Rick Repetti's Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will

with Christian Coseru, "Free Your Mind: Buddhist Meditation and the Free Will Problem"; Gregg D. Caruso, "Buddhism, Free Will, and Punishment: Taking Buddhist Ethics Seriously"; David Cummiskey, "Ego-less Agency: Dharma-Responsiveness without Kantian Autonomy"; Karin L. Meyers, "Mental Freedom and Freedom of the Loving Heart: Free Will and Buddhist Meditation"; and Rick Repetti, "A Defense of Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom*."*

A DEFENSE OF *BUDDHISM, MEDITATION, AND FREE WILL: A THEORY OF MENTAL FREEDOM*

by Rick Repetti

Abstract. This is my response to the criticisms of Gregg Caruso, David Cummiskey, and Karin Meyers, in their roles as members of the "Author Meets Critics" panel devoted to my book, *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom* at the 2019 annual meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, organized by Christian Coseru. Caruso's main objection is that I am not sufficiently attentive to details of opposing arguments in Western philosophy, and Cummiskey's and Meyers' objections, similarly, are that I am insufficiently attentive to details of Buddhism. I argue that all such objections, however putatively correct, do not rise to the level of objections that actually undermine my account of mental freedom.

Keywords: Buddhism; free will; meditation

In *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom* (2019a),[1] I laid out the main arguments for free will skepticism, critiqued them, uncovered ideas in Buddhist philosophy and practice that presuppose agency, and united them to construct a theory of mental freedom that challenges those arguments for free will skepticism and is at odds with mainstream Buddhist ideas about the no-self. I will sketch those main arguments here,[2] but the focus of this article is to respond to some criticisms of my account by three philosophical friends, Gregg Caruso, Michael Cummiskey, and Karin Meyers, who presented at an "Author

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Meets Critics" panel devoted to my work at the 2019 annual meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. I preface any rebuttals to their valuable objections by acknowledging that theirs is well-appreciated friendly fire, meant to support and develop any of the underdeveloped aspects of my views. I am honored by, and very grateful for, their critical attention to my project.

I will begin by summarizing the main arguments for free will skepticism. I will introduce ideas in Buddhism that bear on the issue of free will and show how they may be used to support a Buddhist theory of mental freedom that includes freedoms of thought, will, emotion, attention, perception, and all voluntary mental phenomena, analogous to Harry Frankfurt's theory of free will, that of *having the sort of will one wants to have* (1971): an enlightened being has freedom of mind if she *has the sort of mind she wants to have*. After sketching these arguments, I consider major objections from Caruso, Cummiskey, and Meyers, and respond to them.

The Main Arguments for Free Will Skepticism

The *Consequence Argument*, developed by Peter van Inwagen (1975), asserts that if *determinism* is true, the view that the past and the laws determine all subsequent states of the world, then there are never any alternatives, we can never do otherwise, and so free will and determinism are incompatible. This argument presupposes that free will requires that an agent could have done other than she did, under identical causal circumstances; this ability is called *leeway autonomy*. However, if determinism is correct, there are no alternatives, because the past and the laws determine one outcome in each moment, and if not an agent cannot do otherwise and lacks free will. This argument does not assert determinism, but only its incompatibility with free will: it is an argument for *incompatibilism*. Incompatibilists who assert determinism are *hard determinists*, and incompatibilists who assert the reality of free will are *libertarians*.

The *Manipulation Argument*, developed by Derk Pereboom (2001), presents four cases, three of which are obviously unfree, and claims the fourth is no different. First, a brain-chip-implant remotely controls an agent's brain, such that the agent does X at time T, and is intuitively unfree. Second, a child is brainwashed to do X at T, and is equally unfree. Third, a fetus is genetically programmed to do X at T, and is likewise unfree. Fourth, the past and the laws deterministically cause the agent to do X at T, thus the agent is equally unfree because there are no principled distinctions to be found between any two adjacent cases that could undermine that inference by analogy. The Manipulation Argument argues against free will, not merely its incompatibility with determinism, so it is an argument for hard determinism.

