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The Metaphysics of No-Self: A Determinist Deflation of the Free Will Problem

Vishnu Sridharan¹

Abstract

For over two millennia, the free will problem has proven intractable to philosophers, scientists, and lay people alike. However, Buddhism offers us unique insight into how, when, and why human agency matters to us. In his 2009 book, *Consequences of Compassion*, Charles Goodman argues that the ultimate nonexistence of the self supports the ultimate nonexistence of free will. Recently in this journal, Riccardo Repetti has critiqued Goodman's view and made the case that free will does, in fact, ultimately exist. This article first illustrates how Repetti's view of the self is, actually, entirely consistent with Goodman's. It goes on to argue that Repetti misconstrues elements of hard determinism as entailing that our wills have no influence on final outcomes. Lastly, it shows how, if Goodman and Repetti are in agreement on the ultimate nonexistence of the self, as well as the causal efficacy of the will,

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their disagreement about the ultimate existence of free will may be inconsequential.

Not every discussion of Buddhist ethics has to explicitly tackle Buddhist metaphysics. However, we should keep in mind that because all ethical theories make basic metaphysical assumptions, a clearer metaphysical understanding can greatly simplify our ethical explorations.²

Charles Goodman's 2009 book *Consequences of Compassion*, reviewed in the *JBE* by Richard Hayes (2011), illustrates this approach. In short, Goodman argues that because Buddhist metaphysics does not support the ultimate existence of the self, it also does not support the ultimate existence of free will or moral responsibility. Prima facie, if the self does not genuinely exist, what can possess free will or bear moral responsibility? Instead, Goodman outlines how the Buddha's teachings support hard determinism, in which (what we conventionally think of as) individuals are not ultimately responsible for their actions, and all is governed by a "karmic law" that resembles other laws of nature.

Recently in these pages, Riccardo Repetti published a series of articles examining the history of Buddhist views of free will ("Earlier," "Paleo-compatibilism," and "No Self") in addition to his own take on Buddhist ethics ("Meditation"). In his most recent piece ("No Self"), Repetti takes issue with Goodman's account of the conventional self and offers what he considers an alternate view of the "mind-dependent" self. Although Repetti's account is nuanced and compelling, I argue that he fails to draw a clear metaphysical distinction between Goodman's analysis of the conventional self and moral responsibility and his own analysis of the "mind-dependent" self and moral responsibility. In addition, I ar-

² I would like to thank Dan Cozort, Charles Goodman, Riccardo Repetti, and an anonymous reviewer at the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* for comments on this article.

gue that Repetti misconstrues elements of hard determinism as entailing that the human will has no influence on final outcomes. If I am correct on both of these points, then Repetti and Goodman's disagreement about the ultimate existence of free will may bear little consequence.

This article proceeds in three steps: first, it outlines Goodman's theory of conventional vs. ultimate truth and how that connects to the self, free will, and moral responsibility; next, it shows how Repetti's argumentation fails to establish a clear metaphysical distinction between Goodman's view of the conventional self and his own view of the "mind-dependent" self; lastly, the article argues that hard determinists such as Goodman do believe in the causal efficacy of the will, and as a result that Goodman and Repetti's disagreement over the ultimate existence of free will may be inconsequential.

Goodman's View

Although Goodman does not devote much of his book to metaphysics, the basics of his view are clear. In *Consequences*, he draws on two distinct metaphysical perspectives: the Abhidharma and the Madhyamaka. In his view of the Abhidharma, what ultimately exists are "fleeting entities that are constantly appearing and disappearing in accordance with causal laws" (11), or, otherwise put, "simple, momentary, localized things, interrelated by a web of causal connections" (149). On the other hand, things that exist conventionally, such as "people, animals, chairs, rocks, and trees," do not exist "independently of the constructive activity of the mind," although our analysis, thoughts, and discourse about these things "clearly does feature in important human social practices, and these practices are useful for many purposes" (11). In other words, what conventionally exists is constructed by our minds from what ultimately exists. Under the Madhyamaka view, as he sees it, there is nothing that

ultimately exists: “both people and *dharmas* exist, but conventionally, not ultimately.”³

Thus, in Goodman’s view, both the Abhidharma and Madhyamaka agree on the ultimate nonexistence of all of our concepts and composites. This means that the self also does not exist ultimately. Goodman quotes Vasubandhu’s *The Treasure of Metaphysics*, a work from the fifth century CE in the tradition of Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma, as saying that when we look closely at the self, we see that “there is no sentient being here, nor is there a self, but simple entities, each with a cause . . . everything that belongs to [us] is empty” (148). If we meditate on the nature of our emptiness, we will see that we do not ultimately exist, although the self, like other conventionally existent things, does play an important role in our daily lives.

