Evil and the Problem of Impermanence in Medieval Japanese Philosophy

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Abstract

The problem of evil is widely considered a problem only for traditional Western monotheists who believe that there is an omnipotent and morally perfect God. I argue, however, that the problem of evil, more specifically a variant of the problem of evil which I call the 'problem of impermanence', arises even for those adhering to the philosophical and religious traditions of the East. I analyse and assess various responses to the problem of impermanence found in medieval Japanese literature. I argue that the only response that is potentially satisfactory requires supernaturalism. I conclude, therefore, that the problem of impermanence is a unique problem posing a greater challenge to naturalists than to supernaturalists.

1. Introduction

The problem of evil is normally considered a problem only for traditional monotheists who believe that there is an omnipotent and morally perfect God. For instance, in defending the logical problem of evil, J. L. Mackie writes, 'The problem of evil, in the sense in which I shall be using the phrase, is a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good' (Mackie 1955, p. 200). I have argued elsewhere, however, that certain versions of the problem of evil arise not only for traditional theists but also for pantheists, panentheists, axiarchists and even atheists (Nagasawa 2016, 2018, forthcoming). In this paper, I extend my argument even further. I argue that the problem of evil, more specifically a variant of the problem of evil which I call the 'problem of impermanence', arises even for those adhering to the philosophical and religious traditions of the East. I discuss Japanese texts mostly from the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and show how the problem was introduced and addressed by medieval Japanese thinkers. I then argue that a careful analysis of the problem suggests that the only potentially satisfactory solution to the problem requires supernaturalism. I infer from this finding that the problem of impermanence is a unique version of the problem of evil, a version which poses a greater challenge to naturalists than to supernaturalists. This means, I argue, that the problem of impermanence can even be construed as a partial argument for supernaturalism.

This paper has the following structure. In Section 2, I introduce Kamo no Chōmei's work *Hōjōki* (1212), which vividly describes a series of disasters that he witnessed in Kyoto. I explain how his writing invokes philosophical concepts that are commonly discussed in contemporary Western literature that contemplates or analyses the problem of evil. In Section 3 I argue that, contrary to initial appearances, pain and suffering in the midst of disasters are not the main concerns of Chōmei or other Japanese thinkers. Their main concern is rather the impermanence or transience of our existence, which leads us to the problem of impermanence. In Section 4, I introduce and classify four distinct responses to the problem of impermanence found in the Japanese literature: hermitism, hedonism, indifferentism and transcendentalism. In Section 5, I offer a systematic analysis of the problem of impermanence and argue that, ultimately, only transcendentalism, which is based on supernaturalism, has the potential to offer a satisfactory solution to the problem. In Section 6, I summarize the discussion.

2. *Hōjōki* and the Problem of Evil

The most prominent work that is relevant to the problem of evil in the medieval Japanese literature is undoubtedly *Hōjōki* (方丈記), which was written by Kamo no Chōmei (鴨 長明) in 1212. Chōmei was an author and poet who was born the second son of a Shinto priest but later in life lived in seclusion. *Hōjōki*, which records a series of disasters and catastrophes in Kyoto, is recognised as one of the most important literally works in the Kamakura period.[1] In this section, I provide an overview of *Hōjōki* and explain how Chōmei's descriptions of the disasters and catastrophes are relevant to philosophical concepts concerning evil discussed in the West.

Chōmei reports a series of four disasters and catastrophes that people in Kyoto experienced within a nine-year period. The first disaster that he describes is a great fire in 1177. He explains how the fire started in a lodging house for dancers and spread very quickly on the fickle wind. He writes, "For those caught up in the blaze, it must have seemed a nightmare. Some fell, choked with smoke; others were blinded by the flames and quickly perished. Where others managed to escape with their life, they left behind them all their worldly goods" (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 6).

In Western philosophy, moral evil refers to any negative state of affairs, such as a war or a crime, involving pain and suffering brought about by acts of morally significantly free agents. Natural evil involves any negative state of affairs, such as an earthquakes or a tornado, that causes pain and suffering through natural processes. Chōmei notes that an unpredictable wind contributed to the spread of the fire in the city. He implies, however, that this is not an instance of natural evil *alone* because humans are at least partly responsible for the disaster. He writes, "All human undertaking is folly, but it is most particularly futile to spend your wealth and trouble your peace of mind by building a house in the perilous capital". We can hence conclude that the first disaster that Chōmei describes is a tragic combination of natural evil and moral evil.

The second disaster that Chōmei describes is a whirlwind in 1180. He describes how the swirling wind destroyed every single house, large or small, in its path and blew away every last belonging inside the houses into the air, creating a horrible spiralling smoke of dust that blinded the eye. It was so horrible that he wonders if "the karmic wind of hell itself would be such as this". He also writes, "Whirlwinds are quite common, but do they ever blow like this? This was no ordinary wind, and all wondered whether it was not some portent from on high" (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, pp. 6–7). It is notable that Chōmei speculates that the wind might have a supernatural cause. The 'karmic wind of hell' is a translation of '*jigoku no gō no kaze*' (地獄の業の風), which is an enormous storm that is believed to occur in hell in response to human wrongdoing, and the 'portent from on high' is a translation of '*mono no satoshi* (もののさとし)', which literally means the warning of spirits, where 'sprits' refer to gods or Buddhas.

The third disaster that Chōmei describes is a series of famines that took place over a two-year period in 1181–2. He writes that the crops failed as a result of 'disaster followed on disaster' involving drought in the spring and summer and typhoons and floods in the autumn. Chōmei contends that this third disaster started with natural evil but resulted in moral evil. He

[1] Isobe (1976), Karaki (1965) and Takeuchi (2007) discuss many of the medieval Japanese texts that I address in this paper. It should be noted that these authors consider the texts in relation to the concept of impermanence in general rather than the problem of evil or the problem of impermanence specifically. I benefit greatly however from Takeuchi's approach to the texts. Some of the responses to the problem of impermanence that I introduce in Section 4 are based on his classification of distinct responses to impermanence found in medieval Japanese texts.

reports that, because of poverty and hunger, some people went to old temples to steal the Buddhist images and dismantled and broke up woodwork in the worship hall to sell. He writes, "Born into these vile latter days, it has been my lot to witness such heartbreaking things" (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, pp. 9–10). Chōmei also remarks that he observed not only immoral acts but also compassionate and altruistic acts in the midst of the disaster. He writes, "Where a man could not bear to part from his wife, or a woman loved her husband dearly, it was always the one whose love was the deeper who died first—in their sympathy for the other they would put themselves second, and give their partner any rare morsel that came their way. So also, if parent and child lived together the parent was always the first to die; a baby would still lie suckling, unaware that its mother was dead" (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1212/2013, p. 10). These are examples of what Western philosophers consider greater goods realised through negative states of affairs.

