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Talking Past Each Other?: Reply to Rick Repetti

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Talking Past Each Other?

Reply to Rick Repetti

Karin Meyers¹

Abstract

This essay is a response to Rick Repetti’s “It Wasn’t Me: Reply to Karin Meyers,” in respect to my article, “False Friends: Dependent Origination and the Perils of Analogy in Cross-Cultural Philosophy.” My article was written—at Repetti’s invitation—in response to his edited volume of essays on the topic of free will in Buddhism, *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?*—to which I am also a contributor (“Grasping”). In the article (for which Repetti was also the editor), I compliment Repetti’s analysis of the topic and his own substantive account of a Buddhist theory of free will, but am critical of the way he frames an affirmative answer to the question of why there should be a Buddhist theory of free will. My arguments concern comparative and historical method—namely, the importance of considering critical differences between Buddhist and Western ideas and what Buddhists *have said*

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when imagining what they *can* say about a topic. In his reply, Repetti wonders whether we have been talking past each other. Here I attempt to clarify the nature and scope of my critique and to correct some of the points on which Repetti seems to have misread it.

Introduction

My article, “False Friends: Dependent Origination and the Perils of Analogy in Cross-Cultural Philosophy” engages in what I take to be “an important meta-philosophical debate as to whether or how it makes sense to talk about a *Buddhist* perspective on free will” (787). In it, I build upon a central theme of Rick Repetti’s edited volume on the subject, *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?* I discuss some of the problems I find in how he frames an affirmative answer (in chapter two, “Why”) because I believe this introduces an important set of concerns regarding how what Buddhists *have said* ought to constrain what we imagine they *can* say about free will or any other philosophical topic. The bulk of the essay then discusses a variety of ways in which scholars have read the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination in light of modern ideas about causation, how the Buddhist ideas are different, and why it is important to pay attention to such critical dis-analogies between Buddhist and Western ideas in our constructive philosophical engagements with Buddhism.

In his reply to my article, Repetti rightly notes that most of my concerns do not have any direct bearing on his own substantive account of a Buddhist theory of free will, which he presents in chapter seventeen (“Agentless”). I agree and aimed to emphasize that. The central conceit of my article (793) was that Repetti and I agree on so much of the substance of what Buddhists *can* say about free will, but disagree on this

methodological question of how that should be constrained by what they *have said*. Our disagreement on this point is significant, but for the most part, Repetti does not address it in his reply (“It Wasn’t Me”). Instead, he defends himself against claims I do not make about his views (e.g., that he interprets Buddhism deterministically); misreads me as making prescriptions for Buddhist orthodoxy when I am making a point about the meaning of Buddhist ideas or the nature of Buddhist claims; and accuses me of misrepresenting him or reading him uncharitably when I am critical of how he frames some of the philosophical issues at stake (e.g., his statements about Buddhism, religion, and science). In what follows, I attempt to clarify the nature and scope of my critique and to correct a few of the points on which Repetti seems to have misread it.

Free Will or Something Like It

The first point on which Repetti says I have misrepresented him is my statement that he and several contributors to the volume (including me) agree that, “although Buddhists did not have the idea of free will, much less a problem with it historically, it is not unreasonable to consider what they might say about it now” (789). Repetti understands this to misrepresent his view that Buddhists can affirm free will and that the Buddha himself argued against positions similar to various forms of free will skepticism (859-860). As I endeavored to make clear in my article, I very much agree with Repetti that there can be *something like* a Buddhist theory of free will. However, the qualification is mine. I say “something like,” because I believe it is important to emphasize how the distinct history of Buddhist ideas impact what Buddhists might say about free will (or any other cross-cultural philosophical topic).

In the paragraphs preceding the statement in question, I discussed some of the other contributors’ views on the distinct theological

and philosophical contexts of classical Western formulations of the problem of free will (787-788). Although I do not agree with Jay Garfield's ("Just") and Owen Flanagan's ("Negative") conclusions that this context means Buddhists shouldn't say anything about free will, I also cited Emily McCrea's essay ("Emotions"). I mentioned that it illustrates well how the prospective interest of Buddhist soteriology in future freedom rather than a retrospective interest in moral responsibility makes for a significantly different set of concerns about free will ("False" 788 and fn. 2). In other words, while I think Buddhists *can* say something about free will (and Repetti and I happen to agree on much of the substance of what this might be), I believe it is important to avoid the impression that the idea(s) or problem(s) of free will as formulated in the West is(are) found in classical Buddhist texts.

