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Tracing the Trajectory of Buddhist Free Will Theorizing

Katie Javanaud

Keble College, Oxford

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Tracing the Trajectory of Buddhist Free Will Theorizing

Katie Javanaud¹

Abstract

This paper documents the key trends and developments in the history of Buddhist free will theorizing, indicating potential new avenues for research. Part 1 traces the debate from its origins in the late 19th century to the present day. Though scholarship remains divided as to whether a Buddhist free will problem can even be formulated, this paper contends that such skeptical arguments can be defeated. An important aspect of Buddhist free will debates concerns the commensurability of causal determinism and dependent origination: by evaluating their similarities and differences it becomes clear that dependency relations encompass, but are not limited to, causal relations.

¹ Theology and Religion, Keble College, Oxford. katie.javanaud@keble.ox.ac.uk. I would like to thank Keble College, Oxford, where I have been the recipient of a Sloane Robinson scholarship, as well as The Spalding Trust and the Khyentse Foundation for their generous support. I would also like to thank Jan Westerhoff for helpful comments on this manuscript.

Part 2 examines psychological/spiritual responses to the problem, where the focus has shifted away from metaphysics. Finally, this paper initiates an exploration into the prospects of articulating a pan-Buddhist response to the free will problem.

1 Tracing the Debate

1.1 Approaches to Buddhist free will theorizing

Buddhist literature is replete with discussions of *freedom*, conceived in spiritual terms as the complete abandonment of unwholesome mental states and the fulfilment of the noble Eightfold Path.² However, before the advent of Indology as a decidedly Western discipline, few thinkers had examined the free will problem from a Buddhist perspective (i.e. the challenge of securing moral responsibility given either determinism or indeterminism). From its inception, Buddhism has prioritized soteriological goals over abstruse metaphysical speculation, seeking to provide pragmatic instruction on how to achieve liberation from cyclic existence. Some scholars maintain that Buddhism's "therapeutic" agenda explains its lack of engagement with the free will problem (e.g., Gowans 11-21). On this view, preoccupation with such a seemingly intractable philosophical problem merely distracts people from the more important objectives of extirpating suffering and pursuing enlightenment.

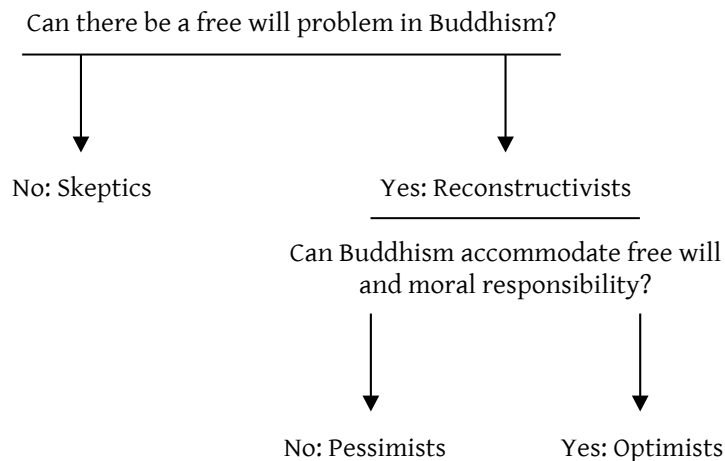
² The Buddha's first sermon (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, *Samyutta Nikāya* 56.11) is a particularly pertinent text which presents the attainment of final emancipation (*nirvāṇa*) as the result of abandoning all craving and pursuing the Eightfold Path as a "middle way" between the extremes of uncontrolled indulgence and excessive asceticism. The themes of this text are commonly found throughout subsequent Buddhist literature.

However, though traditional Buddhist sources do not explore the compatibility of causal determinism or indeterminism with free and responsible agency, certain texts discuss whether people are accountable for dependently originated activity. For example, in chapter six of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva asserts that it is irrational to become angry with people who inflict injury upon us. This is because their actions are dependent on prior conditions, which are themselves dependent on other conditions, *ad infinitum*.³ That these remarks feature in a text aimed at promoting bodhisattvahood suggests that some Buddhists consider reflection on free will and/or the requisites for moral responsibility to have spiritual value. Thus, if theorizing about the metaphysics of action can aid the attenuation of unwholesome reactive attitudes and thereby promote greater compassion toward others, then, conceivably, speculation on free will itself has therapeutic potential (Repetti *Why* 28).