The fourth and last disaster that Chōmei describes is a series of earthquakes that struck in 1185. He describes how mountainsides collapsed and tsunamis flooded the land. Not a single temple building or pagoda in the city remained intact and everyone who was indoors at the time was crushed. He remarks, "Among all the terrors, I realized then, the most terrifying is an earthquake" (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, pp. 10–11). Chōmei describes vividly a tragedy that he witnessed in this catastrophe. A small child, who was the only son of a samurai, was building a toy house under the roof of a mud wall when the earthquake struck. The wall collapsed and crushed the child's body so badly that people could not even recognise him. Chōmei writes, "I saw with sympathy and sadness the parents who held the body of the child in their arms crying out loud. It was sad to see that the loss of a child was so unbearable that even a brave samurai could not hide his agony".[2] This can be construed as an example of what Western philosophers have called 'horrendous evil'. Marilyn Adams (1999) defines horrendous evil as a form of evil "the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole" (Adams 1999, p. 26). While we might be comfortable believing that relatively minor mishaps are necessary for the realisation of the greater good, it is significantly more difficult to believe that there is any point to the utterly awful pain and suffering of innocent victims like this.

We have seen Chōmei's descriptions of four terrible disasters, which seem to capture a variety of key philosophical concepts addressed in the contemporary debate in the West over the problem of evil. The first disaster, the great fire, is an outcome of a combination of moral evil and natural evil. It teaches us that moral evil can intensify the impact of natural evil, or vice versa. The second disaster, the whirlwind, seems to involve little human wrongdoing. Chōmei hence describes speculation that it was an instance of evil with a supernatural cause with the intention or effect of warning people. The third disaster, consecutive famines, arose naturally but Chōmei describes how it led people to perform two contrasting types of acts: immoral acts and altruistic acts. The fourth disaster, a series of earthquakes, is comparable to the disaster of the whirlwind but Chōmei records an instance of horrendous evil that he witnessed as its tragic consequence.

3. The Problem of Impermanence

In the previous section, I introduced Chōmei's *Hōjōki* and explained how numerous key concepts concerning evil discussed in the West emerge in his report of disasters and catastrophes in Kyoto. If we place Chōmei's work in the Western framework we can use it as a vivid illustration of the problem of evil for Judeo-Christian theists: how could an omnipotent

[2] Puzzlingly enough, this important passage is omitted from both Hoffmann's and McKinney's translations of *Hōjōki*.

and all-loving God allow these instances of moral evil and natural evil involving pain and suffering for many people in Kyoto in the Kamakura period? It is obvious, however, that the problem that Chōmei raises is distinct from this particular problem because Chōmei and other medieval Japanese thinkers do not believe in the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God. Yet this is not the only reason that the problem that Chōmei raises is distinct from the problem of evil as conceived in the West. I argue that the other and more important reason is that Chōmei's problem focuses primarily on *impermanence* rather than pain and suffering. In what follows, I call the version of the problem of evil discussed mainly in the West, which focuses on pain and suffering realised through moral or natural evil, the 'problem of pain and suffering' and the version of the problem of evil discussed by Chōmei and other medieval Japanese thinkers, which focuses on the impermanence of reality highlighted by examples of moral or natural evil, the 'problem of impermanence'.

Chōmei considers the world and life to be transient, fragile and impermanent. This is based on the Buddhist teaching that impermanence (無常 *mujō* in Japanese) is, along with suffering (苦 *ku* in Japanese) and non-self (無我 *muga* in Japanese), among the Three Marks of Existence (三相 *sansō* in Japanese). His worldview is summed up in the very first passage of *Hōjōki*.

> On flows the river ceaselessly, nor does its water ever stay the same. The bubbles that float upon its pools now disappear, now form anew, but never endure long. And so it is with people in this world, and with their dwellings. (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 5)

Chōmei is making two claims here. The first is that the world is analogous to a ceaseless flow of water because it undergoes continuous change. This dynamic view of reality is often compared to Heraclitus's thesis that one cannot step into the same river twice. The second is that people and their dwellings are akin to floating bubbles in the water in the river because their existence is temporary, transient and fragile. Chōmei continues:

> . . . The places remain, as full of people as ever, but of those one saw there once now only one or two in twenty or thirty still survive. Death in the morning, at evening another birth—this is the way of things, no different from the bubbles on the stream.
>
> Where do they come from, these newborn? Where do the dead go? I do not know. Nor do I know why our hearts should fret over these brief dwellings, or our eyes find such delight in them. An owner and his home vie in their impermanence, as the vanishing dew upon the morning glory. The dew may disappear while the flower remains yet it lives on only to fade with the morning sun. Or perhaps the flower wilts while the dew still lies but though it stays, it too will be gone before the evening. (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 5)

In the above quote, Chōmei says that we are part of the perpetual cycle of birth and death and that this is 'the way of things' (ならひ *narai* in Japanese). He then wonders about the origin and ultimate destiny of our existence. That Chōmei wonders about them seems to imply that he thinks that our existence transcends material reality, but he does not elaborate this point any further. He then considers the meaning of life. He wonders why our hearts should fret over our existence if its briefness is analogised to that of a vanishing dew drop on a flower. One might compare Chōmei's view to Seneca's well-known view of the shortness of life. Their views are, however, distinct. Seneca says that despite its short appearance life is actually long enough. He writes, 'Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested' (Seneca 2004/49AD, p. 1). Chōmei, on the other hand, says that life *is* indeed short.

Chōmei laments that while people recognise that pain and suffering experienced in disasters and catastrophes are good reminders of the impermanence of life they tend to forget about it as time passes. After describing the earthquake disaster, Chōmei writes:

> At the time, all spoke of how futile everything was in the face of life's uncertainties, and their hearts seemed for a while a little less clouded by worldliness, but time passed, and now, years later, no one so much as mentions that time.
> (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 11)

It is worth emphasising that Chōmei's main focus here is on impermanence, not pain and suffering, which are only reminders or highlighters of impermanence. This marks the difference between the problem of pain and suffering and the problem of impermanence.

The concept of impermanence is not unique to Chōmei's work. In fact, it is a theme that is widespread in Japanese literature and artwork, particularly in the Kamakura period. For example, in his *Essays in Idleness* (徒然草 *Tsurezuregusa* in Japanese), the monk Yoshida Kenkō presents a dynamic, impermanent worldview that is comparable to Chōmei's:

> This world is changeable as the deeps and shallows of Asuka River—time passes, what was here is gone, joy and grief visit by turns, once splendid places change to abandoned wastelands, and even the same house as of old is now home to different people. The peach and the plum tree utter nothing—with whom can we speak of past things? Still more moving in its transience is the ruin of some fine residence of former times, whose glory we never saw. (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 33)

Like Chōmei, Kenkō compares the intransient nature of reality with a river and applies the metaphor to human life.

