metaphysical speculations, in my view, the effort must be made. Not everyone who is attracted to the theory of positive disintegration will be inclined toward Kierkegaardian religious existentialism, or necessarily toward any religious perspective at all. Dabrowski had no need to separate his religious beliefs from his psychological theorizing—in all likelihood he would have felt that both his psychological insights and his metaphysical beliefs proceeded as interconnected parts of a whole from his own unique individual essence. However, if the theory of positive disintegration is to gain a wider acceptance, and it seems to me there are very good reasons why it should, then, a distinction must be made between the theory of positive disintegration as an empirically based theory of personality development and Dabrowski's personal metaphysical and religious views.

Notes

1. See entries under my name in a Bibliography of Dabrowski materials, available online at: <http://positivedisintegration.com/DRIBiblio.htm#l-o>. Most of the references under my name have links to the works themselves.
2. For the translations of all passages from *In Search of Mental Health* (1996), I am indebted to Elizabeth Mika.
3. In the volume *In Search of Mental Health*, Dabrowski refers to various sources on Asian religion. The most frequently cited, and the least authentic, is Paul Brunton. Brunton was an

Englishman who was fascinated by the “mystic east,” but was far from an expert in the field of Asian religious thought and practice. He assumed the role of a guru, had a few disciples, and wrote many books (e.g., *A Search in Secret India*) but was something of a harmless fraud. For an entertaining expose of Brunton’s posturing as a guru see Masson (1993). Dabrowski refers to Anagarika Govinda and Christmas Humphries once each. Unfortunately, precise references are not provided, so it is impossible to verify, or ascertain the context for, these quotations.

4. This is a generalization. In China, Vietnam, and Korea, some householders practice Ch’an Buddhism and monastics engage in Pure Land Buddhist practices and conduct Pure Land services for lay persons. In Japan, Zen Buddhism is an independent sect with both monastics and laypersons as members.

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