Skepticism about the legitimacy and worth of Buddhist free will theorizing can be traced from the very origins of the debate in the late Nineteenth century. Since that time, scholars have become increasingly interested in Buddhism's capacity to formulate and respond to the free will problem. The recently published *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* (Repetti) brings the work of key contributors together, enabling the identification of two dominant approaches that have shaped the debate so far: scholars are divided as to whether a free will problem can even be formulated in a Buddhist context. Skeptics hold that Buddhism does not possess the necessary concepts for the articulation of the problem, whilst, contrastingly, reconstructivists contend that the problem (or a sufficiently similar problem) can arise from the Buddhist framework. Scholars of the latter type are themselves divisible into two groups: pes-

³ Śāntideva 6.25 (Crosby and Skilton). "Whatever transgressions and evil deeds of various kinds there are, all arise through the power of conditioning factors, while there is nothing that arises independently" (Crosby and Skilton 52).

simists and optimists. Both pessimists and optimists agree that Buddhist free will theorizing is possible and, indeed, philosophically important, yet disagree about whether Buddhist responses can safeguard the notions of free will and moral responsibility.



Though proponents of skeptical, pessimistic, and optimistic approaches have each delivered important insights, progress in Buddhist free will theorizing requires confidence in the legitimacy of the enterprise. For reasons set forth below, skeptical arguments can be defeated. The final repudiation of the skeptical position, however, does not detract from the valuable contribution skeptics have made to this debate, particularly in promoting deeper reflection on the nature, purpose, and limits of cross-cultural philosophizing. Perhaps unintentionally, through arguing that Buddhist free will theorizing is fundamentally misguided, skeptics have encouraged their opponents to articulate increasingly more nuanced and sophisticated positions.

1.2 *The emergence of the debate*

In an essay of 1898, “On the Will in Buddhism,” Rhys Davids set the trajectory for early discussions on Buddhism and free will by arguing that “in a great number of cases, the languages which have grown up with the traditions of Western philosophy do not afford equivalents for Oriental standpoints” (48). Occasionally, Rhys Davids has been interpreted as suggesting that early Buddhists were interested in the same kind of free will problem as that found in the Western analytic tradition (Flanagan 59). However, her remarks are better understood as casting doubt on Buddhism’s ability to engage with this problem, and thus as inaugurating skepticism toward the entire enterprise of Buddhist free will theorizing. Rhys Davids discusses the absence of an exactly equivalent term for “will” in Pāli literature, but acknowledges several terms which convey “classes of mental states or processes . . . more or less” communicative of the notion (48). Crucially, Rhys Davids does not merely discuss the *general* challenges of translation, but rather signals the omission of certain concepts from the Buddhist worldview that she deems critical for free will theorizing. For any term in one language, there may not be a precise equivalent in another. However, it is often possible to convey the functions fulfilled by terms in the source language that are nevertheless absent from the target language. Rhys Davids implies, however, that the concept of a metaphysically independent will cannot perform any function in the Buddhist system and, as such, would be explanatorily redundant. Furthermore, such a concept is explicitly rejected by Buddhists who regard belief in an independent will, self, or center of agency as an obstacle to their soteriological project.

These ideas were adopted and developed by subsequent scholars. For example, Rahula (54-55) and Conze (104) likewise hold that Buddhism lacks the concepts necessary for the formulation of the free will problem. They maintain that without belief in the existence of an inde-

pendent *will* or *self*, free will theorizing is pointless—for to whom or what could freedom be predicated? These skeptical points continue to find support in contemporary scholarship. In *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* (Repetti), for example, Gowans, Garfield, Flanagan, and Adam all criticize efforts to establish the implied Buddhist view on free will as either misplaced or meaningless, the product either of soteriological procrastination or of philosophical error.

Garfield asserts that it is “impossible to formulate the free will thesis in a Buddhist framework” and presents the persistent efforts of many contemporary scholars in this field as futile (50). Both Garfield and Flanagan consider the free will problem to be premised on specifically Western assumptions, emerging from “a very particular, parochial language game” (Flanagan 61). However, although skeptical arguments have been a recurrent feature in debates about Buddhism and free will, the furtherance of reconstructive progress requires their rebuttal.