> There is no choosing your moment, however, when it comes to illness, childbirth or death. You cannot call these things off because 'the time isn't right'. The truly momentous events of life—the changes from birth through life, transformation and death—are like the powerful current of a raging river. They surge ever forward without a moment's pause. Thus, when it comes to the essentials, both in religious and in worldly life, you should not wait for the right moment in what you wish to achieve, nor dawdle over preparations. Your feet must never pause.
>
> . . . The seasons progress in a fixed order. Not so the time of death. We do not always see its approach; it can come upon us from behind. People know that they will die, but death will surprise them while they believe it is not yet close. (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 98)

Another well-known work from the Kamakura period that represents the concept of impermanence is *The Tale of the Heike* (平家物語, *Heike Monogatari* in Japanese), a war epic describing the rise and fall of the Taira clan over a twenty-year period. Starting with the victory of the clan in two civil wars against the Minamoto clan, Taira no Kiyomori from the Taira clan becomes the first courtier from a warrior family as Chief Minister of the government. At its peak, the Taira clan governed more than half of the country. However, the frustration of the oppressed public and their rivals causes further wars against the Taira clan, which ultimately ends with the defeat of the Taira clan by the Minamoto clan led by Minamoto no Yoshitsune in the final battle of Dan-no-ura. Yet the epic does not end there. After a power struggle, even the war hero Yoshitsune is killed by his own brother Minamoto no Yoritomo. The anonymous author of the tale presents the epic as a spectacular illustration of the impermanence of our existence and introduces the following poem:

> The Jetavana Temple bells
> ring the passing of all things.
> Twinned sal trees, white in full flower,
> declare the great man's certain fall.

> The arrogant do not long endure:
> They are like a dream one night in spring.
> The bold and brave perish in the end:
> They are as dust before the wind.
> Far away in the Other Realm,
> Zhao Gao of Qin, Wang Mang of Han,
> Zhu Yi of Liang, Lushan of Tang
> Spurned the governance established
> By their lords of old, by sovereign past,
> Sought pleasure and ignored all warnings,
> Blind to ruin threatening the realm,
> Deaf to the suffering people's cries.
> So it was that they did not last:
> Their lot was annihilation.
> . . .
> (Tyler thirteenth century/2014, p. 3)

This passage is one of the most well-known expressions of *Shogyō Mujō* (諸行無常), the Buddhist thesis that everything in reality, in both their appearances and essences, is impermanent. '[T]he great man's certain fall' is a translation of *Seija Hissuino Ri* (盛者必衰の理), which literally means 'the law' (理; *ri* in Japanese) in accordance with which even the prosperous inevitably decay. It is notable that the author of the *Tale of the Heike* compares the rise and fall of people in power to 'a dream one night in spring' because a dream is a common metaphor for impermanence in Japanese culture. As Seiichi Takeuchi notes, dreams share many characteristics or implications of impermanence, including transience, futility, perplexity, unpredictability and, incoherence (Takeuchi 2007, 27–28). Dreams are considered 'unreal' because they are always elusive and ephemeral; yet these authors point out that life itself is also elusive and ephemeral.

The distinction between the problem of pain and suffering and the problem of impermanence can be made by referencing the three types of suffering (三苦 *sanku* in Japanese) recognised in Buddhism, as follows:

> The suffering of suffering (苦苦 *kuku* in Japanese): This refers to physical and mental sufferings that we experience when we face illness, death or other difficulties in life.
>
> The suffering of change (壊苦 *eku* in Japanese): This refers to sufferings that we experience when pleasurable things become unpleasurable because of the dynamic nature of reality. Since all is impermanent, even things that we find highly pleasurable will eventually become unpleasurable.
>
> The suffering of existence (行苦 *gyoku* in Japanese): This refers to suffering that we experience due to our conditioned state and dissatisfaction with the impermanence of everything. Even if we are currently having pleasurable experience we can suffer existentially by recognising that the pleasure does not last forever.

The problem of pain and suffering as it is discussed in the West focuses on the 'suffering of suffering', which is realised through moral or natural evil. The problem of impermanence found in the medieval Japanese literature, on the other hand, focuses on the 'suffering of change' and the 'suffering of existence', which arise from the impermanent and ephemeral nature of reality

and our recognition of that ephemerality. Pain and suffering are apt illustrations of impermanence but they are not essential ingredients. In fact, the problem of impermanence can also be presented by referring to pleasure and joy instead of pain and suffering. Even if we have pleasure and joy we can still suffer from them because they do not last forever (the 'suffering of change') and we still remain conditioned and dissatisfied with our existence (the 'suffering of existence').

The above point about the suffering of change and existence is illustrated in Japanese literature. For instance, as we have seen, in *Essays in Idleness*, Kenkō writes, "time passes, what was here is gone, joy and grief visit by turns, once splendid places change to abandoned wastelands. . . . Still more moving in its transience is the ruin of some fine residence of former times, whose glory we never saw." (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 33). Similarly, the author of the *Tale of the Heike* talks about 'the great man's certain fall', whose life is like 'a dream one night in spring' and '[t]he bold and brave' who 'perish in the end' (Tyler thirteenth century/2014, p. 3). Even if life is filled with success and glory it is not everlasting and it always comes to an end. There are many more textual examples illustrating that pleasure and joy, rather than pain and suffering, can occasion the problem of impermanence. The author, poet and courtier in the Heian period (794–1185), Ki no Tsurayuki, for instance, writes in the *Kokin Wakashū*:

> the air is still and
> sun-warmed on this day of spring—
> why then do cherry
> blossoms cascade to the earth
> with such restless changeful hearts
> (Rodd and Henkenius 905/2004, p. 73)

Tsurayuki compares the joyful events in life with magnificent cherry blossoms in spring and wonders why such pleasurable things cannot last forever. Similarly, Ariwara no Narihira, another poet in the Heian period, writes:

> if this world had never
> known the ephemeral charms
> of cherry blossoms
> then our hearts in spring might match
> nature's deep tranquillity
> (Rodd and Henkenius 905/2004, p. 64)

Like Tsurayuki, Narihira compares the pleasure of life to the beauty of cherry blossoms and wonders how calm we would feel if life had not involved any pleasurable events, which never last forever. We often realise impermanence through the occurrence of negative events, such as sudden death and unexpected illness, but we can also recognise it through positive events that give us pleasure and joy. We could of course feel pain or suffering by observing the end of pleasure and joy but, again, pain and suffering are not essential to the problem of impermanence. Consider, for example, someone who experiences a great deal of pleasure and joy but suddenly falls into a deep coma and dies without waking up. Here the problem of impermanence arises even though pain and suffering are not present.

In Section 2, we saw that Chōmei's descriptions of pain and suffering in the midst of disasters and catastrophes in Kyoto raise important philosophical concepts concerning evil as Western philosophers discuss it. Yet, I have argued in this section that the focus of Chōmei's and other medieval Japanese authors is not on pain and suffering themselves. Their focus is rather on impermanence. For them, pain and suffering are only vivid reminders or highlighters of impermanence. Hence, these texts in medieval Japanese literature should be construed as works that are most relevant to the problem of impermanence rather than to the problem of pain and suffering.