I should, however, have made it clear that Repetti does not share my hesitancy or qualify his statements about free will in Buddhism in the way I do. I should also have noted that this is indicative of our disagreement regarding philosophical method. In his reply to my article, Repetti says (of himself), "I focus on what Buddhists *can* say, as opposed to what they *have said* or *do say*" ("It Wasn't Me" 865). I too am interested in this explicitly constructive philosophical project, but I would replace the qualifier "opposed to" with "in light of." In other words, I view the project of deciding what Buddhists *can* say about free will as comparative and historical as well as constructive and philosophical.

Soteriodicy

The next point Repetti addresses in his reply is the way I engage with his proposed soteriodicy (meaning "a godless analogue of theodicy that is soteriologically equivalent," (862). Here I believe he misconstrues my objections. Repetti suggests that for some Westerners the ideas of karma

and rebirth might serve as a temporary substitute for a theistic idea of a just-world until they are ready to accept the idea of no-self (“Why” 27). I said I found this “exegetically implausible” (“False” 791, fn. 11). Contrary to his interpretation (“It Wasn’t Me” 851), I did not mean to suggest that Repetti has attempted and failed to give a proper exegesis of these Buddhist ideas, rather, I am asserting that exegetical work is needed, that this “soteriodicy” simply doesn’t make sense in light of Buddhist understandings and arguments regarding the logical coherence and consistency of these ideas (“False” 791, fn. 11).

What worries me is that after saying, “budding Buddhist converts come to understand [karma and rebirth] more subtly (e.g., there’s no self that reincarnates or bears karma)...” he says, “...or *subsequently*, if there’s no reincarnation, it’s like reincarnation moment to moment anyway” (“Why” 27, emphasis added). This sounds as if Repetti is saying that the doctrines of karma and rebirth are reasonably understood as supplanted by the doctrine of momentariness—an impression that is reinforced by his previous suggestion that belief in karma and rebirth are plausibly optional (25).²

Regardless of whether Repetti means to endorse this view of karma and rebirth himself or merely to present it as a way someone might reasonably interpret these doctrines, it is problematic. As I discuss at length in the footnote (“False” 791, fn. 11) and later in the article (808), the Buddhists who develop the doctrine of momentariness do not understand it to supplant the idea of rebirth, and indeed, few Buddhist traditions take the ideas of karma and rebirth to be dispensable. I under-

² Specifically, he says that belief in karma and rebirth are exceptions to the Buddha’s commitment to “empirically validated truth,” but that some Buddhists don’t take karma and rebirth literally, and that Buddhist supernaturalism is “plausibly optional” (“Why” 25)—I’ll say more about these claims below.

stand this to be directly relevant to what we imagine Buddhists can say regarding these doctrines. Imagine, for example, if someone were to argue that a Cartesian *can* say that the mind is material based on a rational reconstruction of Descartes's mechanistic physics while ignoring the central role of mind in his larger dualistic theory.³

Repetti wonders why I have belabored discussion of his soteriodicy, which is, after all a relatively minor argument in support of “the idea that there is, can be, and ought to be a Buddhist theory of free will” (“It Wasn’t Me” 861). I discuss it (albeit in a footnote) because I believe it illustrates well why we need to weigh what Buddhists *have said* against the prevalent impulse to naturalize Buddhism or make it otherwise palatable to a modern worldview—even when our primary interest is what Buddhists *can* say about the topic.

In regard to my critique of his soteriodicy, Repetti also says that I “seem to confuse most Western philosophers with most Westerners” (860-861) when I say I find it “pragmatically implausible.” I do not. As I state in my footnote (“False” 492, fn. 11), I have simply observed that most Western Buddhists in my acquaintance (few of whom are philosophers) find the idea of no-self easier to assimilate than the ideas of karma and rebirth. I suggested that this is probably owing to a pervading cultural commitment to naturalism. I am happy to be corrected if there is evidence that shows my assessment of this demographic is mistaken.