1.3 Overcoming skepticism

To successfully rebut these skeptical arguments, Buddhist free will theorists must demonstrate that Buddhism does indeed have access to the conceptual apparatus needed to articulate the problem. Federman has employed this strategy by arguing that Buddhism’s commitment to *anātman* neither impedes nor undermines discussion on free will (8). Whereas skeptics consider Buddhism’s denial of *ātman* as precluding the possibility of a free will problem—summed up by Adams’s pithy expression “no self, no free will, no problem” (239)—reconstructivists observe that many Western philosophers engage with this problem without recourse to the notion of *self* as a metaphysically independent substance with inherent reality. Invoking Dennett’s rejection of a Cartesian *soul* (Dennett 1), Federman maintains that although Buddhism’s rejection of

ātman entails rejection of “ultimate free will,” there is still scope for a compatibilist notion of freedom and responsibility (1).

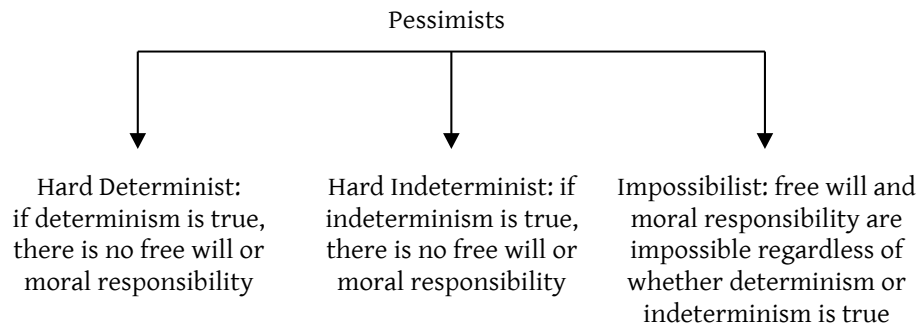
Similarly, Siderits argues that *anātman* does not nullify the free will problem. On the contrary, because freedom is typically predicated of *persons* (which are admitted in Buddhism as conventionally existent), the question of whether people possess free will remains. Siderits proposes a solution to the problem by drawing on the fact that an ultimately existent *ātman* is indeed denied: whilst ultimately everything may be determined, it is conventionally true that people are free and responsible. Conflating the ultimate and conventional discourse domains leads, Siderits argues, to *meaningless* statements (*Paleo-Compatibilism* 29-42). Repetti has also responded to skeptical arguments, focusing on the possibility that Buddhist free will theorizing may contribute toward, rather than hinder, the furtherance of soteriological goals (*Why* 22-23). As is acknowledged above, however, skeptical contributors to this debate have correctly observed that reconstructivists too often assume the parity of—perhaps superficially similar—concepts that have emerged in very different philosophical systems. The most pertinent example of this concerns the reconstructivist treatment of dependent origination as roughly coterminous with causal determinism.

While more recent contributors have begun to take seriously the differences as well as the similarities between dependency and determinism (e.g., Breyer 360-373), whether Buddhists are implicitly committed to a form of determinism remains a contested issue. Nevertheless, if the Buddhist free will problem can be expressed in terms of a tension between the theories of karma and dependent origination, then, even though Buddhist and Western versions of the problem are unlikely to be the same, they may in fact be *analogous* (Javanaud).

1.4 Pessimistic and optimistic approaches

Although reconstructivists concur in their assessment that the free will problem can indeed be formulated in a Buddhist context, they often disagree profoundly over the type of response available. That is, they disagree over Buddhism's ability to safeguard the idea that meditative practice and ethical decision-making (which are critical to attaining spiritual emancipation from cyclic existence) are freely chosen activities. However, unless Buddhism can provide an account of such practices as being "up to" us, what sense can be made of its invocations to cultivate wholesome conduct, meditative absorption, and insight?