4. Responses to the Problem of Impermanence

Western authors in the Judeo-Christian tradition respond to the problem of pain and suffering by trying to show how it is possible for God to allow pain and suffering despite His omnipotence and all-lovingness. Japanese authors present radically distinct responses to the problem of impermanence. This is unsurprising because the problem of impermanence is not concerned with the existence of God; it is rather a problem concerning how we can understand, respond to and cope with impermanence. It is difficult to locate clear statements of the Japanese authors' responses to the problem of impermanence because they do not address the problem in a structured and systematic manner. We can nevertheless identify the following four distinct responses in their poetry and literary work: (1) hermitism, (2) hedonism, (3) indifferentism and (4) transcendentalism. Let us synopsise each of them here and assess them in detail in the next section.

Response 1: Hermitism

The first response to the problem of impermanence found in the medieval Japanese literature is what I call 'hermitism'. According to hermitism, the best response to the problem is to live a simple life as a hermit and stay away from any potential disasters and catastrophes that we may encounter in civilization. Chōmei claims that the key to enduring our impermanent and ephemeral existence is to place ourselves in the right environment in which we can stay calm and free ourselves from unnecessary concerns and worries. He writes:

> Yes, take it for all in all, this world is a hard place to live, and both we and our dwellings are fragile and impermanent, as these [disastrous] events reveal. And besides, there are the countless occasions when situation or circumstance cause us anguish. . . .
>
> If you live in a cramped city area, you cannot escape disaster when a fire springs up nearby. If you live in some remote place, commuting to and fro is filled with problems, and you are in constant danger from thieves. A powerful man will be beset by cravings, one without family ties will be scorned. Wealth brings great anxiety, while with poverty come fierce resentments. Dependence on others puts you in their power, while care for others will snare you in the worldly attachments of affection. Follow the social rules, and they hem you in; fail to do so, and you are thought as good as crazy. (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 12)

Chōmei's hermitism is obviously influenced by the Buddhist teaching to relinquish all worldly attachments and pursue equanimity (捨 *sha* in Japanese). Equanimity is a perfectly balanced mental state that is free from emotional disturbances and should be cultivated towards *nirvana* (涅槃 *nehan* in Japanese). It is important to note that Chōmei's response is not a mere theoretical solution to the problem of impermanence. It is indeed a lifestyle, which Chōmei himself adopted. Past thirty years old, Chōmei moved into a small house, which was a tenth the size of his previous house, to pursue a modest life and, eventually, at the age of fifty, he renounced the world to become a lay monk as well as a hermit. He writes, "I had never had wife and children, so there were no close ties that were difficult to break. I had no rank and salary to forgo. What was there to hold me to the world?" (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 12).

Chōmei's last house, which he built at the age of sixty, was a mere ten feet square, and less than seven feet high. He continues:

> . . .The hermit crab prefers a little shell for his home. He knows what the world holds. The osprey chooses the wild shoreline, and this is because he fears mankind. And I too am the same. Knowing what the world holds and its ways, I desire nothing from it, nor

> chase after its prizes. My one craving is to be at peace, my one pleasure to live free of troubles. . . . (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, pp. 16–17)

Kenkō also describes, in his *Essays in Idleness,* his pursuit of hermitism as a response to the problem of impermanence. Like Chōmei, Kenkō emphasises the importance of solitude in living in the impermanent world.

> What kind of man will feel depressed at being idle? There is nothing finer than to be alone with nothing to distract you.
>
> If you follow the ways of the world, your heart will be drawn to its sensual defilements and easily led astray; if you go among people, your words will be guided by others' responses rather than come from the heart. . . Even if you do not yet understand the True Way, you can achieve what could be termed temporary happiness at least by removing yourself from outside influences, taking no part in the affairs of the world, calming yourself and stilling the mind. As *The Great Cessation and Insight* says, we must 'break all ties with everyday life, human affairs, the arts and scholarship. (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, pp. 58–9)

The Great Cessation and Insight (摩訶止観 *Maka Shikan* in Japanese) is a Chinese Buddhist doctrinal treatise from the sixth century. Notice that Kenkō says that even if we do not succeed in becoming enlightened it is, practically speaking, nevertheless worth detaching ourselves from worldly affairs because we can still achieve temporary happiness.

Hermitism offers *practical* advice about how we should live in response to the problem of impermanence. This stands in clear contrast to common responses to the problem of pain and suffering in the West, which tend to be purely theoretical.

Response 2: Hedonism

The second response to the problem of impermanence is what I call 'hedonism'. Hedonism is comparable to hermitism in the sense that it offers practical advice. However, its advice contrasts sharply with that of hermitism. As its name suggests, hedonism advises us to pursue hedonistic pleasure and enjoy our impermanent existence as much as possible, instead of renouncing the world and living in isolation.

Ōtomo no Tabito, a court noble and poet whose life bridged the mid-Asuka (592–710) period through the early Nara period (710–794), presents his version of hedonism in the following poem:

> All living things die in the end:
> So long as I live here
> I want the cup of pleasure
> (Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 2005, p. 118)

When referring to the cup of pleasure, Tabito means enjoying his time with the help of alcoholic drink. In fact, the above is among his 'Thirteen Poems in Praise of Saké (rice wine)'. The use of alcohol is more explicit in another of his poems:

> Ceasing to live this wretched life of man,
> O that I were a saké-jar;
> Then should I be soaked with saké!
> (Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 2005, p. 117)

The use of alcohol, as opposed to other pastimes, is important in this context. Impermanence makes us feel that our existence is elusive and dream-like but when we are drunk it feels even more elusive and dream-like. Takeuchi therefore calls hermits' approach to impermanence "going deeper into dreams" (Takeuchi 2007, p. 98).

In another poem in the same set, Tabito presents hedonism as a form of anti-intellectualism:

> Grotesque! When I look upon a man

Who drinks no saké, looking wise,
How like an ape he is!
(Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 2005, p. 117)

This poem represents Tabito's view that, unlike hermitism, which is often pursued by intellectuals, hedonism is a down-to-earth response available to ordinary people. It is interesting to note that even though Tabito ridicules intellectuals who pursue hermitism he also seems to acknowledge that the lifestyle that hedonism recommends is not respectable:

If I could but be happy in this life,
What should I care if in the next
I become a bird or a worm!
(Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 2005, p. 118)

Tabito accepts that his hedonism is not praiseworthy. That is why he thinks that its consequence may be that he will be reborn as a bird or a worm. Yet he says, or perhaps pretends, that he does not mind that prospect as long as he can enjoy his current moment in impermanent and ephemeral reality. Tabito also writes:

Far better, it seems, than uttering pompous words
And looking wise,
To drink sake and weep drunken tears
(Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 2005, p. 117)

The first line of the poem represents another example of Tabito's anti-intellectualism. Yet the phrase 'drunken tears' also suggests that Tabito is not entirely content with hedonism. Hedonists cannot but weep because while they advocate that drinking is the best response to the problem of impermanence they still cannot overcome the sad reality that everything comes to an end. Perhaps, ironically, the more fun they have the more vividly they realise that their enjoyment will not last forever.