In the conclusion of my essay I offered a tongue-in-cheek play on Repetti's soteriodicy. Given the prevalence of naturalism in the West, I suggested that a more fitting progressive soteriodicy would be one in which Westerners (including Western philosophers) are enticed to Buddhism with a more naturalistic view (812) that is gradually replaced with

³ I thank Jay Garfield for the analogy.

a more expansive naturalism or “super” naturalism (one that might accommodate karma and rebirth among other things). Although Repetti does not call me to task for it, I should have called this a “soteriology” rather than a “soteriodicy,” because it has nothing to do with the problem of evil or idea of a just-world. He does, however, call me to task for (jokingly) suggesting that maybe he had something like this progressive soteriology in mind when he appears to endorse naturalizing Buddhism (“It Wasn’t Me” 862). Fair enough.⁴

Again, the more serious point in respect to Repetti’s soteriodicy is that pre-modern Buddhist traditions did not view the doctrines of no-self or momentariness as incompatible with or replacing the doctrines of karma and rebirth. On the contrary, they expended a great deal of effort to show their *consistency*—often by invoking the idea of dependent origination. The bulk of my article is devoted to discussing how and why we misread dependent origination when we minimize the centrality of these doctrines and instead interpret it through the lens of modern ideas about empirical investigation, universal causation, and natural law.

In his reply to me Repetti claims that in saying certain supernatural elements of Buddhism are optional he was “merely pointing out that these ideas are, in fact, optional for those who prefer to see them as such” (863). I fail to see how the fact that some Western Buddhists might regard karma and rebirth as optional is material to our constructive philosophical engagement with Buddhist ideas. Moreover, as indicated above, in the chapter, Repetti does not say that supernatural elements are optional, but that their optionality is *plausible* in light of the Buddhist commitment to “empirically validated truth” (“Why” 25)—a point to which I will return below. As I suggest in my article (“False” 791-792, fn.

⁴ However, I’m not sure why Repetti writes as if I am saying he or Flanagan actually endorses this alternative soteriology (“It Wasn’t Me” 862).

11) if Repetti believes that classical Buddhist understandings of how core Buddhist doctrines relate to each other are wrong or in need of revision in light of current knowledge then the onus is on him to *argue* why this is the case.

Normative Claims and Buddhist Orthodoxy

Contrary to Repetti's understanding ("It Wasn't Me" 862-864), I am not concerned with what individual Buddhists might believe or in arbitrating what beliefs someone must hold to be a "true Buddhist." (Who am I to say?) My concern is how we, as *scholars*, interpret Buddhist *ideas*. If we take some ideas (like karma and rebirth) to be optional because they do not conform to modern assumptions about the world, this necessarily affects how we interpret other Buddhist ideas, such as the nature of the Buddha's awakening, right view, the path of contemplative practice, dependent origination, etc.—all of which I discuss in my article. If my point is normative, then it concerns *method*, not *belief*.

Again, I maintain that if we want to talk about what Buddhists *can* say about something, it is important to get clear on what they *have said*, including what they have said about doctrines that may appear implausible from a modern scientific perspective. If we disregard such central Buddhist doctrines as karma and rebirth when thinking about freedom and action in Buddhism, I submit that we are not really engaging with *Buddhist* ideas but instead with Buddhist inflected versions of Western ideas. I'm not sure why one would call what results a "*Buddhist* perspective" or a "*Buddhist* theory." Moreover, as I discuss in my article, I believe failing to engage with Buddhist ideas that challenge modernist commitments unnecessarily and unhelpfully limits the range of topics we submit to philosophical scrutiny.

In making this argument about how we engage with Buddhist ideas, I am in no way advocating, as Repetti suggests, an “ideology” that “demands adherents cannot decide whether to lend assent to uncertain propositions” (“It Wasn’t Me” 864). In fact, in regard to the “uncertain propositions” of karma and rebirth, I take some pains to explain how the problem of belief in them is addressed in the Nikāyas. I do so in the course of my criticism of Repetti’s statement that these doctrines are exceptions to the Buddhist commitment to “empirically validated truth” (“Why” 25).

Repetti does not cite any source in support of his statement that the Buddhist commitment to “empirically validated truth” dates to “injunctions from the Buddha not to accept anything on authority, but on investigation” (25). However, the *Kālāma Sutta* is often cited in support of this idea. In my article, I point out how this sutta’s recommendation that prospective Buddhists consider the pragmatic (and eudemonic) benefits of belief in karma and rebirth (“False” 791, fn. 9) is different from what we typically have in mind by empirical investigation. Later, I discuss how karma and rebirth are presented (in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*) as matters of direct experience available to advanced Buddhist meditators (805–807)—and again, how this might be empirical in a broad sense but quite different what we have in mind by empirical investigation. Modern persons (Buddhist or otherwise) can certainly question what it might mean to have an experience of remembering a past life or seeing a future one (I certainly do). Nevertheless, the fact Buddhist texts attest to such experiences and present the doctrines of karma and rebirth as amenable to these forms of rational and experiential investigation should be relevant to our assessment of Buddhist claims concerning them as well as to our understanding of what a Buddhist commitment to “empirically validated truth” might entail.