Because the self does not ultimately exist under either of these metaphysical perspectives, Goodman claims, neither does free will. In Goodman’s words, “if you don’t exist, nothing is up to you. If there is no autonomous self, there is no autonomy” (149). Applying a similar analysis, Goodman argues that if you do not exist, you are not morally responsible for anything. In this way, by casting doubt on the ultimate existence of the self, Goodman has a strong argument against the ultimate existence of both free will and moral responsibility.

At the same time, Goodman believes that the *conventional* self supports a *conventional* sense of moral responsibility. In the introduction to *Consequences*, Goodman outlines the three stages of Buddhist compassion, a framework that he borrows from Edward Conze. In the first stage of compassion, which Goodman believes corresponds with Theravāda ethics, a bodhisattva is compassionate to living beings. In the second stage, the bodhisattva realizes that individual living beings do not ulti-

³ Personal Communication, May 2013.

mately exist, and as a result is compassionate toward “the impersonal events which fill the world” (6). In the third and final stage of compassion, Goodman says, a bodhisattva’s compassion “operates within one vast field of emptiness” (6). Thus, once the bodhisattva realizes the ultimate nonexistence of the self, she is liberated from all notions of moral responsibility and acts in the world with an infinite, limitless, all-encompassing joy and unconditional love that transcends morality.

Repetti’s Response

In his article, “No Self,” Repetti offers what he believes to be a number of reasons why his account of the “mind-dependent” self is more consistent with Buddhist thought than Goodman’s account of the conventional self. However, Repetti fails to put forward relevant distinctions between his metaphysical analysis of the self and Goodman’s.

Red apples

Repetti’s first attack on Goodman’s metaphysics is against his claim that “if there is no autonomous self, there is no autonomy.” Repetti responds that simply because “there are no red apples,” it does not follow that “there is no red” (“No Self” 143); that is, it does not follow that there is no autonomy just because there is no autonomous self. Although Goodman later clarifies what he meant by his argument, Repetti’s response is worth examining as it undergirds his metaphysical account.

Repetti asks us to suppose that red apples are a “conceptual fiction” because “(a) they are constructed from the aggregation or conjunction of their parts, and (b) what is genuinely real is only what exists outside or independent of our conceptualizations” (“No Self” 145). In this view, what exists is “an indefinitely long conjunction of quantum level,

or dhamma level, propositions about all the micro-level phenomena that account for the faulty red apple apprehension producing series or ‘ultimate red apple’” (“No Self” 145).

Repetti is clearly correct in saying that the conclusion “there is no red” does not follow from “there are no red apples.” However, the fundamental challenge he faces is to move from the premise that (1) there genuinely exists an indefinitely long conjunction of quantum level propositions that account for our perception of red apples, to (2) red apples exist. Repetti elaborates on how he believes he can meet this challenge in the following passage:

If all perceivable features of *whatever it is that we call “red apples”* appear in the indefinitely long ultimate-red-apple conjunction, there is nothing illusory about *red apples*, properly understood. It is the improper understanding of the red apple as a mereological whole—with an independent nature or essence as such—that is delusory. Absent that sort of misconception, it is unproblematic that *there are red apples*. (“No Self” 145)

When Repetti concludes the above passage with “there are red apples,” he could mean one of three things: red apples exist conventionally; red apples exist ultimately; or red apples exist under some other schema that he would like to propose. If he means that red apples exist conventionally, then there is no explicit disagreement with Goodman, as Goodman maintains his analysis is consistent with the Abhidharma teaching. Under this view, red apples, similar to the self, are constructs of our minds that facilitate our daily lives.

Repetti clearly does not propose that red apples and the self ultimately exist, for he writes that it is “improper” and “delusory” to think that red apples have “an independent nature or essence.”

Lastly, Repetti may want to jettison the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality altogether. Regardless of the terminology he uses, however, his account still maintains at least two levels of reality: one for the *dhamma* level micro-phenomena, which exist independently of our minds, and another for red apples, whose existence is dependent on our minds (the Abhidharma view). Let us call these “mind-independent” reality and “mind-dependent” reality.