The *Kanginshū* is a collection of popular songs and ballads compiled by an unidentified Buddhist monk in the late Sengoku period (1336–1573). We can see a somewhat humorous defence of hedonism in one of its poems:

The world slips away bit by bit – *chriori, chirori*

What is strange about that? After all
Our sad world is a small boat in a storm

What is strange about that? After all
How many people live to seventy

This, that and everything else to—
A dream, a phantom, foam on the stream.
Life lasts no longer than dew on a leaf
And even then it is tasteless and flat

A dream, a phantom
God Damn It

Who can bear the sight of a person that looks like he understands
Oh world of dreams, dreams—
His face alone looks like it knew everything

What can you do with
'Understanding'. After all

Life is a dream—
Be crazy—that is all
(Hoff 1978, pp. 19–20)

The phrase '*chirori*' (or '*chirari*' in modern Japanese) means a brief moment, which, in this context, refers to the short duration of our existence. Like Tabito's poem above, the song seems to contain a hint of pessimism. It compares '[o]ur sad world' with a small boat in a storm and laments the shortness of life: '[l]ife lasts no longer than dew on a leaf' and 'it is tasteless and flat'. And, again like Tabito's poem, it also expresses a form of anti-intellectualism. It ridicules intellectuals who pretend to understand everything when they themselves are no different from someone carried on a small boat in a storm. Hedonism discourages people from intellectualising the impermanence of life and encourages them simply to accept it and go crazy while they are alive.

In sum: hedonism is comparable to hermitism in the sense that it offers a practical solution to the problem of impermanence. However, hedonists reject hermitism for its underlying intellectualism. According to hedonism, there is no sober, sophisticated intellectual answer to the problem of impermanence. All we can do is intoxicate ourselves to try to enjoy our present moment and forget about or go deeper into an elusive and ephemeral reality.

Response 3: Indifferentism

The third response to the problem of impermanence is what I call 'indifferentism'. According to this response, we should simply accept the impermanence of reality because there is no point in trying to overcome it. We have no control over it, the view says, because we ourselves are fundamentally impermanent. This is a unique response because it is a response which does not offer any substantial 'solution' to the problem. In this sense, indifferentism is deemed a 'no response' response.

We saw earlier that Kenkō pursues hermitism as a response to the problem of impermanence. Yet he presents self-criticism in the following passage:

> [Life] is like the game of *mamakodate*, played with *sugoroku* pieces, in which no one knows which in the line of pieces will be removed next—when the count is made and a piece is taken, the rest seem to have escaped, but the count goes on and more are picked off in turn, so that no piece is finally spared. Soldiers going into battle, aware of the closeness of death, forget their home and their own safety. And it is sheer folly for a man who lives secluded from the world in his lowly hut, spending his days in idle delight in his garden, to pass off such matters as irrelevant to himself. Do you imagine that the enemy Impermanence will not come forcing its way into your peaceful mountain retreat? The recluse faces death as surely as the soldier setting forth to battle. (**137** McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 90)

Kenkō thinks that life is like a game which is guaranteed to end in our loss (death) even though we do not know when that will happen. In the above passage, Kenkō is critical of people like Chōmei and himself who intellectualise the problem of impermanence and willingly live as hermits as if they can escape it. Kenkō acknowledges that soldiers who firmly realise that their own death can happen at any moment know better than intellectual hermits because they face impermanence directly without pretending that it can be avoided. What soldiers embrace here is indifferentism.

Saigyō, a poet and Buddhist monk who lived in the late Heian period through the early Kamakura period, was another prominent figure who renounced the world to pursue hermitism. Yet in his poetry he also wonders if he is truly more successful in overcoming impermanence than ordinary people, who appear to accept impermanence as it is.

And vow renouncement of the world
But cannot let it go

Some who have never taken vows
Do cast the world away
(Takagi 1977, p. 53)

Saigyō decided to live in isolation because he wanted to rid himself of his worldly desires. Yet he wonders if his very decision to take such a radical move shows that he cares too much about the world. Perhaps ordinary people living ordinary lives are less concerned about worldly desires and, in this way, they react better to impermanence.

Kenkō goes further. He says not only that impermanence is inevitable but that it should be welcomed.

> If our life did not fade and vanish like the dews of Adashino's graves or the drifting smoke from Toribe's burning grounds, but lingered on for ever, how little the world would move us. It is the ephemeral nature of things that makes them wonderful.
>
> Among all living creatures, it is man that lives longest. The brief dayfly dies before evening; summer's cicada knows neither spring nor autumn. What a glorious luxury it is to taste life to the full for even a single year. If you constantly regret life's passing, even a thousand long years will seem but the dream of a night.
>
> (**7** McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, pp. 23–24)

Kenkō seems to be suggesting here that prolonging life does not make it worthwhile; life is worthwhile precisely because it ends at some point. Extending life much longer, he says, does not make it better.

In sum: indifferentism maintains that we should simply accept that life and the world are impermanent because they are beyond our control; hence, we should live ordinary life as it is. We should even welcome impermanence because life could not be worthwhile if it was permanent.

Response 4: Transcendentalism

The fourth and last response to the problem of impermanence found in medieval Japanese literature is what I call 'transcendentalism'. According to this response, we can overcome impermanence by transcending our impermanent existence. Takeuchi uses the phrase 'going beyond dreams' to characterise this response and describes it as the belief that "while the world is like a dream, there is an outer world that is more real which we can wake up into" (Takeuchi 2007, p. 27). Our goal is, according to this approach, to 'wake up' from an elusive, dream-like, impermanent reality into a new, transcendental reality.

Iroha is an old Japanese pangram poem comparable to an alphabet song, one that many people in Japan can recite even today. The earliest appearance of the song is found in *Readings of Golden Light Sutra* (金光明最勝王経音義 *Konkōmyōsaishōōkyō Ongi* in Japanese), which was written in the Heian period.

Although its scent still lingers on
    the form of a flower has scattered away
For whom will the glory
    of this world remain unchanged?
Arriving today at the yonder side
    of the deep mountains of evanescent existence
We shall never allow ourselves to drift away
    intoxicated, in the world of shallow dreams
(Abé 1999, p. 398)

The poem tells us to realise our impermanent existence in the changing world by looking at blossoming flowers which, despite their beauty, will inevitably scatter in the end. It then encourages us to avoid absorbing ourselves into the dream-like, elusive reality and instead overcome impermanence by crossing the deep mountains of karma. As Takeuchi contends, the

Iroha song has two elements: (i) the affirmation that reality is impermanent and (ii) the determination to try to transcend the impermanence (Takeuchi 2007, p. 35). The first element corresponds to the problem of impermanence and the second element corresponds to transcendentalism as a response to the problem.