The *Randomness Argument*, also developed by Pereboom (2001), asserts that if *indeterminism* is true, there is no free will because choices are random, but we cannot control the outcome of random processes, and so free will and indeterminism are incompatible. Those who assert the truth of indeterminism and its incompatibility with free will are *hard indeterminists*.

The *Luck Argument*, asserted by Caruso (2018) and others, describes two kinds of luck. *Constitutive* luck involves the unchosen characteristics that constitute our identity: genetics, IQ, and so on. *Contingent* luck involves the variable conditions that influence each choice moment: environmental conditions, diseases, opportunities, and so on. Because luck is beyond our control, free will is asserted to be incompatible with luck. To the extent that contingent phenomena function as if random regardless of whether determined, the Luck Argument may be construed as a form of *hard incompatibilism*, the view that free will is incompatible with *both* determinism and indeterminism.

Hard incompatibilism unites these incompatibilisms (between free will and determinism, free will and indeterminism, and free will and luck) in a dilemma facing the free will optimist, the *Optimist's Dilemma*:

(1) If *determinism* is true, there are no alternatives, thus nobody can do otherwise, thus nobody can have free will.

(2) If *indeterminism* is true, choices are random, but nobody can control the outcome of random processes, so nobody can have free will.

(3) Thus, whether determinism or indeterminism is true, nobody can have free will.

Pereboom (2001) is credited with forming this argument by uniting the arguments for hard determinism and hard indeterminism.

Soft Compatibilism asserts the opposite, that free will is compatible with all forms of causation, and flips the reasoning in the premises of the Optimist's Dilemma in a dilemma facing the free will pessimist, the *Pessimist's Dilemma*:

(1) If being *determined* implies *non*alternatives and thus the *inability* to do otherwise, then *not* being determined implies *alternatives* and thus the *ability* to do otherwise, thought necessary for free will, in which case free will is possible if indeterminism is true.

(2) If being *indeterministic* and *random* implies we *cannot* control the outcome of the choice process, then *not* being indeterministic or random implies we *can* control the outcome of the choice process, in which case free will is possible if determinism is true.

(3) Thus, whether determinism or indeterminism is true, free will is possible.

A simple flipping of the antecedents and consequents in the premises of the Optimist's Dilemma generates the equally logical Pessimist's Dilemma, so it is surprising that the Pessimist's Dilemma has not attained the same status in the literature as the Optimist's. They are logically equal, although extrinsic reasons favor one over the other.[3]

The *Impossibility Argument*, proposed by Galen Strawson (1994), asserts that every choice is a function of, or is conditioned by, the mental state one is in at the choice moment. Unless one could bring about one's first—presumably *unconditioned*—mental state, which would only be possible if one could create oneself *ex nihilo* as a *causa sui*, one cannot be ultimately responsible for one's choice. Because nobody can create oneself from scratch, ultimate responsibility and free will are allegedly impossible.

Relevant Buddhist Ideas and Some Arguments against Free Will Skepticism

Nirvana is described as an unconditioned state that one need not *create oneself* to attain. To the contrary, its attainment is the result of a process of deconditioning one's mental states of all mental-state-conditioning factors associated with the sense of self. Contrary to Strawson, if unconditioned states are prerequisite for ultimate responsibility and free will, then *nirvana* renders ultimate responsibility and free will possible. The Buddhist path, moreover, is precisely the methods prescribed for bringing about *nirvana*, the primary method of which is meditation. Thus, the Buddhist path has built into it methods for increasing free will, despite the paradoxical implication that the Buddhist path leads to the realization of no-self, and thus arguably to the realization of agentless agency.

The Buddhist theory of free will I develop may be understood by comparison with Frankfurt's analysis of free will. Frankfurt separates freedom of *action*, being able to enact desires, from freedom of *the will*, being able to have only the effective desires one wants to have. I find it useful to compare these two elements of Frankfurt's analysis with empirical philosophical research on children's emerging conceptions of free will. Studies by Kushnir et al. (2015) show that children around age four consider free will being able to do whatever they want, which is analogous to Frankfurt's freedom of action, whereas children around age seven construe free will as being able to *not* do what they want, analogous to Frankfurt's freedom of the will—for having only the effective desires one wants to have implies not having effective desires one wants not to have, and includes being able to not act on unwanted desires.