Repetti seems to have missed the significance of my discussion of these critical differences between Buddhist and Western epistemologies. In his reply he does not address my *arguments* concerning how classical Buddhist texts treat knowledge of karma and rebirth, but instead suggests that I have violated Descartes's and William James's epistemological criteria in relating what Buddhists *have said* about them. It would be interesting to compare (and contrast) these criteria to Buddhist criteria, but I'm not sure why Repetti reads my text-based, historical, and comparative discussion of karma and rebirth as demanding assent to belief in them.

In order to support the *historical* point that these doctrines are not as provisional or optional to Buddhism as modern persons might prefer, I cited Bhikkhu Anālayo's recent study on rebirth in the Nikāyas (805). In this study, Anālayo discusses how although "right view" is typically presented in the Nikāyas in terms of belief in karma and rebirth (specifically, in contrast to the "wrong view" of denying these), there is an alternative definition of "right view" in terms of the four noble truths. The upshot of this is that although outright denial of karma and rebirth is indeed "wrong view," the Nikāyas *also* do not demand belief in them (Anālayo 30). However, despite this accommodation for personal agnosticism, the Nikāyas clearly present karma and rebirth as central to the Buddha's soteriological message and to the unfolding of the path in the life of an adept. I believe most South and Southeast Asian (and perhaps many East Asian) Buddhist traditions would agree.

This brings us to another point on which Repetti seems to have misread me. Contrary to Repetti's concern ("It Wasn't Me" 864), when I suggest that the Nikāyas' views on rebirth (among the other classical Buddhist views I discuss) are relevant to our constructive philosophical engagements with Buddhism, I am by no means suggesting that the Nikāyas should arbitrate how all Buddhists in all times and places should

view rebirth or any other matter. Like many Buddhist studies scholars, I use the Nikāyas as a key point of reference for defining and investigating Buddhist ideas. I do this with the clear understanding that there are many historical forms of Buddhism and many forms that are evolving today. Indeed, the central conceit of my own contribution to Repetti's volume ("Grasping") is that we need to pay greater attention to the diversity of Buddhist traditions when imagining what Buddhists might say about free will. However, I also endeavor to make it clear when something (like belief in karma and rebirth) is more or less consistent across classical Buddhist traditions. The Nikāyas are particularly relevant in the present case because they also happen to be *Repetti's* primary archive—the texts to which he most often refers when he discusses the relevance of what Buddhists *have said* to what they *can say*.

Although my primary concern in the article is the interpretation of Buddhist ideas, contrary to Repetti's suggestion ("It Wasn't Me" 864), I am not opposed to the constructive project of criticizing, revising, or jettisoning some of these ideas—*provided* we are clear on what they mean and the grounds on which they stand. I agree with Repetti that there are occasions when it is appropriate to rely on modern knowledge, critique, and methods of investigation rather than (or *in addition* to) what is handed down by tradition to revise Buddhist doctrine. I would just add (and I am certain Repetti would agree) that this ought to be our approach regardless of whether the tradition in question is a classical Buddhist one or modern naturalism, and that we need to enter into criticism sufficiently attuned to differences in the nature and grounds of the claims made by these traditions. When I say that naturalized interpretations of Buddhism should be placed *alongside* traditional ones in our inquiries ("False" 793), I mean to invite such argument and investigation. I do not mean, as Repetti seems to think I might, that we should, for instance, "favor the anecdotal mystical claims of someone in a pre-scientific age over those of neuroscience" ("It Wasn't Me" 867).

I did not belabor the point in my article but I believe the doctrine of rebirth is a good example of the kind of idea that should be subjected to exegetical *as well as* empirical scrutiny. The idea of rebirth is often dismissed as pre-scientific nonsense, but upon fair-minded investigation, it appears to be a reasonable hypothesis for a variety of phenomena (e.g., past life memories in young children, unusual knowledge or talents, and birth defects) that cannot be explained satisfactorily according to current scientific theory (Anālayo). This does not “prove” that the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth is true, but it does argue against the impulse to dismiss it as non-empirical, empirically false, or otherwise irrelevant to our constructive philosophical engagements with Buddhism. I take my view on this topic to be consistent with Repetti’s own recommendations regarding the prospects for examining Buddhist claims about meditation in light of contemporary neuroscientific research (“Why” 23, “It Wasn’t Me” 866-867).