Whether Buddhism can secure moral responsibility for actions that arise from an infinitely expansive nexus of *impersonal* causes and conditions is a major source of contention. Among reconstructivists who conceive of Buddhism as implicitly committed to determinism, hard (incompatibilist) determinists adopt the pessimistic view that Buddhists cannot accommodate free will and responsibility whereas soft (compatibilist) determinists optimistically think they can. Still other contributors refrain from evaluating Buddhism's implied view on determinism, arguing that its truth or falsity is irrelevant to questions of responsibility. These thinkers can be further divided into pessimistic and optimistic groups, the former holding that (strong/deep) free will is *necessarily* impossible (e.g., Strawson *Impossibility* 6-7 and *Free* 72-83) and the latter arguing that the metaphysical question of whether determinism is true or false is ancillary to the practical challenge of exercising freedom (Repetti *Earlier* 284 and *Agentless* 193).



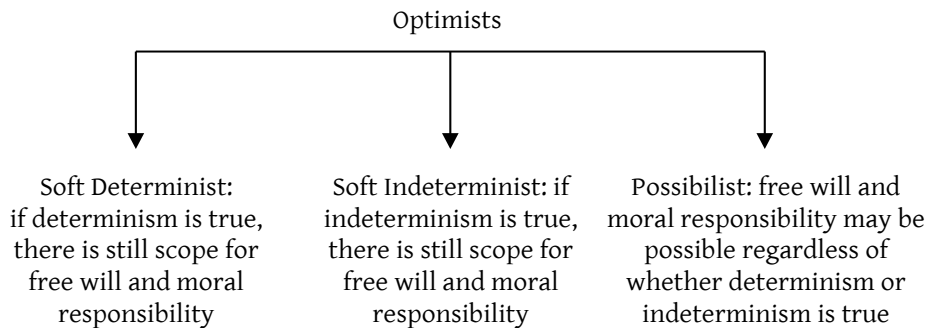
Goodman interprets Buddhist texts as implicitly defending the thesis of causal determinism, which, as a hard determinist, he regards as incompatible with free will and moral responsibility. He maintains that these texts affirm both the “universal causality and predictability in principle” of every event and that “the entire Indian Buddhist tradition [is] committed to hard determinism” (*Consequences* 146). Although Goodman has since modified his position, arguing that Buddhists might sometimes benefit from sustaining the *illusion* of free will whenever doing so aids the cultivation of compassionate responsiveness (*Uses* 39), his initial approach is objectionable insofar as: (a) it assumes that commitment to dependent origination implies commitment to causal determinism, yet fails adequately to convey the relationship between causal dependency and other types of dependency; and (b) it overlooks examples from Buddhist literature where it is plainly stipulated that people *are* morally responsible for their volitional activity/karma.

Optimists about Buddhism’s capacity to accommodate free will in a world governed by dependent origination usually adopt one of two strategies: either they deny the equivalence of causal determinism and causal origination (i.e., the causal aspect of dependent origination), leaving scope for indeterminism, or they accept this equivalence and maintain that free will and responsibility are compatible with determinism. An altogether different strategy involves positing self-regulation and

mental freedom as capacities that can be exercised irrespective of whether determinism or indeterminism is true.

Gómez employs the first strategy, appealing to several Pāli texts in which the Buddha appears to deny that “the cause-effect relationship implied necessarily strict determination or a one-to-one correspondence between act and fruit” (82). However, appeals to causal indeterminacy are insufficient for dispelling the difficulty of explaining free and responsible action. For, indeed, the indeterminist now faces the troublesome task of defending agency in the face of seemingly *chancy* occurrences. Unlike Western defenders of soft indeterminism, however, Buddhist free will reconstructivists cannot appeal to the notion of an independent *self*, capable of intervening in an otherwise causally regulated system in order to assert the will.

The second strategy finds support from those who conceive of the Buddhist free will problem as pertaining strictly to the domain of conventional reality, such that freedom and determinism are descriptions applicable within distinct and incommensurable domains (e.g., Siderits *Paleo-Compatibilism* 30 and Meyers 43). Although the ingenuity of this *paleo-compatibilist* response to the problem is striking, the theory it is not without its detractors.



On the one hand there are those, such as Repetti, who regard the paleo-compatibilist *solution* as simply avoiding the problem: “the compatibility criterion in the Western discussion is logical consistency... and paleo-compatibilism seems to avoid bivalence the way subjectivism does (by embedding, relativizing, or indexing its claims)” (*Reductionism* 56). On the other hand, there are those, such as Abelson, who think that paleo-compatibilism succeeds in reconciling responsibility and determinism but does so at the cost of forfeiting “the soteriological aspect of the Buddha’s teachings because it requires the appropriation and identification of one’s mental states as one’s own” (149).

