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False Friends: Dependent Origination and the Perils of Analogy in Cross-Cultural Philosophy

Karin Meyers¹

Abstract

Cross-cultural philosophical inquiry is predicated on the possibility of drawing analogies between ideas from distinct historical and cultural traditions, but is distorted and constrained when those analogies are overdrawn. In considering what Buddhists might have to say about free will, scholars tend to draw analogies between dependent origination and distinctively modern naturalistic ideas of universal causation. Such analogies help promote the idea of Buddhism as a “scientific religion” and help justify the impulse to naturalize Buddhism (or to simply ignore its un- or super-natural elements) in order to make it a more credible conversation partner. By tracing some of the early history of the idea of dependent origination, this essay

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discusses how and why these analogies have been overdrawn. It addresses why this matters to the inquiry into free will and other cross-cultural philosophical engagements with Buddhism. With respect to naturalizing Buddhism, it argues that decisions about what to exclude from serious consideration (such as karma and rebirth) *necessarily* influence how we understand ideas (such as dependent origination) we deem more congenial (and thus essential), and that by excluding those we do not find congenial, we foreclose opportunities to submit our own philosophical assumptions to scrutiny and to be genuinely transformed by our encounter with Buddhism.

Introduction

Readers of *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?* (Repetti) are likely to be struck by the sheer diversity of views on the topic. Given that much of this diversity has to do with the philosophical commitments of the essays' authors rather than differences between Buddhist traditions, one may wonder if the qualifier "Buddhist" in the book's title is misplaced. However, this does not diminish the value of the volume in collecting together for the first time an engaging series of new and (newly revised) seminal essays on the topic of free will in relation to Buddhist thought and practice. Nor does it diminish Repetti's accomplishment in making the philosophical stakes of the free will debate, relevant Buddhist ideas, and individual author contributions accessible to a broad cross-section of readers.

One of the many virtues of the volume is the way Repetti has organized the essays as a progressive dialogue that not only introduces a variety of (increasingly optimistic) perspectives on a Buddhist theory of

free will (culminating in Repetti's own "soft compatibilism"), but also engages the reader in an important meta-philosophical debate as to whether or how it makes sense to talk about a *Buddhist* perspective on free will. In this essay, I'd like to build upon this debate and particularly Repetti's framing of an affirmative answer in order to address what I see as a basic methodological challenge for this kind of cross-cultural philosophical inquiry: namely, the need to pay greater attention to the distinct contexts and histories of the relevant ideas (both Buddhist and Western)—even when our aim is explicitly constructive rather than historical or comparative.

After raising some concerns about Repetti's justification for a Buddhist theory of free will in terms of a *naturalized* Buddhism, I turn to consider how drawing a strong analogy between dependent origination and modern conceptions of causation, in particular, may distort and constrain the inquiry.

A Buddhist Theory of Free Will?

Given that neither the idea nor problem of free will were part of Buddhist intellectual history prior to contact with western philosophy in the modern era, *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* appropriately begins with the critical question of whether it *even makes sense* to ask what a Buddhist theory of free will might look like. In chapter one, Christopher Gowans argues that speculative theorizing about free will is, in fact, antithetical to the pragmatic soteriological orientation of the Nikāyas and cautions against reading Buddhist ideas in terms of western philosophical concerns and categories.

In chapters four and five, Jay Garfield and Owen Flanagan also express skepticism about the project, arguing that it does not

make sense to ask what Buddhists might say about free will because Buddhists do not share the assumptions that gave rise to the idea or problem in the west. Namely, Buddhists do not require, and even explicitly reject, the idea of an agent acting outside of the causal nexus or a divinely created order.

Both Garfield and Flanagan hold that the problem of free will is a philosophically unfortunate legacy of Christian monotheistic theodicy. Later in the volume, Emily McRae's (chapter fifteen) subtle reading of Tsongkhapa's account of emotion and action in *pragmatic* and *normative*, rather than in *metaphysical* and *descriptive*, terms, and as more concerned with *future outcome* than *originating cause*, nicely illustrates how the distinctiveness of a *Buddhist* soteriological context makes for an entirely different set of concerns about freedom and responsibility.²

² "Buddhist ethics refocuses the question from 'Could he have done otherwise and, if not, should we blame (or praise) him?' to 'Can I be freer in the ways I think, feel, and act, to help myself and others?'" (179). Notably, if we apply McRae's analysis of Tsongkhapa to Śāntideva's *Bodhicāryāvātāra*, it provides a compelling alternative and possible correction to Goodman's (chapter three) and Coseru's (chapter eight) readings. Whereas Goodman takes Śāntideva's event-causal description of action to resemble a hard incompatibilism happy to deny free will and moral responsibility, Coseru finds the moral epiphenomenalism implied by that description inconsistent with the basic terms and content of Buddhist practice. Following McRae's analysis, an instruction to regard others' harmful actions as not under their control may not be a metaphysical thesis that undermines free will and responsibility so much as a practical strategy for increasing one's own freedom and self-control. Similarly, although looking backwards and discovering that we are not the ultimate authors of our actions appears to threaten free will and moral responsibility, an analysis of the complex conditions that give rise to our actions enhances our self-control and ultimate liberation. Such a pragmatic, future-oriented reading of action makes sense in light of a Buddhist soteriology that is largely indifferent to the question of ultimate moral responsibility so central to Christian theology and classical formulations of the problem of free will.