Science, Religion, and Buddhist Naturalism

Repetti notes that in many of my arguments regarding the problems of assimilation of Buddhist ideas to our own, I do not name him explicitly (“It Wasn’t Me” 865). This is because he is not their target. On the occasion of writing a review of a collection of essays on free will in Buddhism, my aim was to offer a critique of a prevalent methodological approach to the topic, namely, one that tends to focus on the similarity between Buddhist and Western ideas and to overdraw analogies between them. I view attempts to naturalize Buddhism in order to make it a more congenial conversation partner as a particularly problematic version of this approach. In my article I am critical of Repetti only where he appears to justify naturalizing Buddhism or draws analogies that support the naturalization of Buddhism or occlude important differences between Bud-

dhist and Western ideas. Again, I believe these criticisms are relevant regardless of whether Repetti advocates the view or analogy in question himself or merely sketches how it might go without any comment on why it is problematic. (In some cases, it was not clear to me which he was doing.)

As mentioned above and in several places in my article, I generally agree with what Repetti imagines Buddhists *can* say about free will as presented in his substantive contribution to the volume (“Agentless”). I agree with his view that this has little to do with the question of whether determinism is true or whether dependent origination is deterministic. (For completely independent reasons, I doubt both.) I also agree with him that the “supernormal, and possibly supernatural” abilities claimed for Buddhist adepts go considerably beyond what we typically have in mind when we talk about free will and with his view that this is relevant to what Buddhists might say about free will. (I make both points in my own contribution to the volume, “Grasping.”) I also praise his analysis of the kind of freedoms *āryas* enjoy in light of Buddhist evitabilism and contemporary analysis of the free will problem (“False” 793, 811).

My criticisms concern how he frames his soteriological argument for a Buddhist theory of free will in chapter two. Following Christopher Gowans’s argument in chapter one that metaphysical speculation about free will is contrary to the pragmatic soteriological spirit of the Nikāyas, Repetti makes a case in chapter two (entitled “Why there should be a Buddhist theory of free will”) for a Buddhist theory of free will as salutary for Westerners confronted with an “*existential doxastic impasse*” between humanistic self-conceptions and scientific narratives, or between our subjective experience of free will and what contemporary science reveals about our experience (“Why” 24-26). This argument is “soteriological” in the sense that it proposes a Buddhist theory of free will as therapeutic in respect to resolving this cognitive dissonance and em-

bracing the reality of “agentless agency.” Specifically, Repetti says that a Buddhist theory of free will is “soteriologically warranted” for understanding how enlightenment can be attained if there is no agent, but also because of its explanatory purchase on the free will problem (22-23). Later he says that anything that brings people to the *Dharma* is “soteriologically relevant and thus justified” (24).

As I duly note (“False” 812), his soteriological argument and the justifications for naturalizing Buddhism that accompany the framing of it are not necessary for Repetti’s own account of a Buddhist theory of free will. As he makes clear in his reply, Repetti also does not consider it his primary argument for why there *should* be a Buddhist theory of free will (“It Wasn’t Me” 861). If I understand correctly, his primary argument for that is simply that Buddhism already has an implicit theory of free will insofar as Buddhist adepts are described as exhibiting a kind of control that defeats the most powerful forms of free will skepticism (“Why” 23-24).

In his reply, Repetti stresses that he does not necessarily endorse naturalism and that his body of work attests to this fact—including his discussion of the supernormal abilities of Buddhist *āryas* (“It Wasn’t Me” 866ff.). He therefore takes issue with my understanding that he supports naturalizing Buddhism and with my suggestion that this seems odd in light of the role his own extraordinary experiences played in the genesis of his interest in the problem of free will (“False” 797-798, “It Wasn’t Me” 874-875). Nevertheless, Repetti makes several problematic claims and explanatory remarks that function to justify naturalizing Buddhism. He does not give any rhetorical indication that these are not his own, and, again, regardless of whether they represent his own views, it is important to point out how they reinforce common misconceptions about Buddhist doctrine and are otherwise methodologically problematic.

In the course of explaining how a Buddhist theory of free will might be salutary for Westerners (who are committed to a scientific worldview), Repetti says that Buddhism (compared to other religions) has few claims that contradict science, that Buddhism is committed to “empirically validated truth,” that “much if not all of its supernaturalism is plausibly optional,” and that its core doctrines are not in conflict with science (“Why” 25). He goes on to say that karma and rebirth are exceptions (25) to this commitment to empiricism, but instead of questioning the nature of this commitment—given that karma and rebirth are clearly core doctrines—he presents his “soteriodicy” (discussed above) that offers an interpretation of karma and rebirth which effectively renders their traditional (what some might call “supernatural”) elements provisional (27).