Although the classification of attitudes as skeptical, pessimistic, or optimistic is a generally useful way of dividing existing approaches, it is, of course, overly simplistic. Numerous other contributors fall either between or outside of these categories. Blackmore’s work, in particular, reveals the inappropriateness of using these categories to evaluate every existing contribution to the Buddhist free will problem while simultaneously emphasizing that Buddhism’s interest lies primarily in achieving complete *spiritual* freedom. Presumably in the pursuit of that freedom, Blackmore claims to have “given up” the illusion of free will and, consequently, to have achieved a deeper kind of freedom—a freedom from thinking about freedom (84-91).

1.5 Determinism and dependent origination

Although some scholars regard the truth or falsity of determinism and indeterminism as irrelevant to establishing whether free will and moral responsibility obtain, the majority of reconstructivists consider Buddhism’s implied stance on determinism to be pertinent. Establishing the Buddhist view on this matter requires an evaluation of the similarities and differences between determinism and dependent origination. How-

ever, because Buddhists conceive of dependent origination in a range of ways, differences between schools are to be expected.

Too many reconstructivists have merely assumed that determinism and causal dependency are conceptually co-extensive. The error in this assumption, however, lies in the fact that Buddhists understand causal relations to be a mere *subset* of dependency relations. What Buddhists mean by asserting that a causal relation obtains, therefore, can only be analysed against the backdrop of their (sometimes highly distinctive) metaphysical, ontological, and semantic theories. In the case of Madhyamaka, for example, which posits the pervasive *conceptual dependency* of all phenomena such that mind-independent facts about causation are deemed *impossible*, causal relations possess a different (empty) status to that which they possess in other (metaphysically realist) traditions. Accordingly, the theory of determinism—which in Western philosophy is often presented as either objectively true or false—is unlikely to find affinity among proponents of anti-realist Buddhist traditions.

The theory of dependent origination stipulates: “When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”⁴ It is tempting to follow Ānanda and declare this teaching, here so simply expressed, to be straightforwardly comprehensible; but, as the Buddha warns, the arrogance of unenlightened beings who presume to understand the profundity of this teaching is the source of their potentially endless suffering.⁵ In contrast, a thorough understanding of dependent origination enables beings to realize complete emancipation from suffering so that they are no longer driven by blind desire or aversion. Buddhism presents insight into dependent origination as the pin-

⁴ *Cūḷasakuludāyī Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 79 (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 655).

⁵ *Mahānidāna Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya* 15 (Walshe 223–230).

nacle of spiritual achievement, hence the Buddha's saying that "one who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination."⁶

The disagreement between those who maintain, and those who deny, that commitment to universal causal dependence entails determinism centers on the question of whether causal dependence implies the *necessity* of events. As Gómez has argued, the Pāli canon contains passages in which the Buddha resists the fatalistic idea that humans lack the capacity for self-control, karmic responsibility, or the ability to navigate their own course out of cyclic existence. However, as Western debates on free will reveal, resistance to fatalism need not imply resistance to determinism, for the very process of deliberating and being responsive to reasons is integral to achieving what may nevertheless be a determined outcome. Whereas soft indeterminists and hard determinists concur that exercising free will involves a capacity *to have done otherwise*, soft determinists ascribe a different meaning to free will. On this view, notions of responsibility and self-control retain their function even if people cannot do otherwise.

Still other passages from the Pāli canon suggest that Buddhism accepts the indeterminacy of karmic consequences. For example, as a result of his clairvoyant powers, the Buddha affirms that the same deeds performed by different people can fructify in very divergent ways.⁷ Once again, however, Buddhism's concession that karma is indeterminate (insofar as similarly motivated actions can yield different results for different people) tells us nothing about its position on the general principle of universal causal determinism. For any *one* karmic activity, there may be just *one* possible karmic result. This is because, according to Buddhism,

⁶ *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 28 (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 283).

⁷ *Loṇakapalla Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya* 100 (Bodhi 331-335).

no two beings can share the same karmic history. Thus, contrary to Austin's assertion that, *under precisely the same conditions*, he *could* have putt-
 ed a golf ball even though he failed to (166), Buddhists might explain ap-
 parent discrepancies in karmic outcomes by arguing that a being's
 unique karmic history ensures that there can be no alternative way in
 which particular instances of karmic activity fructify.