Repetti (chapter two) and most of the other contributors (including McRae) seem to 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. Several emphasize ways in which Buddhists would deny free will and/or moral responsibility.³ Others agree that although Buddhists must rule out any version of free will that requires agent causation as metaphysically basic, Buddhism has a variety of resources to explain how our actions are in some relevant sense(s) *up to us*.⁴ Several contributors further point out that Buddhist soteriology is centrally concerned with how we can gain mastery over our actions (as well as over our thoughts, desires, emotions, volitions, and even material form) and/or countenances forms of freedom and self-mastery that go considerably beyond the kinds of choice or control typically associated with free will.⁵

As suggested by Gowans's critique, the difficulty is whether or how to relate these Buddhist soteriological concerns to the metaphysical and moral problem of "free will." At issue is not only how one defines the problem and the central terms of the debate, but also how one interprets Buddhist ideas in order to draw analogies (or dis-analogies) to the terms of the debate. I suspect that the problem of analogy may be more acute than Repetti and some of contributors suspect. Specifically, this concerns the phenomenon of "false friends,"⁶ that is, Buddhist ideas that *appear* similar to western ideas, but that involve commitments that are

³ Goodman (chapter three), Strawson (chapter six), Blackmore (chapter seven), Coseru (chapter eight), and Abelson (chapter thirteen).

⁴ Adam (chapter eleven) and Siderits (chapter twelve).

⁵ Friquegnon (chapter nine), Wallace (chapter ten), Harvey (chapter fourteen), McRae (chapter fifteen), Meyers (chapter sixteen), and Repetti (chapter seventeen).

⁶ I borrow this term from linguistics, where it refers to words from different languages that are similar in sound or spelling but have different meanings.

incongruous with the basic ontology or epistemology that informs their supposed analogues. As will be discussed below, this is precisely what we find in the case of dependent origination—which is often understood as roughly analogous to modern conceptions of universal causation—but which involves a number of commitments at odds with the materialism⁷ and naturalism⁸ that inform most modern thinking on causation. Under most classical descriptions, dependent origination involves a commitment to the reality and *primacy* of the mind. Historically, it is also associated with the ideas of karma and rebirth and the practice of recollecting past lives (*Anālayo*), and it is regularly invoked even today to explain a variety of other phenomena that persons committed to a modern scientific worldview would typically consider implausible. Before discussing how these dis-analogies may matter to the inquiry into Buddhist perspectives on free will, it will be helpful to examine how Repetti defends this inquiry.

In response to Gowans’s view that philosophical speculation about free will is contrary to the pragmatic soteriological orientation of the *Nikāyas*, Repetti argues that in the current western context, there is, in fact, a justifiable soteriological need for a Buddhist theory of free will (chapter two). Indeed, part of what motivates his interest in the topic is his understanding that Buddhism is uniquely situated to articulate a coherent ethical and soteriological narrative about free will that is consistent with modern science. Drawing on Stephen J. Gould’s idea of religion and science as “non-overlapping magisteria” (or NOMA), Repetti

⁷ The view that everything is constituted by, supervenes upon, or emerges from physical processes.

⁸ The view that everything is the result of natural causes, explicitly excluding the supernatural and spiritual. It is important to note that although this definition is circular—leaving what constitutes the natural up to interpretation—it is typically interpreted to imply some version of materialism.

asserts that Buddhism—properly *naturalized*—would (unlike other religions) instantiate a “valid NOMA case” (25). He reasons that, unlike other religions, whose central claims contradict empirical facts, pre-modern Buddhism shares with modern science a commitment to “empirically validated truth,”⁹ and that “much if not all of its supernaturalism is plausibly optional” (25). Repetti admits that the doctrines of karma and rebirth are exceptions, but suggests that these may be safely removed¹⁰ or interpreted¹¹ in such a way as to be made consistent with scientific natu-

⁹ Repetti says that this commitment dates “to injunctions from the Buddha not to accept anything on authority, but on investigation” (25). He does not cite any source, but he might have in mind something like the *Kālāma Sutta* (AN 3.66, Thānissaro), which is regularly cited in support this claim. The sutta certainly commends the audience (of non-Buddhists) to not take things on authority, but the pragmatic program of investigation it recommends is only empirical in the broadest sense of the term. It recommends considering what kinds of qualities wise people recommend (or condemn) and how adopting (or abandoning) these qualities might affect one’s happiness, and then acting accordingly. With respect to karma and rebirth, it recommends weighing the potential benefits of belief against drawbacks of disbelief.

¹⁰ He notes that “some Buddhists do not take these literally” and cites the Flanagan (*Bodhisattva*’s) conception of a naturalized Buddhism without the “hocus pocus” (25).

¹¹ With respect to interpreting the doctrines of karma and rebirth (he says “reincarnation”) in a way that is consistent with naturalism, Repetti envisions belief in them as part of a progressive Buddhist “soteriodicy” (a theodicy without a god) for Western Buddhists attached to the idea of a just world. Eventually, naive ideas about karma and rebirth are to be replaced by the subtler doctrines of no-self and momentary arising (27). I find this a bit dubious on both exegetical and pragmatic grounds. Although there are varying degrees of sophistication in how karma and rebirth are presented in classical Buddhist texts, it is significant that virtually all South Asian Buddhist schools (non-Mahāyāna as well as Madhyamaka and Yogācāra) take pains to demonstrate the consistency of karma and rebirth with the doctrine of no-self. In fact, this is one of the central tasks of early Buddhism and integral to the presentation of dependent origination in the Nikāyas/Āgamas. Moreover, the doctrine of momentariness, which develops in the Abhidharma, does not replace the idea of rebirth but exists alongside it, such that the links of dependent origination are applied *both* to a single moment *and* a series of three lifetimes. Repetti may disagree with traditional Buddhist views on how these core

ralism. In effect, this naturalization disassociates the ideas of karma and rebirth from the doctrine of dependent origination and from their traditional roles in Buddhist soteriology, where they have been critical to defining the content of the Buddha's awakening, Right View, and progress on the path (Anālayo).