As discussed above and in my article, these comments about empiricism and karma and rebirth reveal a misunderstanding of Buddhist methods of investigation and of the relation of karma and rebirth to other Buddhist doctrines. In my article, I also suggested that they reflect a tendency shared by many modern interpreters to read Buddhist texts selectively—based on a circular logic and a mistaken premise that the *essential* Buddhist doctrines should agree with what seems sensible to modern persons. I’m not sure why Repetti refers to this critique as if it is rooted in my own personal hermeneutic (“attempts at naturalizing Buddhism threaten to run afoul of her hermeneutics,” “It Wasn’t Me” 857) when I explicitly pointed out that this is a *common* critique of modernist interpretations of Buddhism and proceeded to quote Rupert Gethin’s clear and succinct description of the problem (“False” 796-797).

In the course of explaining how a Buddhist theory of free will might be salutary for Westerners, Repetti also mentions that a *naturalized* Buddhism would instantiate a “valid NOMA case” (“Why” 25)—meaning that its claims would be non-overlapping with science (in con-

trast to other religions and, presumably, a non-naturalized Buddhism). This further reinforces the impression that Repetti is promoting Buddhist naturalism as part of his broader argument (contra Gowans) for why there should be a Buddhist theory of free will.

However, in respect to Repetti's NOMA discussion I took greater issue with his suggestion that, "A Buddhist NOMA issue is arguably whether conventional Buddhist truth (e.g., Buddhist religion) is non-overlapping with ultimate Buddhist truth (akin to science)" (26). Repetti maintains that in saying this he was not endorsing the idea (popularized by Stephen J. Gould) that religion and science should be non-overlapping magisteria, nor asserting that Buddhism or Buddhism parsed into the two truths overlaps (or does not overlap with science), but merely mapping out interesting logical possibilities about Buddhism and free will ("It Wasn't Me" 869). My problem is with the map—with the analogy between conventional truth and "Buddhist religion," on the one hand, and ultimate truth and science, on the other.

Repetti objects that I don't spell out the problem (868-869). Given the attention paid in contemporary Religious and Buddhist Studies to the historical construction of the category of religion and the dangers of reading other cultural traditions in terms of Western categories, I believed reminding the reader that "religion" and "science" are distinctively Western and modern categories would be sufficient to identify the problem(s), but I'm happy to elaborate here. The primary problem is that these categories are not natural or universal, but are constructed within a very particular modern Western discourse imbued with a series of meanings, values, and assumptions not shared by classical Buddhist traditions. In particular, Buddhist traditions do not draw the particular distinctions between supernatural and natural, cultural and natural, spiritual and natural, non-empirical and empirical, subjective and objective,

private and public, etc. that inform the categories of religion and science, respectively.

Moreover, although the relationship between the two truths is subject to multiple interpretations (see Meyers “Grasping”), conventional truth is commonly understood in terms of reference to persons and ultimate truth in respect to selflessness or emptiness—a distinction that has little to do with those listed above. This makes it difficult to imagine precisely what Repetti has in mind with the analogy or with his clarification in his reply that conventional truths are “arguably religious” and Buddhist ultimate truths are “arguably not religious” (“It Wasn’t Me” 869). How could/would these arguments go?

One could take the analogy as merely pointing to the fact that like the ultimate truth in Buddhism, science traffics in impersonal narratives and like conventional truth, religion traffics in humanistic narratives that reference persons. After all, Repetti has suggested that a Buddhist theory of free will may help resolve the tension between scientific and humanistic narratives. However, the term “religion” is much more loaded than this, and because the analogy follows his discussion of how core Buddhist claims do not conflict with science—in contrast to the claims of other religions—it is easy to get the impression that “Buddhist religion” here includes all those “plausibly optional” (or “supernatural”) bits of Buddhism. Thus, without further explanation of what “Buddhist religion” is supposed to entail and why it should be conventional rather than ultimate, the analogy is easily read as supporting a selective, naturalistic interpretation of Buddhist doctrine—for which Repetti has already offered some justification.