1.6 *The soteriological import of dependent origination*

Another reason to doubt the conceptual inter-changeability of determin-
 ism and dependent origination is that, in Buddhist texts, the latter can
 be arrested or even reversed. The earliest Buddhist sources identify de-
 pendent arising as one of the hallmarks of cyclic existence. The implica-
 tions of this insight for the relationship between bondage and liberation
 are variously interpreted. While Theravādins hold that these states are
 radically metaphysically distinct, Mahāyānists typically deny metaphysi-
 cal distinguishability yet admit a profound experiential difference, char-
 acterized by delusion and insight respectively. Under all interpretations,
 though, the aspirant's goal is to terminate the process of rebirth by ex-
 punging grasping, aversion, and delusion from the mind. So, whereas
 Western philosophy explores the thesis of causal determinism as a strict-
 ly metaphysical view, the Buddhist thesis of dependent origination is
 thoroughly imbued with soteriological import. This engenders ques-
 tions about the different functions these theories are intended to per-
 form within their respective philosophical systems and, in turn, stimu-
 lates more discussion about the extent to which these worldviews are
 comparable.

The idea that the world fails to conform to the way it appears to
 ordinary, unenlightened, beings forms an integral part of every Buddhist
 system. The theory of two truths is intended to accommodate the rela-

tionship between appearance and reality, allowing Buddhists to retain pragmatically convenient notions (such as *person*, *chariot* etc.), even though these entities disintegrate upon conceptual analysis. As noted, some reconstructivists appeal to the semantic insularity of conventional and ultimate discourse domains to advance a compatibilist response to the problem (e.g., Siderits *Paleo-Compatibilism* and Meyers). On this view, causal determinism might be postulated as ultimately true. However, as intimated already, not all schools of Buddhism accept a robust distinction between the ultimate and conventional domains and therefore do not endorse the realist assumption that either determinism or indeterminism must reflect the way the world mind-independently is. For such schools, therefore, the co-extensiveness of determinism and causal dependence cannot be conceded.

In summary, given Buddhism's ambivalence toward the idea of causal necessitation coupled with its endorsement of an entirely different worldview to that which has produced the Western thesis of causal determinism, efforts to reconstruct a Buddhist view on free will and responsibility which focus on psychological/spiritual fulfilment appear increasingly promising. Although comparing determinism and dependent origination is important to the project of Buddhist free will theorizing, recent scholarship has begun to formulate the problem in terms of a tension between dependent origination and karma. This new way of posing the problem avoids the shortcomings associated with reducing dependent origination (which can also encompass mereological and conceptual dependence) to causal dependence. This shift in focus creates new reconstructive possibilities and places less weight on the seemingly insurmountable challenge of deciding Buddhism's implied view on determinism.

2. Psychological/Spiritual Responses to the Problem

2.1 Acquiring free will

Psychological approaches to Buddhist free will theorizing reconceptualise the meaning of free will. In contrast to presentations of free will as a property either wholly present or wholly absent from a person, psychological reconstructivists hold that free will comes in degrees. As with the exercise of a muscle, so too with the exercise of free will: regular and sustained exertions enable its gradual development while inactivity leads to atrophy. Distinguishing cases of free action (exemplified by an ability to satisfy one's desires) and cases of free will (characterized as the ability to regulate one's desires and, if necessary, bring one's first-order desires into alignment with one's higher-order volitions), psychological reconstructivists argue that certain Buddhist practices, especially mindfulness meditation, enable the acquisition of free will.

Psychological approaches to Buddhist free will discourse draw considerably on the work of Frankfurt. He argues that, though free will debates are often framed around the *principle of alternate possibilities*, i.e., the question of whether an agent could have done otherwise, in fact, this principle's plausibility is an illusion (1). He considers the ability to do otherwise to be subsidiary, or even irrelevant, to deciding whether people possess free will and are morally responsible for their actions. Rather, the exercise of free will and the ascription of responsibility requires only that a person *identifies*—at a higher volitional level—with whatever first-order desires are satisfied in the execution of their actions. In Frankfurt's model, higher-order volitions are formed when people have desires about which desires should constitute their will, i.e., move them to action. Higher-order volitions are thus distinguished from higher-order desires, which are simply desires about which things one desires to desire (Frankfurt 16).