Is there a metaphysical difference between Repetti’s “mind-dependent” self and Goodman’s conventional self? The answer seems to be no. Repetti writes that if the self and objects like red apples do not exist, it is not “because there are no such entities,” but because “they are regarded in Buddhist philosophy as being ultimately empty,” which means that they “lack an independent nature, an essential or intrinsic nature, or a self-nature” (“No Self” 144). Along similar lines, Goodman describes the conventional self as existing only as a result of “the constructive activity of the mind.” If there is no metaphysical difference between Repetti’s account of the “mind-dependent” self and Goodman’s account of the conventional self, then their disagreement with respect to the ultimate existence of free will may be of minimal consequence.

Excessive eliminativism

Repetti says that arguing that red apples do not exist is “unjustified and excessive, unless the claim is made equally about all things’ utter nonexistence” (“No Self” 146). Goodman is, according to Repetti, unwilling to bite that bullet because he “does not treat the items that are, so to speak, central posits in his Buddhist consequentialism—sentience, pleasure, pain, wellbeing, suffering, consequences, and so forth—as utterly nonexistent” (“No Self” 146).

In this passage, Repetti attempts to draw a distinction between his metaphysics and Goodman's by saying that, though Repetti believes that red apples do exist, but only in "mind-dependent" reality, Goodman believes that they are "utterly nonexistent." However, this is an overstatement; Goodman says that the Abhidharma and Madhyamaka traditions do not see apples and tables as "utterly" nonexistent but only as "ultimately" nonexistent. In *Consequences*, Goodman specifically writes that it is *not* the case that "ordinary things, such as chairs, trees, and people, are utterly nonexistent. Indeed, they do exist, but they exist conventionally, not ultimately" (123).

The Madhyamaka philosopher Bhāvaviveka uses the metaphor of the snake and the rope to illustrate the distinction between conventional existence and utter nonexistence. Say someone walks down a road late at night and mistakes a coiled rope up ahead for a snake. This "snake" does not exist, in the sense that there is no ultimate correspondence in reality to the snake that persists through time. However, Bhāvaviveka tells us, this does not mean that snakes are, to use Repetti's phrase, "utterly" nonexistent. Malcolm Eckel points out that

it is a useful conventional skill to distinguish imagined snakes from real snakes before they sink their conventional teeth into your conventional foot and bring your conventional life to a conventional end. To say that no snake exists even conventionally (*vyavahārena*) is contradicted (*viruddha*) by common sense (or by a point that is generally accepted, *prasiddha*). (178)

At the very least, Eckel seems to be pointing out that it is skillful to interact differently with what we conventionally perceive to be a rope and what we conventionally perceive to be a snake, as each will have a markedly different impact on our paths toward enlightenment.

More importantly, Repetti's claim about excessive eliminativism misrepresents Goodman's argument. Although Goodman does say that the ultimate nonexistence of the self entails that there is no such thing as a soul or free will, he explicitly states that the ultimate nonexistence of the self does not entail the ultimate nonexistence of the "central posits of Buddhism" such as suffering and pain. Instead, according to Goodman's understanding of the Abhidharma view, included among the entities that ultimately do exist are "colors, sounds, *thoughts, and sensations*" (149, emphasis added) such as pleasure, pain, and suffering. Goodman's view in this respect is consistent with the Abhidharma teaching that, as stated in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhi Magga*, "Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found" (Mahathera).

No-boundary argument

On Goodman's account, composite things—such as red apples and the self—exist only in a conventional sense, in that they are features of how we parse our environment as opposed to being features of ultimate reality. As such, he says, "there is no genuine boundary between the self and the other" (150), that is, no boundary that exists in ultimate reality.

It is difficult to see how Repetti differs from Goodman regarding the self. As discussed above, Repetti believes that the self only exists in "mind-dependent" reality; therefore, boundaries between the self and others only exist in "mind-dependent" reality. This appears to be indistinguishable from Goodman's view that boundaries between the self and others are features of conventional reality that are useful in making sense of our lives. In fact, Repetti quotes Gestalt theorists as saying that boundaries between the self and others help meet our "biological, social, and psychological needs," for instance, by helping us to maintain our sense of "autonomy" ("No Self" 152).