The following is a waka by Ki no Tsurayuki in the *Kokin Wakashū*:

sleeping I see him—
awake and still I see that
vision before me
ah truly do they say this
locust shell world is a dream
(Rodd and Henkenius 905/2004, p. 288)

Tsurayuki says that whether he is asleep or awake he can envision the deceased loved one. The deceased who left the impermanent realm for transcendental reality is, Tsurayuki says, comparable to a cicada that shed its skin and flew away. Such a transcendental realm feels more real and the fact that he was left alone in this world enhances his realisation that our world is like an impermanent dream.

Saigyō similarly writes:

All in the world
Is a dream, I see,
And seeing its transience,
yet still, still
my heart does not awake!
(Stoneman 2010, p. 75)

Saigyō expresses his frustration that he still cannot wake up into a new reality despite his recognition that the world is as elusive as a dream.

We have seen four responses to the problem of impermanence. Hermitism suggests that we renounce civilisation and avoid potential dangers and difficulties in our ephemeral and fragile existence. Hedonism suggests that we enjoy ourselves with alcoholic drinks so that we can forget about the impermanence of life. Indifferentism offers no solution to the problem but encourages us to live an ordinary life by accepting impermanence as unavoidable. Transcendentalism advises us to try to overcome impermanent reality by waking up into a new transcendental reality.

5. Assessing the Four Responses

In this section I argue that the problem of impermanence is, along with the problem of pain and suffering, a version of what I call the ‘problem of expectation mismatch’. Understanding the problem of impermanence in this way we can correctly assess the abovementioned four responses to it.

The problem of expectation mismatch is a general problem which arises when there is a gap between one’s expectation of how reality should be and how reality actually looks. Consider, for example, the problem of pain and suffering as a version of the problem of expectation mismatch. Judeo-Christian theism teaches us that the world was created by an all-powerful, all-loving God. Many theists, therefore, naturally but also naïvely expect the world to be free from pain and suffering. Our observation shows, however, that the world is filled with pain and suffering. Hence, we face an expectation mismatch: there is a gap between our optimistic expectation of how the world should be and the less optimistic observation of how the world actually looks. In the same manner, many other problems for Judeo-Christian theism, such as the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of no best possible world, can be construed as versions of the problem of expectation mismatch.

The problem of expectation mismatch, however, need not be based on Judeo-Christian theism. In fact, the problem of impermanence is a version of the problem of expectation mismatch based on Buddhism. We often naively assume that everything, including our existence and dwellings, continues to exist indefinitely or we suspend our belief about their impermanence for practical or psychological reasons. That is why, as the medieval Japanese authors point out, wealthy people pursue more wealth and powerful people pursue more power as if they could flourish indefinitely. According to Buddhism, however, everything is impermanent and transient. Even those who achieve significant wealth, power or even happiness eventually age and die. This coincides with our less naïve and more careful observation of the world. Hence, we face an expectation mismatch: there is a gap between our naïve, optimistic expectation of how the world should be and the less optimistic observation of how the world actually looks.

It is interesting to note a structural difference between the problem of pain and suffering and the problem of impermanence. On the one hand, the problem of pain and suffering derives an expectation mismatch from an optimistic view of the world based on religious belief and a less optimistic view of the world based on our observation. On the other hand, the problem of impermanence derives an expectation mismatch from an optimistic view of the world based on our (naïve) observation and a less optimistic view of the world based on religious belief. Hence, while religious belief underpins an optimistic view that is implicit in the problem of pain and suffering it underpins a less optimistic view that is implicit in the problem of impermanence.

In what follows, I argue that we can correctly assess the abovementioned four responses by construing the problem of impermanence as a version of the problem of expectation mismatch. I try to show through our analysis that the only response that is potentially successful is transcendentalism, which requires supernaturalism, and that this finding suggests that the problem of impermanence poses a greater challenge to naturalism than to supernaturalism. Conversely, I argue, the problem of impermanence can be considered a partial argument for supernaturalism and against naturalism.

Assessing Hermitism

The first response to the problem of impermanence to be assessed is hermitism. Considering the problem of impermanence as a version of the problem of expectation mismatch, we can construe hermitism as an attempt to close the gap between our naively optimistic view of reality and the less optimistic view of reality according to Buddhism by minimising negativity in reality. Hermits try to show that, despite impermanence, we can still be content with life if we avoid the negative consequences of human wrongdoings and natural disasters by living in isolation. This is a ‘defensive’ response to the problem of impermanence, a response that is designed to reduce the amount of pain and suffering in reality.

I argue, however, that there are at least three reasons to conclude that hermitism cannot be an ultimate solution to the problem of impermanence. First, while hermits may be successful in avoiding certain types of pain and suffering associated with life in civilisation they may also inadvertently promote other types of pain and suffering that are unique to life in isolation. They may also inadvertently relinquish types of pleasure and joy that can be experienced only by living in civilisation. Hence, it is not obvious that hermits can fill the gap between our naïvely optimistic expectation of reality and the less optimistic view of reality according to Buddhism. Second, hermits cannot escape negativity entirely by living in isolation because, according to Buddhism, pain and suffering arise from birth, aging, illness and dying, which are rooted in human nature. The expectation mismatch gap will remain even if we adopt hermitism.

Third, and crucially, hermitism is at best a response to the problem of pain and suffering, not the problem of impermanence. If we succeed in avoiding pain and suffering, or the ‘suffering of suffering’, to use Buddhist terminology, by living as hermits, impermanence may

become less visible because pain and suffering are highlighters of impermanence. Yet we still cannot escape the 'suffering of change' and the 'suffering of existence', which are directly related to the problem of impermanence. In this sense, hermits like Chōmei seem to conflate the highlighters of impermanence with impermanence itself. Hermits may be able to eliminate a certain amount of pain and suffering but they fail to overcome impermanence itself.

One might argue at this point that my interpretation of hermitism is uncharitable. What hermits try to do, according to this criticism, is to minimise the 'suffering of change' by living in isolation so that they are not constantly influenced by the dynamic nature of human affairs and nature. Even if this interpretation is correct, though, the hermitic approach has only a limited effect on the problem of impermanence because, given the temporality of our existence, hermits are still vulnerable to the 'suffering of change' and the 'suffering of existence'. A critic might also try to reject my interpretation of hermitism by saying that hermits do not mean that hermitism is the *ultimate* solution to the problem of impermanence; it is only a transition towards transcendentalism, whose goal is to reach *nirvana*. This is not what Chōmei says in *Hōjōki* but Kenkō seems to be aware of this point in *Essays in Idleness* where he says, "Even if you do not yet understand the True Way, you can achieve what could be termed temporary happiness at least by removing yourself from outside influences, taking no part in the affairs of the world, calming yourself and stilling the mind." (McKinney, Yoshida and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, pp. 58–9). I do not reject Kenkō's claim here because it is compatible with my thesis that transcendentalism is the only response that has the potential to offer an ultimate solution.