With respect to free will, this naturalized Buddhism promises to mediate between our pre-theoretical narratives about our experience (the fact that our actions seem to be *up to us*) and what science tells us about our “biases, errors, and illusions distorting our experience” (Repetti 24-25). Against Garfield and Flanagan's contention that free will is a problem primarily owing to the bad idea of agent causation and the legacy of monotheistic theodicy, Repetti locates the problem of free will in the cognitive dissonance created by the apparent conflict between pre-theoretical and scientific narratives about action (which he suggests are loosely analogous to the two truths) (26).

According to Repetti, Buddhism offers a way out of this “*existential doxastic impasse*” because, like science, it rejects the idea of a substantial self or agent and exposes errors or distortions in our experience, but like other religious traditions, it offers a humanistic narrative that is richer in ethical value and spiritual meaning than scientific narratives (25). He suggests that like methadone for the heroin addict, naturalized Buddhism offers a way for persons committed to a scientific worldview to gradually withdraw from erroneous ideas of agent causation in order to realize a view of “agentless agency” (27, and chapter seventeen).

Buddhist doctrines relate, but the onus is on him to explain why we should prefer his view. I doubt the pragmatic logic of this soteriodicy for the simple fact that in my experience western Buddhists tend to find the idea of rebirth much harder to assimilate than that of no-self—probably owing to the same naturalism that compels Repetti to suggest that the former is optional.

I call attention to Repetti's framing of constructive inquiry into a Buddhist theory of free will because I believe it exposes one of the primary methodological dilemmas involved in cross-cultural philosophical inquiry: namely, should we rewrite or edit a tradition to make it a more congenial and credible conversation partner, or should we take the tradition at its word and allow it to challenge our philosophical assumptions, concerns, and categories? Given that Repetti (chapter seventeen) and I (Meyers *Freedom*, "Free Persons") arrive at similar conclusions regarding free will in Buddhism—namely, that it is reasonable to ask what a Buddhist theory of free will might look like and that, at least for some South Asian traditions, it looks a lot like "semi-soft compatibilism" (see below), I was surprised to find our approaches to this methodological dilemma so at odds. This made me curious about what else might be at stake.

First, I should say that I agree with Repetti that naturalized Buddhism constitutes an emerging form (or forms) of Buddhism (25) and as such, deserves a place at the table in constructive cross-cultural conversations. I would only urge that this be *alongside* and not in the stead of traditional Buddhist perspectives, and that we avoid any *a priori* assumption that modern naturalism has a greater claim on the possible or true than traditional forms of Buddhism. (I'm not sure Repetti would disagree.)

I am, however, deeply suspicious of the (not uncommon) claim that Buddhism is well positioned for naturalization because of its affinity with science. As Donald Lopez has documented, there has been a long history of projecting scientific ideas and values onto Buddhism, a history that reveals curious shifts in precisely what is taken to be "scientific" about Buddhism and rather free associations between Buddhist and scientific ideas (Lopez). As illustrated above, one of the primary reasons for the claim that Buddhism is more scientific than other religions is the as-

sumption of an analogy between modern empirical and Buddhist epistemic practices. Against Repetti's suggestion that the doctrines of karma and rebirth are exceptions to Buddhism's otherwise empirical orientation, I would suggest that it is more likely the case that we have overdrawn the analogy between modern empirical and Buddhist methods of investigation.

A problematic corollary to the idea that Buddhism is scientific is the idea that science partakes in Buddhist insights. I do not think he means it, but because the analogy between the impersonal view of science and the Buddhist view of no-self does a fair bit of work in his soteriological justification for a Buddhist theory of free will, Repetti comes dangerously close at times to equating a modern scientific worldview with the ultimate truth of Buddhism. At one point, he refers to the "impersonal ultimate reality revealed by science" (28). At another, he adds the distinctively modern and western dichotomy between religion and science into the mix: "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).

I do not think there is anything wrong with drawing a rough analogy between impersonal descriptions in science and Buddhism to help motivate our thinking about free will in a Buddhist context. Siderits (chapter twelve) was the first to do so and I have also done this myself (*Freedom* and "Free Persons"). I also agree with Repetti that there is something of an intuitive existential problem of free will created by the cognitive dissonance between impersonal and personal discourses and that Buddhism has a variety of resources to help resolve this.¹²

¹² In this volume (chapter sixteen), however, I attempt to show how the plurality of Buddhist views on the relation between personal and impersonal perspectives provides

However, I think it is important to clarify the ways in which science and Buddhist ultimate truth (whether this be understood in terms of the reality of psycho-physical events or their insubstantiality) are *not* alike. It is significant, for instance, that in Buddhism, ultimate truth is not discovered through empirical methods of the sort deployed in the natural sciences. It is simply not the sort of thing (i.e., objective physical processes) that these methods reveal, and is only finally realized through non-conceptual *gnosis*. In these respects, scientific narratives (even when they involve impersonal terms and counter-intuitive insights) are more akin to conventional than ultimate truth. Moreover, insofar as a scientific narrative is committed to the truth of materialism or fails to be soteriologically effective, it would not even qualify as *truth* for most Buddhists.

It is important to make these qualifications because the pervasive bias in the modern academy towards materialism, in particular, makes it tempting to take the analogy too far. For instance, in an otherwise engaging essay, Blackmore (chapter seven) presents dependent origination as a kind of causal determinism that, like science, has no room for the “magical” interventions of non-physical (i.e., mental) causation (85). This reminds me of how my students often cannot help but think of *dharmas* as objective physical atoms, despite learning that the vast majority of *dharmas*, and the ones with which Buddhists are most vitally concerned are, in fact, *mental* factors. I do not think Repetti shares in these confusions, but at one point he also inadvertently suggests that

a greater range of responses to this existential problem than has generally been appreciated in studies on free will in Buddhism.

deciding whether dependent origination is deterministic is ultimately an empirical matter to be decided by neuroscience (194).¹³

Although I believe Repetti's soteriological justification can (with a little tweaking) survive clarifying these dis-analogies, I am less optimistic about his assertion that Buddhist traditions' "supernaturalisms" are "plausibly optional," and the further implication that these are irrelevant to the inquiry into a Buddhist theory of free will. As a matter of textual interpretation and historical description, it is, of course, deeply problematic to rely on modern sensibilities about what is natural or plausible to decide what is essential to Buddhism.