The analogy between ultimate truth and science may be a little less problematic, but not much. In my article I mentioned that I too have drawn a rough analogy between the impersonal perspective of science and the impersonal perspective of selflessness. Specifically, I have refer-

enced Thomas Nagel's description of action from an objective, external perspective (Nagel 110) to help motivate thinking about free will in Buddhism (Meyers "Free Persons" 41-42).⁵ In my discussion of Repetti's much more explicit analogy between science and ultimate truth, I cautioned that without careful qualification, the analogy could be misleading. I argued that if one draws the analogy, it is also important to note the considerable dis-analogies between a scientific perspective and Buddhist insight into ultimate truth because of the confusions that can and do arise from conflating them (e.g., Susan Blackmore's presentation of dependent origination as a kind of physicalism in chapter seven of *Buddhist Perspectives*, "False" 795). I noted that ultimate truth is not discovered by rational or empirical inquiry of the kind that informs modern science and—unlike science—is defined in relation to its soteriological efficacy ("False" 795). I also suggested that the potential confusions that might arise from drawing too strong of an analogy between ultimate truth and science is compounded by Repetti's reference to the "impersonal ultimate reality revealed by science" ("Why" 28) (in the course of framing how free will might be related to the two truths) and by his (accidental) statement that the question of whether dependent origination is deterministic is an ultimately empirical matter (see below).

In regard to the analogy of religion and science to the two truths, Repetti argues that I have taken issue with what he is merely presenting as "logical possibilities intended to raise the level of philosophical discussion" rather than advocating as his own views ("It Wasn't Me" 870). When I push back against a select portion of these possibilities, I also do so to raise the level of discussion. I do it both to narrow and to expand

⁵ I would now say that the distinction between subjective/internal vs. objective/external and perhaps the language of personal vs. impersonal as well may distort more than it clarifies how Buddhist schools see the two truths as relating to each other. See "Grasping" for a preliminary discussion.

the realm of these logical possibilities in light of Buddhist commitments, and to ward off the assimilation or replacement of Buddhist ideas with modern ideas. That I view some of the possibilities Repetti introduces as impossible or inadvisable in light of the history of these commitments reveals a serious disagreement between us about how to delimit the logical space of these possibilities, and not, I submit, an uncharitable reading of his intentions. It is also not critique or comment on his personal or general views on naturalism or supernaturalism—which he agrees were not the subject of the chapter. Contrary to what Repetti seems to think, our personal views on these matters—both his and my own—are irrelevant to this methodological critique.

Determinism and Oversight

In regard to determinism, Repetti says that I take issue with his claim that the truth of determinism is an open empirical question and suggests that I have falsely accused him of confusing the *exegetical* question of whether dependent origination is deterministic with the *empirical* question of whether determinism is true (“It wasn’t me” 870). He is mistaken on both counts. In chapter seventeen, Repetti says that, “The question whether *Buddhist causation* is deterministic or not, both, or neither technically does not matter to my view. I leave it to others to dispute such ultimately empirical (Balaguer 2009) matters (e.g., Story 1976; Rāhula 1974; Gómez 1975. . .” (“Agentless” 193-194, emphasis added).

I agree that deciding whether determinism is true is an open empirical question, but that’s *not* what Repetti says here. It’s strange to claim that whether or not “Buddhist causation” is deterministic is ultimately an empirical matter, and weirder still to cite a neuroscientist alongside Buddhist Studies scholars in support of this claim, so I checked and rechecked both the Kindle and print versions of the book when I

originally wrote the article and again in writing this response. I wish Repetti had done the same. If he had, I think he would agree that the original line was indeed an oversight on his part and that my reading it against his other statements on the topic (“False” 795-796 and fn. 13) was an attempt at both charity and clarity, and not a “multi-level stacking of assumptions” (“It Wasn’t Me” 870).

I’m not sure why Repetti also thinks I have an “implicit worry” that he might attribute determinism to Buddhism (871). Perhaps this comes down to two editing oversights in my footnotes. In the body of my article I wrote that several contributors say dependent origination is “similar to or a form of causal determinism” (“False” 798). In the footnote (798, fn. 15), I cite the page (*Buddhist* xx) where Repetti provides the gloss: “Buddhist causation (dependent origination, similar to determinism).” I then say “but also see” and cite the places where he expresses his own agnostic view in regard to whether dependent origination is deterministic. Perhaps the disjunction did not read as effectively as I had hoped. However, in the following footnote (“False” 799, fn. 16), I include Repetti in a list of scholars who have expressed doubt as to whether dependent origination is “properly or necessarily understood as deterministic,” and a few pages later in the body of the article I say that whether or not dependent origination is deterministic is not directly relevant to most contributors’ conclusions (800). Later, when I discuss Repetti’s soft-compatibilism I again *explicitly* acknowledge his agnosticism on the matter (811, fn. 24 and below).