Psychological reconstructivists have modified Frankfurt's theory in several important respects, transposing aspects of it to a Buddhist context. For example, whereas Frankfurt emphasizes the need to "wholeheartedly identify" with one's higher-order volitions (159-176), Repetti rejects the idea that practising greater self-regulation leads to self-identification (*ahaṃ-kāra*) with one's higher volitions. On the contrary, Repetti argues that if the practice of mindfulness generates deeper awareness of the ephemeral nature of phenomena, then it can promote detachment from unwholesome mental states, making people more reflective about which desires they endorse. (Repetti *Agentless*)

The idea that meditative absorption undermines the ordinary, unenlightened, compulsion to satisfy desires is also useful in dispelling the apparent paradox of *striving* for enlightenment. Though Buddhists maintain that desires—at whichever level in the hierarchy—foster attachment and thus impede liberation, the cultivation of wholesome desires is a necessary step in the process of disassociation from the ego. Hence Repetti's claim that: "the *ārya* self-sculpts her hierarchical will in accord with the *Dharma*, increasing her self-regulative control thereby, despite her increasing recognition of the ultimate unreality of her self" (*Agentless* 200).

The *psychological* approach to free will implies that, in fact, few people exercise free will or are morally responsible for their actions. It would therefore be inappropriate to express unwholesome reactive attitudes toward those whose actions harm us. However, although most people may be driven by the blind desires that keep them in cyclic existence, psychological reconstructivists argue that mindfulness equips us with the tools to cultivate self-regulation and mental control.

Another important difference between Frankfurt's theory and that advanced by psychological reconstructivists is that, although both systems claim indifference toward the truth status of determinism, the

former cannot entirely avoid the threat of determinism. As Frankfurt himself acknowledges, “it seems conceivable that it should be causally determined that a person is free to want what he wants to want. If this is conceivable, then it might be causally determined that a person enjoys a free will” (25). Contrastingly, Buddhist free will reconstructivists could avoid this conclusion by challenging the idea of a mind-independently true description of the world: there simply is no fact of the matter concerning determinism.

Alternatively, following Siderits, they might challenge the idea that conventionally existent *persons* are the type of entities that could be ultimately determined. Although Repetti has resisted paleo-compatibilism for reasons already supplied (*Reductionism* 56), the persuasiveness of psychological/spiritual responses to the Buddhist free will problem arguably lies in their ability to subsume and skilfully utilize apparently rival theories (Javanaud, forthcoming). This ability derives from the predominantly practical agenda of psychological reconstructivism, which is more interested in the challenge of exercising free will than in rendering it consistent with what is ordinarily presumed to be an objective metaphysical picture of reality (Repetti *Earlier* 284).

Unlike other reconstructive efforts, psychological approaches can deliver a decisive blow to skeptical objections arising from evaluations of Buddhism as primarily concerned with soteriological freedom. The idea of freedom as gradually acquired also coheres well with the Buddhist conception of conventionally real persons pursuing a spiritual path of many stages.

Like other psychological reconstructions, the recently developed *perspectivalist* theory does not depend on a conception of the world as either deterministic or indeterministic (Breyer 363). Perspectivalism recommends attributing free will and moral responsibility whenever doing so is likely to stimulate wholesome reactive attitudes (of compassion,

sympathy, praise of others etc.), and withholding ascription of such properties whenever doing so is likely to provoke unwholesome reactive attitudes (of resentment, blame, conceit etc.) (Breyer 373-378 and Goodman *Uses* 37-41).

Such an approach is in accordance with Buddhism's pedagogical strategy of expediency (*upāya*), which accommodates *prima facie* contradictory teachings in order to appeal to people at different stages of spiritual maturity. Although early iterations of perspectivalism require refinement, an interesting facet of this approach is its conceptual availability to realist and anti-realist schools of Buddhism alike (Breyer 374-378). This raises the question of whether a pan-Buddhist response to the free will problem can be articulated.