Given that his primary training is in western philosophy, Repetti may not be aware of the extent to which this dynamic has infected modern interpretations of Buddhism or the degree to which it is has been subjected to critique in Buddhist studies. In describing the practice of excluding mythological narratives from assessments of what is essential to the doctrine of the Nikāyas, Rupert Gethin provides a rather clear-eyed diagnosis of the problem:

There is an obvious danger of circularity here: we know that the Buddha did not teach implausible myths because in the parts of the Nikāyas that present his genuine teachings there are no implausible myths; when we come

¹³ Alongside authors who treat the question of whether dependent origination is deterministic as an *exegetical* question, Repetti cites Balaguer's discussion of the lack of decisive empirical evidence regarding the indeterminism of neural events relevant to libertarian free will. I do not see how what science knows or discovers about our neural events has much to do with what the Buddha meant by dependent origination. On 202-203, however, Repetti makes the appropriate distinction between the empirical and exegetical, so I assume this was just an oversight.

across an implausible myth it must therefore not belong to his genuine teachings . . . (Gethin 66)

Admittedly, accurate historical description is not the philosopher's immediate concern, and Repetti is quite aware of the fact that most Buddhists would not recognize a naturalized Buddhism as *Buddhist* (25). However, the problem with letting naturalism inform interpretation of Buddhist doctrine is not merely descriptive; it also undermines the broader constructive philosophical enterprise.

Our decisions about what to exclude from serious consideration (like karma and rebirth) *necessarily* influence our understandings of those Buddhist ideas (like dependent origination) we deem more congenial and thus essential. More importantly, by excluding ideas that we do not find congenial, we embody a kind of intellectual colonialism that forecloses opportunities to submit our own philosophical assumptions to scrutiny and to be genuinely transformed by our encounter with another tradition. In this regard, one might note the performative contradiction in Flanagan's contention that *naturalized* Buddhism offers a serious counterpoint to western concerns about free will and thus protection against "philosophical projection and ethnocentrism" (70).

Before discussing how naturalistic interpretation and the broader tendency to draw overly strong analogies between Buddhist and western ideas play out with respect to dependent origination, I think it relevant to mention an irony I find in Repetti's framing of his project. Although he promotes the idea of naturalizing Buddhism in the course of justifying why we need a Buddhist theory of free will, in the Preface to the volume he mentions that he first became interested in the topic owing to unusual out-of-body and precognitive experiences induced by his practice of meditation.

This bit of personal history (which I commend Repetti for including) suggests to me, at least, that the fact that Buddhism countenances such experiences within a *radically different* conception of mind and world than found in our modern naturalisms—which tend to reject or explain away such experiences (e.g., Blackmore *Seeing*)—is not irrelevant to our inquiry. Put another way, the fact that traditional forms of Buddhism do not share our understanding of the “natural” (and hence “supernatural”) is significant.

Dependent Origination as Universal Causation¹⁴

Dependent origination is regularly presented in the secondary literature as a theory of universal causation (the idea that every fact or event has a cause), and most of the essays in *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* that mention dependent origination follow suit. Several contributors further suggest that dependent origination is similar to or a form of causal determinism (“the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature” (Hofer)).¹⁵ Because the contemporary debate about free will typically centers on the assumption that free will is incompatible with causal determinism or (more commonly) on countering this assumption, the idea that dependent origination is a form of universal causation or specifically determinism tends to frame the conversation about free will in Buddhism. For example, in the Forward to the volume, Daniel Cozort asserts, “Certainly

¹⁴ I would like to acknowledge and thank my former student, Gonzalo Perillou, whose master thesis research on dependent origination, from the Nikāyas to Mipham, encouraged me to rethink aspects of this topic.

¹⁵ Repetti (xx, but see also 194, 196, and 202-203), Goodman (38-39 and *Consequences*, chapter eight), Garfield (51), Blackmore (85), Friquegnon (111), Adam (129), Siderits (145-146), and Abelson (149).

the Buddha was a determinist,” and suggests that the only question is whether he was a “hard” or “soft” one (one who rejects or accepts its compatibility with free will, respectively) (xvii).

Despite the apparent confidence of Cozort’s assertion, the question of whether dependent origination is deterministic is far from a settled matter in the secondary literature. Scholars have argued that at least some versions of dependent origination are closer to indeterminism, that the Buddha rejected both determinism and indeterminism, that the Buddha accepted aspects of both determinism and indeterminism, that there is no clear Buddhist position on determinism, that Buddhists simply were not thinking in these terms, or some combination of the above.¹⁶ In fact, I have yet to see a compelling argument that any particular version of dependent origination is clearly deterministic.¹⁷ I suspect that the assertion that it is deterministic owes more to the assumption that dependent origination is a form of universal causation and, as such, *must* be deterministic than to how Buddhists talk about it. As both Gowans (15-16) and I (*Freedom* 48, 69-71; this volume, chapter sixteen 184) have argued, there is no reason to suppose that pre-modern Buddhists would have conceived of causal regularities or conditioning relations as we do. In the context of South Asian Buddhism, ideas about these regularities were based on psychological observations and organic agrarian models and metaphors, rather than on mathematical predic-

¹⁶ See Meyers (*Freedom*) for an overview. In this volume, several scholars also express hesitation or doubt as to whether dependent origination is properly or necessarily understood as deterministic: Gowans (15-17), Coseru (99), Wallace (113; 118-120), Harvey (163-165), and Repetti (194, 202-203).