Assessing Hedonism

The second response to assess is hedonism. Like hermitism, hedonism offers practical advice. However, hedonism provides us with a good contrast to hermitism because it is an 'offensive', rather than 'defensive', response. Again, hermits claim that the best way to live our ephemeral existence is to eliminate unnecessary worries by living in isolation; their interest is not in maximising pleasure but in minimising worries. Hedonists maintain, on the other hand, that the best way to live our ephemeral existence is to try to enjoy ourselves as much as possible, particularly with the help of alcoholic drink; their interest is not in minimising worries but in maximising pleasure. In other words, while hermits try to fill the gap in the expectation mismatch by reducing negativity in reality hedonists try to fill it by enhancing positivity in reality. This makes sense given that, as we have seen above, hedonism is often pursued as a critical, anti-intellectualist reaction to hermitism.

I argue that Hedonism also fails as an ultimate solution to the problem of impermanence. First, while hedonists may be successful in promoting hedonistic pleasure and joy they may also inadvertently relinquish certain types of pleasure and joy that are unique to ordinary, non-hedonistic life. They may also inadvertently promote types of pain and suffering that arise only in hedonistic life. Hence, it is not obvious that hedonism can fill the gap between our naïvely optimistic expectation of reality and the less optimistic view of reality according to Buddhism.

Second, if Buddhism is right hedonists cannot escape negativity entirely by living hedonistically because, again, pain and suffering arise from birth, aging, illness and dying, which are rooted in our human nature.

Third, more importantly, hedonists' attempt to promote pleasure and joy can backfire because pleasure and joy, as much as pain and suffering, can be highlighters of impermanence. As we have seen, medieval Japanese authors vividly illustrate impermanence by referring not only to pain and suffering but also to pleasure and joy. By enhancing pleasure and joy, therefore, hedonists may experience 'suffering of change' and 'suffering of existence' more intensely. Fourth, unlike hermitism, hedonism cannot be adopted even as a transitional step towards transcendentalism because, according to Buddhism, pursuing worldly desires like pleasure and

joy will keep us away from *nirvana*. Tabito seems to recognise this problem when he expresses cynicism or guilt regarding his pursuit of hedonism in saying that he cannot but try to have fun even if he has to reborn as a bird or a worm. I conclude, therefore, that hedonism cannot be an ultimate solution to the problem of impermanence.

Assessing Indifferentism

The third response to assess is indifferentism. Unlike hermitism and hedonism, this response suggests that we should not do anything but simply live ordinary lives. Considering indifferentism as a response to expectation mismatch, we can understand it as the view that we should accept reality as it is according to Buddhism; there is no need to attempt to decrease negativity or increase positivity in reality. Once we accept the Buddhist dynamic view of reality our naïve optimistic expectation should be corrected in such a way that it is within our expectation that life is impermanent and full of pain and suffering. Unlike hermitism and hedonism, indifferentism addresses the problem of impermanence directly. As I have argued, hermitism and hedonism are misguided because they eliminate or alleviate pain and suffering, which are only highlighters of impermanence, rather than impermanence itself. Indifferentism, on the other hand, faces the problem of impermanence directly and encourages us to accept our impermanent existence at face value and live ordinary lives accordingly. This is, again, a 'no response' response because it discourages us from making any changes to our lifestyles. Hence, nearly everyone who is not aware of the problem of impermanence has in effect already adopted this response.

Indifferentism seems problematic because it faces a paradox: there cannot be genuine indifferentism as a response to the problem of impermanence because once we recognise impermanence as a philosophical problem, we cannot just live ordinary lives as ordinary people. Trying to live ordinary lives as reflective thinkers responding to the problem of impermanence is not the same as living ordinary lives as genuinely ordinary people. This point is compatible with Chōmei's claim that soldiers seem to accept impermanence better than an intellectual like himself and with Saigyō's claim that people who have never taken vows are better at renouncing the world than hermits like himself.

Setting aside the paradox of the impossibility of genuine indifferentism, I believe that indifferentism is a coherent response to the problem of impermanence. It accepts impermanence as it is and simply swallows it. It is comparable to pessimism about reality and life, which I also believe to be a coherent, if unattractive, view. Yet indifferentism is not a satisfying *solution* to the problem of impermanence because instead of solving the problem it only accepts impermanence as an unsolvable problem. It would be ideal if there were a solution that gives us a more optimistic perspective. I argue in what follows that transcendentalism is the only such solution.

Assessing Transcendentalism

We have assessed three responses to the problem of impermanence: hermitism, hedonism and indifferentism. They are compatible with naturalism because none of the three requires any supernaturalist belief. The fourth and final response that we assess here is transcendentalism, which is the only response requiring supernaturalist belief. I argue that this response is also the only response which has the potential to solve the problem of impermanence in a satisfactory manner. This means that the problem of impermanence may poses a more significant challenge to naturalists, or at least those who reject indifferentism, than to supernaturalists.

As we have seen, transcendentalism suggests that we can overcome impermanence by waking up into a new reality. Yet in their writings the medieval Japanese thinkers that we have considered are not explicit about what such a new reality is. I submit that there are at least two

versions of transcendentalism in the Eastern framework, which correspond to two distinct ways of understanding the new reality.

The first version of transcendentalism, which I call 'ineffable transcendentalism', is based on the Buddhist approach to impermanence. Given the influence of Buddhism in Japan it is natural to think that many medieval Japanese thinkers have this sort of view in mind when they write about the possibility of a new reality. Buddhism affirms impermanence through and through. It is not merely that our current realm or our bodily existence is impermanent; absolutely *everything* is impermanent. For instance, Pure Land Buddhism (浄土仏教 *jōdo bukkyō* in Japanese), which spread widely in Japan during the Kamakura period, encourages people to repeat a mantra to be reborn in the pure land. Yet even the pure land is not a permanent realm like heaven in the Christian tradition where God is believed to reign eternally. Anything that may exist, whether heaven, hell, gods, selves or souls, is impermanent in Buddhist metaphysics.

How can we resolve the problem of impermanence if the possibility of permanence is precluded universally? More specifically, how can *we* overcome impermanence if there is no such thing as the permanent self? According to ineffable transcendentalism, we can respond to the problem of impermanence by transcending impermanence rather than by denying impermanence or stipulating permanence. Buddhism places us in *samsara* (輪廻 *rinne* in Japanese), the continuous cycle of death and rebirth, and encourages us to escape from this cycle. There is no 'true self' or 'permanent soul' transmigrating in this metaphysical system. Our ultimate soteriological goal is *nirvana*, an ineffable and indescribable state of enlightenment, which represents an escape from the cycle.