In footnote 28 (813), I do say that Repetti concludes both determinism and indeterminism are “*inconsistent*” with the Buddha’s evitabilism. I don’t blame Repetti for being confused here. This was a typo. I meant to say “consistent.” I then add the further comment—meant to complement Repetti’s view rather than argue with it or improve upon it (contrary to how he takes it, “It Wasn’t Me” 881)—that at least one high-

ly adept Buddhist meditation master (Pa Auk Sayadaw, who also happens to be one of Burma's leading Buddhist textual scholars) has suggested that the future is open in the context of discussing the *ārya's* precognition of his own liberation. In the note I also cite Peter Harvey's detailed textual argument ("Psychological") that (contra Charles Goodman) the Buddha's omniscience does not entail determinism. I brought this up, because if Pa Auk and Harvey are right, dependent origination (at least as presented in the Nikāyas) would be indeterministic and give Repetti's *ārya* regulative control instead of pseudo-regulative control.⁶

As Repetti makes clear, the *ārya's* evitabilism does not *require* genuine regulative control ("Agentless" 201-202), pseudo will do. Repetti and I are entirely in agreement on this point—again, contrary to what he thinks ("It Wasn't Me" 881-882). I made a similar point in my 2010 dissertation when I argued, like Repetti does here, that as long as there is responsiveness to *dharmas*, it does not matter whether dependent origination is deterministic or indeterministic ("Freedom" 259; also see "Free Persons" 60-61).

Repetti says that I fail to grasp that his soft compatibilism is compatible with "determinism, with indeterminism, with both and/or with neither" (882). Again, I do not. Despite the typo of "inconsistent" for "consistent" in a footnote, I make it quite explicit in the body of the article that I understand he is using "soft compatibilism" in direct contrast to "hard incompatibilism" (the idea that free will is incompatible with

⁶ In his reply to me, Repetti implies that I am unaware that "some quite respectable, brilliant Buddhist scholars take the view that Buddhist causation is deterministic" ("It Wasn't Me" 880). I am not. I reference these scholars in my article as well as my own and others' arguments against the view that dependent origination is deterministic (798-799).

both determinism and indeterminism)—and compliment him for the clarity the term provides:

Indeed, much of what I admire and find satisfying about Repetti's essay (chapter seventeen) as well as his introduction to the volume and discussion in chapter two is the way he brings clarity to the conversation by applying a more precise and standardized vocabulary to positions taken by the authors. This pays off particularly well in his own application of "soft compatibilism" (Mele's term) to describe the enhanced "evitabilist self regulative agency" enjoyed by the āyra, independent of the truth of determinism. (812-813)

Conclusion: Talking Past Each Other?

As indicated above, the central point of disagreement between Repetti and myself concerns philosophical method. In regard to deciding what Buddhists *can* say about free will, I argue that we need to pay careful attention to the distinct histories of Buddhist ideas and distinct interests of Buddhist soteriology—based on careful study of what Buddhists *have said*. I believe the same method should apply to all of our constructive philosophical engagements with Buddhism. If we fail to do this, we risk assimilating Buddhist ideas to our own, or arbitrarily labeling our own ideas as "Buddhist." We also miss out on the opportunity for genuine dialogue with a deeply coherent philosophical tradition quite different from our own.

The title of my article "False Friends" (borrowing from the concept in linguistics) calls attention to the fact that apparent similarities between Buddhist and Western ideas often occlude significant differ-

ences. My article then focuses on drawing out and explaining the dis-analogies relevant to Repetti's soteriological argument and how these and others play into modern interpretations of dependent origination—a critical doctrine in respect to thinking about freedom and action in the Buddhist context.

Repetti treats my arguments about these dis-analogies as if they are intended to disprove the validity of drawing *any* analogies between them ("It Wasn't Me" 879-880). They are not. The first line of my article's abstract and first line of my conclusion state that being able to engage in constructive cross-cultural philosophical inquiry *requires* that we are able to draw analogies between ideas from distinct cultural traditions. As I make clear in my article, I believe cross-cultural philosophical inquiry to be a possible and worthy endeavor—and *also* one that requires rigorous application of comparative and historical methods.

I hope this reply succeeds in clarifying why this methodological piece is so important, as well as the substantive points of agreement between Repetti and myself in regard to what we *can* say about free will in light of Buddhist commitments.

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