¹⁷ For a critique of Goodman’s argument from omniscience (*Consequences*, chapter eight) regarding Buddhist realists, see Harvey (this volume, chapter fourteen) and Meyers (*Freedom* 79-80). Against Siderits’s claim that “Buddhist reductionists” are determinists, I have argued that this is not likely in light of the Theravāda Abhidhamma theory and is not entailed by Vasubandhu’s theory (*Freedom* chapters two and three).

tions about physical bodies in motion that so impressed the idea of determinism on the modern western mind.

With respect to the thesis of determinism, it is also important to note that although it is commonly held that the principle of universal causation entails determinism, there is reason to doubt this (van Inwagen 3-4; Meyers *Freedom* 33-37). In contemporary western philosophy, there is also doubt as to whether determinism is true in light of empirical evidence, agnosticism as to what truth the empirical evidence might support, doubt as to whether the truth of determinism can even be known, and a growing consensus that the language of causation (e.g., event, cause, sufficient cause) does not have any meaningful correlation to modern physical theory (Hofer). None of this bears directly on the exegetical question regarding whether dependent origination is deterministic, but it should caution us against smuggling the assumption that universal causation entails determinism into our interpretations of the Buddhist idea.

Although the question as to whether dependent origination is deterministic has been critical to arguments about free will in Buddhism in the past, the gravitational center of the conversation in *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* has moved on, such that deciding the matter is not directly relevant to most authors' conclusions. This is consistent with the larger philosophical conversation about free will, currently dominated by compatibilisms, many of which are effectively neutral with respect to the truth of determinism. Nevertheless, the assumption of an analogy between dependent origination and modern ideas about universal causation continues to play a significant role in framing the conversation, and is critical to the proposition that a Buddhist perspective on free will—whether this is affirmative, negative, or silent—may be relevant for persons committed to the modern scientific worldview. Historically, the analogy has also played a pivotal role in the construction of

Buddhism as a scientific religion (Lopez 13-32). It helps locate Buddhism on the side of science over and against the western religious ideas of creationism, intelligent design, and an immortal soul. The analogy is also what sanctions the view that dependent origination can be successfully naturalized without losing anything essential.

In the following sections, I trace some of the early history of the doctrine of dependent origination in order to illustrate how and why we tend to overdraw the analogy. In the conclusion, I discuss how this may affect our constructive inquiry into a Buddhist theory of free will and our other philosophical engagements with Buddhism.

Dependent Origination in the Nikāyas

Since at least La Vallée Poussin's 1913 essay on the topic, scholars have been aware that there are several early versions of what eventually becomes the standard doctrine of dependent origination presented in terms of twelve links. These versions differ in the links named, the number of links, and the explanations of their meaning. For example, name and form (*nāma-rūpa*), link four in the standard list of twelve, is in some places explained as shorthand for mental and material objects and in other places as shorthand for the mental and material processes that constitute subjective experience (Bucknell). These interpretations emphasize the processes of perception and rebirth, respectively, which are also typically highlighted in later explanations of the twelve links.

Such explanations of the processes of perception and rebirth do not constitute a theory of universal causation, but convey actionable information about specific conditions relevant to a particular outcome (i.e., the dis-ease or suffering that is *saṃsāra*) and, crucially, to avoiding that outcome. Although the practical negotiation of conditions salient to a particular outcome (whether this be avoiding suffering or growing

rice) does not require a universal theory of causation (deterministic or otherwise), it is commonly understood that the twelve links simply represent a soteriologically critical instantiation of a general principle of causation expressed in the abbreviated or abstract formula:

When this is, that is. From the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, that is not. From the cessation of this,
that ceases.

Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti; imass' uppādā idaṃ uppajjati.

Imasmiṃ asati, idaṃ na hoti; imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.

(e.g., SN 2:21; cf. Bodhi 552)

Taken in isolation, this certainly *looks like* an expression of a principle of universal causation, but in a 1993 study on the topic, Collett Cox cautions against this assumption (121). She notes that in the paradigmatic presentations of dependent origination in the Nikāyas, such as the *Nidāna* section of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the abstract formula is introduced specifically in reference to the twelve links. It is commonly followed by the forward sequence (*anuloma*) of the twelve links, outlining the arising of suffering, and then by the reversal sequence (*paṭiloma*), outlining its cessation (126). Cox concludes that, despite what we find in later developments of the doctrine (see below),

it would appear that in early accounts, conditioning or causation, as such, is important neither as an abstract descriptive principle nor as an explanation for the process of rebirth, but rather insofar as it explains the presence of suffering and thereby makes possible its termination.
(127)

In a subsequent study, Eviatar Shulman confirms that virtually every instance of the abstract formula in the first four Nikāyas is followed by the phrase “*yad idaṃ*” and then the links. He explains that if

“*yad idaṃ*” meant “for example” or “such as,” then the links could be understood as an instantiation of a general principle, but this is not the case. “*Yad idaṃ*” means “that is” or “that which is,” and thus announces a further specification rather than an example (307). The one place where the abstract formula is not followed by the links is in the context of the recollection of past lives (MN 79, Bodhi 655-656)—a topic closely related to the links, but independent from the idea of universal causation (Shulman 307).

Shulman’s research into related terms further supports the conclusion that a principle of universal causation is neither integral to the teaching on dependent origination in the Nikāyas nor part of their central message. For example, “specific conditionality” (*idappaccayatā*)—often taken as a general principle of causal dependency—occurs invariably in reference to the twelve links just as in the case of the abstract formula (307). Likewise, “dependently arisen phenomena” (*paṭiccasamuppanne dhammā*), which frequently occurs together with the qualifiers “impermanent” (*anicca*) and “compounded” (*saṅkhāta*), is commonly understood in reference to all phenomena, but appears in the Nikāyas exclusively in reference to the processes of conditioning outlined by the twelve links (308).