Repetti fails to provide any reason why it would not be sufficient for boundaries between the self and others to exist conventionally. Goodman writes that, according to the Madhyamaka view, conventional existence “is the only type of existence anything could ever have” (*Consequences* 123). The founding text of Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna’s *Root Verses of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*), argues that these conventional truths are essential to the achievement of *nirvāṇa*. Nāgārjuna writes, “It is impossible to teach the ultimate without being based on the conventional, and without understanding the ultimate, it is impossible to attain Nirvana” (Eckel 176). Thus, Goodman is in good company when he argues that, even though boundaries between the self and others only exist in our conventional reality, they are still essential tools on our paths to enlightenment.⁴

If Repetti’s “mind-dependent” reality is not metaphysically different from Goodman’s conventional reality, his objections to the “no-boundary” argument fall by the wayside. Repetti writes that the no-boundary argument could not work because “the same reasoning may be used to reject talk of someone’s karma and reincarnation” (“No Self” 151). However, if Repetti’s “mind-dependent” self is the same as Goodman’s conventional self, then whatever analysis Repetti wishes to utilize with respect to karma and reincarnation could presumably be utilized by Goodman. In other words, because both Repetti and Goodman reject the ultimate existence of the self, both are equally open to the charge that they are also rejecting talk of the self’s karma and reincarnation. In fact, this is a charge that could be leveled against any number of Buddhist scholars, such as Nyanatiloka Mahathera. After citing Buddhaghosa’s

⁴ Repetti gestures toward a similar point when he writes that “For Buddhist practitioners, the free will question is not whether person talk translates to ultimate discourse, but rather how—within that causal nexus (of beliefs, volitions, actions)—the right sort of self-regulating abilities needed for the Buddhist path may be cultivated” (“No Self” 150-151).

Visuddhi Magga to illustrate how the ultimate nonexistence of the self aligns with the central posits of Buddhism, Mahathera points out that one who has “fully penetrated the egolessness of existence, knows that, in the highest sense, there is no individual that suffers, that commits the kammic deeds, that enters Nirvana, and that brings the Eightfold Path to perfection.”

Causal existence

Repetti offers one more argument that he believes separates his view from that of Goodman, which he first put forward in “Paleo-compatibilism” based on his interpretation of the Sautrāntikas (89). Citing what he takes to be “Buddhist causal arguments for the ultimate reality of any entity,” Repetti writes that

Any entity that plays a genuine causal role is ultimately real. The (false conception of) self plays *the chief causal role* in Buddhism’s salvific narrative: It is the chief cause of suffering in Buddhism and by eliminating this powerful cause the greatest effect in Buddhism—enlightenment—is achieved One cannot remove a cause, or eradicate something, moreover, that *does not exist*. (“No Self” 150)

Fundamentally, this attempted distinction is subject to the same critique as above. That is, insofar as Repetti’s “mind-dependent” self is metaphysically indistinguishable from Goodman’s conventional self, it is not clear where the disagreement could reside. Under Repetti’s account, the self—in addition to red apples, chairs, rocks, and books—is causal only within “mind-dependent” reality, and Goodman would agree with respect to the self in conventional reality.

Moreover, Goodman agrees that obviously false concepts may still be causally efficacious, such as when a little girl's "belief that Santa Claus exists causes her to set out milk and cookies for him." Even though the concept of Santa Claus is causally efficacious in this scenario, "Santa Claus doesn't exist and so can't cause anything."⁵ Similarly, in Bhāvaviveka's rope-snake analogy, the snake causes us fear even though it does not ultimately exist.

The Empty Self and Conventional Moral Responsibility

The lack of conflict between Repetti and Goodman's views is also illustrated by Repetti's analysis of moral responsibility. Repetti uses the following quote from the *Majjhima Nikāya* to illustrate what the Buddha means by a self without an independent nature or essence:

Here, bhikkhu, a well-taught noble disciple . . . does not regard material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. He does not regard feeling as self . . . perception as self . . . formations as self . . . consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how identity view does not come to be. (MN 109:11) ("No Self" 189)

If the self is none of the five aggregates (that is, neither our consciousness, our perceptions, nor our material bodies), what is it? More importantly, if we have no essential nature that persists through time, including "reason-responsiveness" (Fischer and Ravizza *Responsibility* (62-91); or, as Repetti puts it, "dharma-responsiveness" "No Self" 170), what is the basis of our moral responsibility?