Nirvana is analogised to 'blowing out' a flame, meaning ending the cycle of rebirth and death, a long process which involves states of being that are conditioned, impermanent and unsatisfactory. Liberation from impermanence and suffering is equivalent to realising what Buddhism calls non-self (無我 *muga* in Japanese) or emptiness (空 *kū* in Japanese). That is, ineffable transcendentalism suggests that a solution to the problem of impermanence is not to try to find or realise the permanent self, which does not exist, but to achieve the state of non-self or the lack of any self, which presents a state of release from suffering and impermanence. *Nirvana* is not eternal in the sense that it does not exist for an endless duration of time; it is timeless, in the sense that it is not even a temporal state. This state is neither 'super existence' nor mere 'extinction'; it is a state of freedom from suffering and impermanence (Collins 1992, p. 216). No language or concept can fully capture such a state because it is unthinkable or incomprehensible by logic or reason (不可思議 *fukashigi* in Japanese). Ineffable transcendentalism is a supernaturalist view because it requires *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth, which exceeds the limits of naturalist ontology, as well as *nirvana*, the soteriological goal that is beyond our present existence in the material universe.

An alternative version of transcendentalism is what I call 'permanent transcendentalism'. This view is based on the Hindu rather than the Buddhist approach to impermanence. We saw above that, according to ineffable transcendentalism, the doctrine of impermanence applies to the entirety of reality. Permanent transcendentalism is, however, based on a more limited or nuanced interpretation of the doctrine of impermanence. This interpretation says that impermanence applies only to the reality in which we currently live and that there is another permanent reality beyond that. We exist in an impermanent realm of conditioned existence but this realm does not exhaust all of reality.

In Hinduism, permanent transcendentalism is presented in terms of the *ātman*, the permanent, unchanging self that exists beyond phenomenality and external conditions. The Hindu belief in the *ātman* directly opposes the Buddhist doctrine of non-self and this opposition

demarcates, to a large extent, Hinduism from Buddhism. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, one of the oldest Upaniṣads, says that the *ātman* 'is free from sin, free from old age, free from death, free from sorrow, and free from hunger and thirst' (Lokeswarananda 2017, Verse 8.7.1) and also that it is 'immortal and fearless (Lokeswarananda 2017, Verse 8.7.4). The *ātman* is an eternal, indestructible self that exists beyond the ego. It is unchanging and does not participate in the phenomenal world but it can be 'realised' as one's real nature. The *jīva*, the individual self, which is bound to the fruits of the actions it has performed in a given life, transmigrates into the body of another living being after death. We are part of *saṃsāra* and when an individual dies the *jīva* is reborn and lives as another person or animal. Regarding the *dehī*, the embodied soul, the *Bhagavadgītā* remarks that, "Just as a person discards his old garments and acquires new ones, the soul similarly gives up old bodies and accepts new ones" (Gosvami 2013, Verse 2.22). This remark is reminiscent of Tsurayuki's analogy that a deceased soul who leaves the impermanent realm for transcendental reality is like a cicada that sheds its skin and flies away. This also reminds us of Takeuchi's characterisation of transcendentalism, according to which, "while the world is like a dream, there is an outer world that is more real which we can wake up into" (Takeuchi 2007, p. 27). Our current reality is a dream-like, ephemeral material existence but there is another permanent reality beyond that.

If we take the right path towards liberation we will eventually achieve *mokṣa* (解脱 *gedatsu* in Japanese), which is the blissful end of the cycle of death and rebirth where we are finally freed from suffering. The dualist tradition of Dvaita Vedānta asserts the distinction between the *jīva* and Brahman, the Ultimate Reality which permeates everything, whereas the non-dualist tradition of Advaita Vedānta asserts non-difference between the *jīva* and Brahman. In either tradition, the *ātman* is 'non-different' from *Brahman* (梵我一如 *bonga ichinyo* in Japanese).

Both versions of transcendentalism that I have discussed are based on metaphysical systems that developed in Eastern religions but transcendentalism can be formulated in the Western framework as well. Western transcendentalism would not postulate rebirth or *nirvana*/*moksha*; it would emphasise the eternal soul or God as an eternal, timeless or necessarily existent being. I do not have the space in which to address such a view here. I also do not discuss which, if any, version of transcendentalism is true because that is not important for our purposes. The crucial point is that any version of transcendentalism requires a supernaturalist ontology that allows us to affirm the existence of a reality that lies beyond impermanence. There is no hope of solving the problem of impermanence without a supernaturalist ontology because our current existence in the material universe is spatiotemporally finite.[3]

The thesis that a satisfactory solution to the problem of impermanence requires supernaturalism is significant because it entails two important points. First, the problem of impermanence poses a greater challenge to naturalists, or at least to naturalists who reject indifferentism, than to supernaturalists. This is interesting especially given that the problem of impermanence is a close cousin of the problem of pain and suffering, which is commonly thought to pose a challenge only to supernaturalists, and more specifically to theists. Second,

[3] One might argue that naturalism is compatible with impermanence because it seems compatible with Platonism about abstract objects, where these objects exist permanently. It is hard to see, however, how we can wake up into a permanent realm of abstract objects within the naturalist framework because naturalists would say that our physical death is the end of our existence. Conversely, if we could somehow wake up into a permanent realm of abstract objects then this would also exceed the limitations of naturalism; so we need supernaturalism anyway.

relatedly, the problem of impermanence can be used as a partial argument for supernaturalism or against naturalism. If we believe that there is an ultimate and optimistic solution to the problem of impermanence we have no choice but to accept supernaturalism. This is interesting too because the problem of pain and suffering is often used as a partial argument for naturalism.

6. Conclusion

Let me close this paper by summarising our discussion. First, I have considered medieval Japanese thinkers who in their writings contemplate pain and suffering that manifest in catastrophes and disasters. Chōmei, in particular, provides in his *Hōjōki* vivid illustrations of all the key philosophical concepts discussed in Western literature on the problem of evil. Second, I have argued that despite their discussions of pain and suffering the medieval Japanese thinkers ultimately focus on impermanence rather than on pain and suffering. For them, pain and suffering, and even pleasure and joy, are only highlighters of how fragile and impermanent our existence is. In this sense, their primary focus is on the problem of impermanence rather than the problem of pain and suffering. Third, I have examined four responses to the problem of impermanence: hermitism, hedonism, indifferentism and transcendentalism. I have argued that the first three, which are compatible with naturalism, are unsuccessful or unsatisfying; some may eliminate or alleviate pain and suffering but they do not resolve the problem of impermanence itself. Fifth, I have discussed two distinct versions of transcendentalism: ineffable transcendentalism, which is based on Buddhist metaphysics, and permanent transcendentalism, which is based on Hindu metaphysics.

Although I have invoked transcendentalism as a solution to the problem of impermanence, I have not explored this view fully nor have I discussed the tenability of any particular version of transcendentalism. I have argued, however, that only transcendentalism, which requires supernaturalism, can constitute a potentially successful response to the problem of impermanence. I have also argued that if the only solution that is potentially successful requires supernaturalism, then the problem of impermanence raises a greater challenge to naturalism than to supernaturalism. Finally, I have argued that this implies that the problem of impermanence can be construed as a partial argument for supernaturalism and against naturalism.[4]

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