Despite similar findings, Cox and Shulman emphasize slightly different (but ultimately complementary) aspects of dependent origination in the Nikāyas. Whereas Cox notes that it is primarily concerned with the origin and ending of suffering and so is closely related to the Four Noble Truths, Shulman discusses how it concerns the role of mental conditioning in shaping samsaric experience in the absence of a self and so is closely connected to the teaching of the middle way of avoiding the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism (311). Whereas Cox seeks to distinguish its general application to the problem of suffering in the Nikāyas from its role as a specific formulation as an explanation for re-

birth in the Abhidharma (see below), Shulman notes its close connection to karma and rebirth in the Nikāyas. In particular, Shulman discusses the ways in which the twelve links constitute a response to Vedic theories of ritual action and cosmology (Jurewicz 2000), reconceiving the world in terms of the subjective creation of suffering (312-315). Although he does not see this as a central theme of the Nikāyas, Shulman believes the doctrine also has broader ontological implications, stating:

if the Nikāyas suttas refer at all to “things” being dependent arisings—and there is serious doubt that they do—they are not saying things depend on other things, or even that everything is conditioned. They certainly are not saying that “everything” depends on everything else. What they may be saying is that the things we encounter are brought into ontological existence because we grasp at them. Or rather, because we grasp at our selves. (309-310)

The idea that reality is brought into being by the grasping tendency of consciousness is a theme developed by later Buddhist schools, and is arguably as much psychological as it is ontological (309). If this implies a general theory of causation, then it is one that is primarily concerned with subjective experience and mental conditioning—and quite unlike modern conceptions of an objective reality constituted by physical processes and governed by natural law.

If Cox and Shulman are right, if dependent origination does not in its first instances concern a principle of universal causation, then why have so many scholars believed otherwise? Why have we been so inclined (I include myself here) to gloss it as a Buddhist “theory of causation”—even when speaking explicitly of its presentation in the Nikāyas?

Dependent Origination and Natural Law

One reason we may be inclined to interpret dependent origination as a theory of universal causation is its superficial resemblance to our ideas about nature and natural laws. Like the facts of nature and natural laws, the truth of dependent origination is not something that the Buddha creates, but something that he *discovers*, a basic feature of the way things are, and something that he encourages his disciples to investigate for themselves. The idea that nature and natural laws are discovered rather than guaranteed by the authority of a tradition is critical to the epistemic practices of the natural sciences (and to modern thinking in general) and to modern cultural narratives in which science triumphs (or must triumph) over religion, religious authority, and superstition.

The problem is that *what* is discovered and the *means* by which it is discovered are not at all the same. According to the Nikāyas, on the night of the Buddha's awakening, his liberating insight into dependent origination (often formulated as knowledge of the destruction of the taints and realization of the Four Noble Truths) was preceded first by recollection of his own previous lives and then by a god's eye view of the passing away and rebirth of other beings according to their karma (e.g., MN 4, Bodhi 105ff).¹⁸ This, together with a plethora of other textual evidence (see Anālayo), suggests that the facts of karma and rebirth are not incidental but rather *integral* to the discovery of dependent origination that forms the core of the Buddha's teaching. This narrative also illustrates the fact that the Buddha's discoveries are not ultimately matters of speculative or logical reasoning,¹⁹ and that if there is an "empirical"

¹⁸ In SN 12.20 (Bodhi 551), the Buddha's awakening is formulated specifically in terms of dependent origination.

¹⁹ This does not mean that the discovery cannot be aided by or is inconsistent with reason.

spirit to the teaching of dependent origination, the means of investigation is quite unlike those deployed in the scientific discovery of empirical facts: namely, a mind highly cultivated through concentration, i.e. one that is “purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability” (MN 4, Bodhi 105).

Is knowledge accessed with a concentrated mind “empirical”? If by “empirical” we simply mean knowledge gained through observation and experience rather than through logic or speculation, then, at least according to the descriptions in the Nikāyas, it would seem to qualify. The Nikāyas are quite clear on the fact that the three insights are forms of direct knowledge (*abhiññā*) that are similar yet superior to sensory perception. In the *Sāmaññaphala sutta*, for instance, the Buddha compares the recollection of previous lives to the more ordinary experience of recollecting the details of previous travel to other villages; the witnessing of the passing away and rebirth of other beings to watching villagers enter into houses, exit, and move about the streets from the vantage point of a central tower; and the imperturbable mind that realizes liberation to a still, clear mountain pool (DN 2, Walshe 106-108; see also Anālayo 32-34). Although these knowledges are empirical in the broadest sense of the term, “empirical” is typically restricted to knowledge gained through ordinary sensory processes or the extension of these through instrumentation. As hinted above, it is this mismatch that leads to the erroneous impression that the ideas of karma and rebirth are exceptions to Buddhism’s otherwise “empirical” orientation consistent with modern naturalism. In this regard, it is relevant to note that, according the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the lesser skills (or “fruits of asceticism”) that might accrue to a highly-concentrated mind include various mind-over-matter psychic powers as well as clairaudience and the ability to read others’

minds—most or all of which would not be countenanced by contemporary philosophical conceptions of empirical reality or nature.²⁰

Dependent origination is so central to the Buddha's message that at one point it is equated with it: "He who sees dependent origination sees *dhamma*; he who sees *dhamma* sees dependent origination" (MN 28, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 284).²¹ But because the discovery of dependent origination requires a fundamental transformation of consciousness and, as Gowans puts it, a knowing *how* rather than a knowing *that* (20), the Nikāyas remember the Buddha despairing of teaching it to others: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise" (SN 6.1, Bodhi 231).