⁵ Personal communication, May 2013.

Repetti responds that the “processual-self system” has enough agency to ground its attribution of desert and moral responsibility. However, he claims there is a distinction between this “self-system” and the “self.” Specifically, he writes that the Buddha rejects “the faulty identification” with the processual-self system as the self (“No Self” 190).

Given that Repetti rejects the existence of the self in “mind-independent” reality, it would seem that this passage is simply making the case that the “processual-self system” bears moral responsibility in “mind-dependent” reality. Again this forces us to ask: where is the disagreement with Goodman? Goodman argues that, in conventional reality, conventional selves bear moral responsibility. Thus, just as Goodman grounds his notion of moral responsibility on the self that exists in conventional reality, Repetti grounds his notion of moral responsibility on the “processual-self system” that exists in “mind-dependent” reality.

Thus, Repetti seems to agree with Goodman that the self does not ultimately exist, and as a result that the self can only bear moral responsibility in conventional reality.⁶ With such broad, fundamental agreement, what is left to disagree about? For that we turn to free will.

Hard Determinism and a Buddhist Deflation

The key distinction between hard determinists (such as Goodman) and soft determinists (such as Repetti) is that the former do not believe in free will, while the latter do. Repetti contends that a consequence of this difference is that hard determinists are committed to the belief that “all events are determined *in such a way* that nothing we can do can make any difference whatsoever to final outcomes,” whereas, for soft determinists, “there is a possibility that an outcome may be changed by

⁶ Personal communication, May 2013.

someone who is sufficiently aware of causes and conditions, even though the ultimate outcome is nonetheless determined” (“Early” 292). However, I would argue that hard determinists actually agree with soft determinists that the operation of our wills influences final outcomes, but disagree that this alone is sufficient to ground free will. In other words, according to hard determinists, the fact that our wills are causally efficacious does not mean that our wills are “free.”

Hard determinists put forward two main arguments to the conclusion that the causal efficacy of our wills is insufficient to ground free will: (1) we are not the ultimate source of our wills, and (2) the operation of our wills is subject to causal laws that dictate only one possible outcome.⁷

The first problem is often called the “source” or “ultimate origination” problem: even though our wills play a causal role in the outcomes of our lives, if the constitution and origination of our wills are causally determined by factors over which we have no control, says the hard determinist, our wills are not truly “ours.” As Robert Kane puts it,

Free will...is the power of agents to be the ultimate creators or originators and sustainers of their own ends or purposes...when we trace the causal or explanatory chains of action back to their sources in the purposes of free agents, these causal chains must come to an end or terminate in the willings (choices, decisions, or efforts) of the agents, which cause or bring about their purposes. (Vihvelin)

The second related problem deals with our potential lack of “alternate possibilities”: even though our wills play a causal role in the outcomes of our lives, if they are governed by causal laws in such a way that

⁷ For a more detailed discussion, see Vihvelin.

only one outcome is possible, argues the hard determinist, then we cannot be said to truly have a “choice” with respect to that outcome. In other words, although our wills do play a causal role in final outcomes, they might not be able to play a causal role in any *other* final outcomes. In the words of Carl Ginet, I can only be said to have freedom of action, and thus the will, “if more than one alternative course of action is then *open to me*. Two or more alternatives are open to me at a given moment if which of them I do is entirely up to my choice at that moment” (Vihvelin).

Taken together, the source problem and the lack of alternate possibilities help us get a clearer picture of why the causal efficacy of our wills does not entail that we have free will. In the view of hard determinists, if we are not responsible for the origination of our wills and our wills causally determine only one possible outcome, then our wills, although influencing final outcomes, are not truly free.

In analyzing hard determinism as entailing that agential actions have no impact on final outcomes, it seems that Repetti conflates hard determinism with fatalism. Although all fatalists are hard determinists, not all hard determinists are fatalists, and Goodman clearly falls in this latter category. *Consequences* contains many statements that flatly contradict fatalism, including the following: “through mindfulness meditation, a person attains the ability to focus on and reflect on her passing thoughts . . . and might, over a long time, be able to weaken or even eliminate her angry impulses” (156). Later in the same chapter, Goodman writes that a Buddhist “must transform the functions of his mind, as well as his relationships to others and to the world,” and that the power of meditation leads him to be “optimistic about the practical possibility of such a transformation” (163). These statements illustrate Goodman’s belief that agential action can affect final out-

comes, which I would argue is entirely consistent with agents lacking free will. However, because of this, Repetti contends that Goodman contradicts hard determinism (“No Self” 155).