Without Frankfurt's terminology, the Buddha implied he had not only freedom of the will, but of the entire mind, which includes freedom of thought, emotion, and other mental states. For the Buddha claimed (AN II.36-7)[4] that he is able to think only whatever thought he wants to think,

and to have only the *resolve* he wants to have, both claims of which imply he is able to not have any thought or resolve he wants not to have. The Buddha's mental freedom consists in his having only those mental states he wants to have. I call this "the Buddha's mental freedom claim."

Given that he has attained the unconditioned *nirvana*, the Buddha is able to be ultimately responsible for his behavior, regardless of whether the world is deterministic, indeterministic, random, or involves luck. The Buddha can prevent the arising of any and all unwanted mental states, so he cannot be manipulated. His ability surpasses the libertarian's ability to have chosen otherwise. Thus, there is an unjustified asymmetry in rejecting libertarian free will on the grounds that it is *acausal*, while accepting the Buddha's mental freedom as *unconditioned*, an asymmetry I problematize in the book.

Most scholars insist that Buddhism teaches there is *literally* no self. However, in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, or the *Discourse on the Characteristic of Nonself*, one of the central original locations for the doctrine in Buddhist texts, the Buddha argues that if the self were this or that aggregated constituent of ourselves, such as volition, feeling, and so on, we could have it that such constituent would be as we wish, namely, free of suffering, but we cannot, thus such constituents are *not the self*. Call this the "no-control-over-aggregates argument." While this lack of self-control is true of the average person, the Buddhist path teaches the average person how to attain that control, which maximal control the Buddha's mental freedom claim alleges.

The no-control-over-aggregates argument assumes that *control over aggregates implies a self*, insofar as *absence of such control* is thought to imply the *absence of a self*. Since the Buddha asserts this control within his unconditioned state, he arguably has a self, one that is ultimately responsible and free, if we apply Strawson's implicit criteria for ultimate responsibility and free will. Most Buddhists resist this line of thinking, given the prevalence of the literalist interpretation of the no-self doctrine.

While there is an abundance of theorizing in Buddhism about how to understand the unreality of the self under the no-self doctrine, how to understand the possibility that the self *is real* in *any sense* is an undertheorized concept in Buddhism, with the exception of pragmatic accounts of the self as a convenient designator or conventional shorthand for the impersonal collection of momentary disconnected parts typically erroneously taken to be a real, integrated whole. However, the Pudgalavādins (Personalists) thought its nature was real, but intermediate between a robust self or immortal soul and a nonexistent self, and of a nature that is *indeterminate*: the self is not the aggregates, nor is it independent of them. They used an opaque dependency model for the self, illustrated by the relationship between fire and fuel (Priestley 1999). I entertain interpretations of this doctrine in the book, but cannot develop them here. Instead, I offer a causal analysis that supports the claim that enlightened beings possess

agency, regardless of the nature of the agent, but which may also be used to claim that the Buddha had a self, even if most of us do not.

Given that one coherent account of real existence in strands of Buddhism claims that something is real if it has causal powers, the Buddha's control over his mental states implies that he has causal powers, and thus that he has real existence. This yields the same conclusion as the no-control-over-aggregates argument: because the Buddha has control over the aggregates, and control over the aggregates is his implicit criterion for a self, it follows that he has a self. Thus, the Buddha arguably has a real self that is unconditioned, ultimately responsible, and free, which sounds like a super-libertarian or titanic agent. I am not claiming the Buddha had a self, but that *his arguments imply he did*, and thus there is a problem with the literalist no-self doctrine.

In the book, I argue that counterfactuals are required to analyze causal control, and I use a counterfactual analysis to support the idea that mental autonomy is real from that Buddhist perspective that equates causal power with real existence. The idea is that *x*'s control over *y* is cashed out in terms of causal counterfactuals about *x*'s relationship to *y*, along Millian lines the Buddha and other Buddhist sages observed centuries before Mill: *when this is present, that is present; when this is absent, that is absent; when this is introduced, that is introduced; when this is removed, that is removed*—when these statements hold, this is the cause of that. Because control is a type of causal power, control entails causal power, which satisfies the Buddhist criterion for real existence, *causal power*—and the Buddha's criterion for self, *self-control*.