Dependent Origination in Abhidharma and Madhyamaka

Despite this early emphasis on the experiential nature of the knowledge of dependent origination and its virtually exclusive concern with the problem of suffering, later Buddhist schools became interested in its theoretical implications. The Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Ābhidharmikas both come to understand dependent origination as an abstract prin-

²⁰ This does not mean that such powers and rebirth are not at least partially amenable to empirical means of investigation. For a general introduction to some of the empirical research pertaining to similar powers in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, see Radin. For a review of the research into past life memories and its relevance to early Buddhist ideas about rebirth, see Anālayo.

²¹ Although certain strata of the Nikāyas clearly support this idea (Cox 123-124), it is important to note that this is the only place where this particular statement occurs (Walser 169).

ciple of conditioning or causation²² applying to *all* phenomena, and articulate the details within comprehensive analytical theories of the ways in which phenomena condition each other.²³ They also come to understand the twelve links as describing two specific (and soteriologically critical) instantiations of this general causal theory: the simultaneous conditioning of a moment of consciousness and the sequential processes of rebirth over three lifetimes (Cox 127ff, Anālayo 8).

It is not necessary to trace the details of these developments here, except to note that the interpretation of dependent origination as a general causal principle comes at relatively late stage—at least in the case of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. After the new comprehensive theory of causes and conditions has become the dominant paradigm for explaining the path, and the twelve links relatively marginalized as a specific theory of rebirth (or of the momentary arising of consciousness), the concept of dependent origination is, in a sense, rehabilitated as the abstract principle underlying the newer causal theories (see Cox 136–137). If we take our cue from this understanding of dependent origination as applying to the arising of all phenomena (instead of to the exclusive problem of *samsaric* experience), it becomes easier to draw analogies to modern ideas about universal causation. It may seem reasonable, for instance, to interpret the abstract formula as expressing something like Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason (and thus as a form of determin-

²² Condition (*paccaya*) and cause (*hetu*) are synonyms, but the former is the dominant term in the Theravāda theory and the latter in the new Sarvāstivāda theory (although they also speak of conditions). Scholars sometimes prefer to speak of “conditioning” rather than “causation” because the latter is more metaphysically loaded in English, but I intend no such distinction here.

²³ See Ronkin for a discussion of the Theravāda theory of twenty-four conditioning relations and Cox for a discussion of the development of the Sarvāstivāda theory of causes (*hetu*) and four conditions (*pratyaya*). See Meyers (*Freedom* chapters two and three) for a discussion of these theories in relation to determinism and free will.

ism) or to imagine that the ideas of karma and rebirth are local, folk applications of an otherwise respectable (naturalistic) theory.

Undoubtedly, Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) is another major influence on our interpretations of dependent origination. Dependent origination is *the* central theme of the MMK. The presentation there is predicated on Abhidharma theories of causation (Salvini)—already somewhere in the process of reconceiving dependent origination as a general principle—and on Perfection of Wisdom teachings in which emptiness (together with other former markers of *nirvāṇa*) had been extended to include *saṃsāra* and, explicitly, the twelve links (Walser 180-181; MMK). One of the central tasks of the MMK is to make this radical new view of dependent origination cohere with earlier non-Mahāyāna sūtra presentations (Walser 172ff). Specifically, Nāgārjuna seeks to make it plausible to read these earlier presentations in light of the idea that all dependently originated phenomena (i.e., all phenomena) lack an intrinsic nature and depend on conceptual imputation for their existence (MMK 24:18-19, Siderits and Katsura 277-278), and to convince his audience that this is, in fact, the only way to make sense of dependent origination and the rest of the Buddha's teaching.

Regardless of whether we believe that this is what the Buddha meant (or implied) when he spoke about dependent origination, the fact that Nāgārjuna appears to be working within two exegetical traditions that take dependent origination as a general principle applying to all phenomena, and that he does much to facilitate this view himself, may help create the impression that dependent origination has always been a universal causal principle—even if it was not originally anti-realist. In short, this highly influential interpreter of Buddhist doctrine, together with generations of other Buddhist exegetes with vested interests in obscuring signs of evolution in their views (Makransky), may have con-

spired with our own historical-cultural situation to enable us to see dependent origination as a universal theory of causation.

However, even in these later versions, dependent origination is quite unlike modern ideas of causation. *Ābhidharmika* “realists” and *Mādhyamika* “anti-realists” alike continue to think about conditioning in terms of agrarian metaphors, to be concerned primarily with the dynamics of consciousness as it pertains to suffering, to be invested in the coherence of the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and to ascribe to a cosmology that points heavily towards the role of the mind in the basic construction of reality. As a general principle governing all this, dependent origination is quite unlike what we think of as natural law, physical causation, etc. Even today we find learned Tibetan Buddhists (not just “folk”) regularly invoking dependent origination to explain the efficacy of mantra and ritual or the manifestation of auspicious synchronicities (Joffe). Such conceptions of dependent origination might be consistent with some future naturalism, but for now it looks a lot like “supernaturalism.”

Conclusion: Does it Matter?

Constructive cross-cultural philosophical inquiry is impossible unless we are able to draw meaningful analogies between ideas from historically and culturally distinct traditions. Arguably, this only becomes a problem when an overdrawn analogy effectively erases the distinctive perspectives of our conversation partners. Although I take Repetti’s point about the genetic fallacy (24, 194), that we cannot rely on the historical origin of an idea to determine its applicability or validity, it is also the case that the history of an idea affects its meaning. By tracing the history of dependent origination, we can see that it is not (in any traditional instantiation) much like a natural causal principle and even appears to contra-

vene our current naturalisms. If our aim is to learn how Buddhism might help us resolve our current existential problem with free will, what do we lose by assuming Buddhism's un-natural or super-natural elements are plausibly optional?