2.2 *The prospects of a pan-Buddhist response*

There is an emerging consensus among reconstructivists that there cannot be a pan-Buddhist stance on the free will problem. Though Buddhologists should welcome the growing awareness of tradition-specific differences in metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, etc., which enable increasingly more nuanced and precise reconstructions, there are compelling arguments both for and against pan-Buddhist free will theorizing. It could be conjectured that the feasibility of formulating a pan-Buddhist approach depends on whether the free will problem is conceived as chiefly metaphysical or ethical in nature. If the metaphysical and ethical components are deemed equally important, it may transpire that at one level (i.e., metaphysical) pan-Buddhist responses are unattainable while at another level (i.e., psychological/spiritual) they are. These count as among the most important research questions with which future scholarship on Buddhism and free will must grapple.

On the one hand, philosophical disagreements internal to Buddhism can sometimes have vast repercussions on how the different schools conceive ultimate reality. For example, according to some (semantic) interpretations of Madhyamaka Buddhism, thoroughgoing repudiation of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) entails the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth” (Siderits *Thinking* 27). In consequence, reconstructions of the implied Madhyamaka view on free will can only ever pertain to the domain of convention. This is because the very idea of a definitive, ultimate level, solution would be incongruent with the Madhyamaka worldview (Javanaud, forthcoming). Contrastingly, because Abhidharma Buddhism admits the ultimate reality of dharmas (i.e., metaphysically simple constituents of ultimate reality) it can accommodate statements about determinism/indeterminism at an ultimate level (Siderits *Paleo-Compatibilism*).

Differences between realist and anti-realist attitudes toward the conceptual coherence of *svabhāva* are similarly reflected in respective interpretations of what it means for something to be dependently originated. Repetti argues that the “linear” conception of dependent origination found in Theravāda Buddhism means that this tradition is more likely to be implicitly compatibilist. However, the “holistic” conception of dependent origination as interdependence commonly found in Mahāyāna traditions makes incompatibilism more appropriate in these contexts. He thus maintains that, “for each doctrinally distinct kind of Buddhism, there may well be a distinct theory of free will”. (Repetti *Earlier* 286) These considerations have led many contemporary contributors to believe that efforts to establish the Buddhist view on free will are just as misguided as efforts to determine what the Western view would be.

On the other hand, as a skeptic about Buddhist free will theorizing, Flanagan questions the extent to which the array of currently com-

peting reconstructions reflects: (a) genuine differences between Buddhist schools, or (b) the “projection of various preferred solutions to our problem of free will” (60-61). Given that reconstructivists often present the Buddhist free will problem as soteriologically significant, it seems reasonable to presume at least some overlap between Buddhists on so central a question as whether people are free and responsible. Moreover, despite the many disagreements between Buddhists of different schools on questions pertaining to theoretical philosophy, there is a surprisingly high degree of convergence in areas such as soteriology and ethics. Certain distinctive developments in Mahāyāna ethics notwithstanding (e.g., the emergence of the bodhisattva ideal), there is general conformity of opinion regarding, for instance, the soteriological import of the Four Noble Truths, the efficacy of the Eight-fold Path, and the legitimacy of employing *upāya* for the spiritual cultivation of sentient beings.

Whether, or at what level, there can be a pan-Buddhist response to the free will problem arguably depends on how the nature of the problem itself is conceived. This is a matter over which scholars, inevitably, will disagree. However, while profound metaphysical disagreements preclude the possibility of any ultimate level concurrence, shared commitment to extirpating unwholesome reactive attitudes and achieving mental freedom from the compulsions of cyclic existence might make the articulation of a pan-Buddhist approach feasible at a conventional level.

To conclude, though this branch of Buddhist studies has emerged only recently, reconstructivists successfully argue that a free will problem analogous to that found in Western traditions can be formulated within Buddhism. This paper has explored several proposed responses to the Buddhist free will problem, arguing that psychological/spiritual approaches are particularly promising. Such approaches safeguard the internal coherence of Buddhist soteriology—which places special emphasis

on the liberating power of meditation as a tool enabling greater control over one's intentional (karmic) states—and accommodate the diverse and multi-faceted conceptions of dependent origination. Competing interpretations of dependent origination seem, *prima facie*, to render impossible a pan-Buddhist approach to free will. Nevertheless, whether it is possible to achieve general Buddhist conformity on such soteriologically central questions as free will and moral responsibility is for future scholarship to determine.

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