Repetti makes crucial alterations to Goodman’s language in his attempt to show that Goodman contradicts hard determinism. As stated above, in *Consequences*, Goodman writes that, through meditation, a person *might* weaken her angry impulses. This is entirely consistent with hard determinism because, although the causal history of the universe *might* be such that a woman’s meditation will decrease her angry impulses, it also *might* be such that she will *not* have that result. Analogously, when we flip a coin, the coin *might* come up heads, but the coin also *might* come up tails.

In analyzing Goodman, however, Repetti substitutes for “might” a word that is rife with unhelpful connotations in the free will and autonomy space: “can.” Specifically, Repetti falsely claims that Goodman writes that a person “‘can’ alter her impulses—implicitly attributing to a processual-person-series a person-series-regulating ability: free will without a real self” (“No Self” 155, emphasis added). From this faulty attribution, Repetti then deduces that “if [an agent] ‘can’ do X, she presumably ‘can’ also do not-X” (“No Self” 155, emphasis added). This would contradict the hard determinist’s argument that although an agent’s will is causally efficacious, she lacks alternate possibilities. However, Goodman does not write that a person *can* alter her impulses; he writes that she *might* do so. In this way, with the seemingly minor shift from the language of *might* to the language of *can*, we are led from a world consistent with hard determinism into one in which an agent seems to have counter-factual abilities. This is of crucial importance in the free will space because, although a coin *might* come up heads or tails, we would not say that it *can* do either (and if we did, we would not mean that the

coin bears moral responsibility for the outcome), and hard determinists such as Goodman apply the same analysis to the self.

More importantly, Repetti and Goodman's very real disagreement about the ultimate existence of free will masks the importance of their more fundamental agreement on the metaphysics of the self. If both Repetti and Goodman agree that the self does not ultimately exist, and thus only bears moral responsibility in "mind-dependent," conventional reality, then what hinges on the ultimate existence or nonexistence of free will? In other words, if the self does not ultimately exist, does it matter if free will does?

I see two options. First, Repetti may diverge from Goodman by arguing that a self can only bear moral responsibility, even in the conventional sense, if free will exists in ultimate reality. If so, then it would be unjustified for Goodman to hold the self morally responsible in conventional reality because, as a hard determinist, he believes free will does not ultimately exist. Although this view is coherent, it seems strange to think that whether a self bears moral responsibility in conventional reality would be connected to any facet of ultimate reality, because the self itself does not ultimately exist.

The other possibility is that Repetti and Goodman agree that the self only bears moral responsibility in conventional reality, independent of whether free will ultimately exists. If so, and if I am correct that hard determinists such as Goodman believe in the causal efficacy of the will, then Repetti and Goodman may have charted a potential path around the free will problem, at least for Buddhist determinists. For Western philosophers, the existence of free will is vital because most believe that without free will we cannot be held morally responsible for our actions, but with free will we can. However, under Repetti and Goodman's shared understanding of the metaphysics of the self—and, arguably, human agency—the ultimate existence of free will is decoupled from our analy-

sis of moral responsibility, and the free will problem is deflated. Although the question of free will may still be of interest to us, if we can agree on our analysis of moral responsibility, as well our analysis of the causal efficacy of the human will, then we may be able to make substantive progress in our conversations about ethics, punishment, virtue, and what makes for a good life.

Conclusion

A strong, clear understanding of Buddhist metaphysics can often provide essential guidance for Buddhist ethics. One example of this is apparent in examining the Buddhist notion of the “self.” With a fundamental agreement on the nature of the self, we might be able to make progress on other seemingly intractable philosophical problems, such as those regarding human agency.

In *Consequences of Compassion*, Charles Goodman outlines a deep and thoughtful analysis of how to construct a theory of Buddhist ethics without the self. Riccardo Repetti seems to agree with Goodman about the metaphysics of the self and conventional moral responsibility, but disagrees about the ultimate existence of free will. However, if Buddhist hard and soft determinists such as Goodman and Repetti agree that the self does not ultimately exist and thus can only bear moral responsibility in “mind-dependent,” conventional reality, and agree that the human will can nonetheless influence final outcomes, then the question of whether or not free will ultimately exists seems to lose much of its significance.

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