Above I mentioned that Repetti and I arrive at similar conclusions about free will in Buddhism. We agree that it makes sense to ask what a Buddhist theory of free will might look like and that what it looks like is a lot like “soft compatibilism.” But the term is Repetti’s. 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 (203).

“Soft compatibilism” is in direct contrast to the “hard incompatibilist” view that free will and moral responsibility are impossible regardless of the truth of determinism (the view Goodman takes in chapter three). If I understand correctly, Repetti’s “soft compatibilism” differs from other forms of “semi-compatibilism”²⁴ in accounting for the superior (even if pseudo²⁵) self-regulative abilities cultivated through Bud-

²⁴ This is John Fischer’s term for the view that strong free will (requiring action to originate with the agent) is incompatible with determinism, but compatible with a weaker form of free will sufficient for moral responsibility. Repetti suggests that we might apply “semi-compatibilism” to similar effect in the Buddhist context regardless if dependent origination is deterministic (203). But because the question of determinism is so vexed, I wonder if we are better off avoiding it.

²⁵ If determinism is true, this regulative ability would be “pseudo” in the sense that, given a fixed past, one could not have done otherwise than what one actually did (202).

dhist meditative praxis (Repetti “Buddhist Meditation”). I’ll leave readers to discover the details for themselves, except to mention that Repetti’s framing the discussion of Buddhist evitabilism in terms of Fischer’s distinction between guidance and regulative control (202-204) offers a substantial refinement over other similar perspectives (my own in Meyers *Freedom* and “Free Persons” as well as Harvey’s in chapter twelve).

Despite the fact that Repetti relies on the idea of naturalizing Buddhism in order to justify inquiry into a Buddhist theory of free will, his conclusions in chapter seventeen do not require naturalizing Buddhism, nor does naturalization enter into his discussion there. Indeed, one might even get the impression that all the talk of naturalization may have just been a ploy to lure philosophers afraid of “hocus pocus” (Flanagan *Bodhisattva’s*) into a conversation with Buddhism, and not a true conviction that Buddhism can or should be naturalized. If this is right, then I propose revising Repetti’s progressive “soteriodicy.”

According to this “theodicy without a god,” karma and rebirth are provisional views that may be abandoned upon deeper realization of no-self and the momentary arising of experience, which are plausibly consistent with naturalism (27).²⁶ As mentioned above, this is part of the methadone for western Buddhists. Instead of taking karma and rebirth as skillful means that might be replaced by a more naturalistic Buddhism, I suggest a soteriodicy in which Buddhist naturalism serves as a skillful means to lure western seekers and Bu-curious philosophers to take up a seemingly naturalistic practice of Buddhist meditation, and then decide if their naturalism remains satisfying or plausible.²⁷ This brings us back to those paradigm-shaking out-of-body and precognitive

²⁶ See fn. 11 for a discussion and critique.

²⁷ Clearly, it does remain plausible for some (e.g., Thompson 2016; Blackmore this volume and *Seeing*), but it’s way too earlier to declare the matter settled.

experiences that inspired Repetti (xviii) to take up the problem of free will in the first place. Learning what Buddhists have to say about these things probably will not affect Repetti's soft compatibilist account. Indeed, I think it is likely to support his analysis of Buddhist evitabilism (and a robust rather than pseudo-type regulative control).²⁸ In this regard, it might also help rule out some other accounts. But perhaps the real payoff for taking what Buddhists say on these matters seriously, for not automatically bracketing or ruling out the bits of Buddhism that smack of supernaturalism, is that it may turn out that our current naturalisms are insufficient to explain these and other human experiences. In other words, Buddhism may track features of our world (or worlds) that are worth knowing about but regularly excluded from our current naturalisms. Moreover, it may offer reasonable explanations or hypotheses for some of these phenomena—such as rebirth for past life memories (Anālayo) or enhanced concentration and a different conception of the relation between mind and world for various yogic powers and perceptions.

Although it is possible that such phenomena will be explained by some future (or “promissory”) naturalism, it is also possible that explaining them will require a substantially revised (or “super”) naturalism. By paying attention to the ways in which Buddhist conceptions of “nature”

²⁸ See Harvey's discussion (163-165), which argues that there is no evidence that even the Buddha's omniscience entails determinism. Repetti concludes his analysis of Buddhist evitabilism (196) with the suggestion that both determinism and indeterminism may be inconsistent with the Buddha's view. Anecdotally, the contemporary Burmese meditation master, Pa Auk Sayadaw, clearly understands there to be more than one possible future. Upon stream entry, one who has sufficiently cultivated the divine eye is supposed to be able to see when arhathood will be attained. When one of the Sayadaw's Western disciples, Stephen Snyder, asked whether this future might change dependent upon practice, the Sayadaw affirmed that this is the case, that one might subsequently see the attainment occurring at a different moment (Horn).

differ from our own, our constructive philosophical engagements with Buddhism are more likely to arrive at a satisfying view—one that accommodates Buddhist insights and experience as well as those of science without reducing one to the other. Rather than relying on Gould’s NOMA thesis to guide our cross-cultural philosophical inquiries, perhaps we should aim for a more expansive, borderless, and eminently revisable magisterium.²⁹

Abbreviations

- AN *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (Thanissaro)
 DN *Dīgha Nikāya* (Walshe)
 MMK *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (Siderits and Katsura)
 MN *Majjhima Nikāya* (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi)
 SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Bodhi)

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²⁹ For some preliminary reflections on what this approach to cross-cultural philosophical conversations with Buddhism might look like, see Meyers (“Damned,” and “Cross-Cultural”).

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