Further, the Buddha rejected the idea of inevitable causation by matter and chance, among other fatalisms (fate, gods, karma, and so on). Matter and chance *resemble* determinism and indeterminism, respectively. When the Buddha ridiculed the fatalists, asking whether their legs walked themselves, he implied belief in *some* sort of agency, rather than *none*. He could have asked if their mouths spoke by themselves, which implies a speaker. That the potter, pot, and pot-making are interdependent, as Nāgārjuna (1995) noted, does not eliminate their reality, without which there could be no such triad; likewise, that agent, action, and agency are interdependent does not eliminate their reality.

Analogous to the mind-body problem (of how the nonphysical can interact with the physical), if *nirvana* is *unconditioned* but all phenomena are *conditioned*, how does the Buddha speak, walk, eat? Do his legs walk themselves, like the fatalists? The Pudgalavādins, a large minority of early Buddhists, thought the *indeterminate reality* of the person was the only way to steer between the horns of the dilemma—the eternalism of the immaterial *ātman* (soul, which some Vedic doctrines asserted) and the nihilism of postmortem extinction (which then-prevalent Carvaka materialists asserted)—and explain the possibility of karma and rebirth.

According to the Buddha's criterion for selfhood, the ordinary person lacks a self because he lacks self-control, whereas the advanced Buddhist has a self because he has self-control. This argument uses elements of Buddhism to construct a theory at odds with mainstream Buddhism. I am not arguing that it is *true*, but *possible*, and worth exploring. Mental autonomy is worth exploring independently of doctrinal commitments, and is probably the sort of freedom most worth wanting.

Multiple decades of meditative practice have *increased* my functionally effective agency and *decreased* my sense of myself as an independently existing, homunculus-type *ego*, but *not* my sense that *I exist* or have increasing control over my own mental states. I suspect the claim that there is *literally no self* is a distortion adopted because it might be more *soteriologically skillful* to adopt that *negative* view than the somewhat *positive* view that *there is* an indeterminate self. As I explained in the monograph, Śāntideva and Tsongkhapa both address the asymmetry between advice to Buddhists to view *nonpractitioners*' suboptimal behavior impersonally, but to view *their own* behavior from the agent stance, by appealing to the idea that doing so is soteriologically fruitful. I would add that another reason is that serious practitioners are cultivating the sort of self-control that constitutes the sort of agent-self implied by the Buddha's mental freedom claim and the no-control-over-aggregates argument, so they can control their behavior in ways ordinary folks cannot, as if the former have a self and the latter do not.

One reason adopting the agency stance is soteriologically fruitful is that the developing agency actually *is* causally and functionally effective, and its cultivation is contingent upon its exercise, which is unlikely if one takes the fatalist stance the Buddha rejected because it would lead to volitional paralysis. Tsongkhapa is more explicit about this than Śāntideva, according to Emily McRae (2017), because the asymmetrical advice is being given to serious practitioners, about ways to control themselves regarding the hostile behavior of nonpractitioners who lack the self-control the Buddhist is cultivating.

This two-tiered analysis supports the idea that the practitioner cultivates the sort of control over her aggregates that constitutes functionally effective agency. It also supports the idea that envisioning that the goal is the realization of no-self could serve as a skillful-means-type approach to ameliorate the potential for the sort of ego-enhancing conceptions likely to arise as agency approaches titanic levels.

The Buddhist two truths doctrine is about the difference between the conventional reality of things like persons, tables, and other medium-sized dry goods, and the ultimate unreality of those things, understood from the unconditioned perspective of the enlightened mind as either empty of independent or intrinsic nature, or as constituted by momentary

impersonal micro-level phenomena, or *dharmas*, according to later or earlier Buddhism, respectively. Arguably, the conventional agent-self has some free will, as Mark Siderits (2017) has argued, but at the ultimate level concepts like determinism and free will do not apply. But the two truths I have been describing reverse the traditional distinction: (1) the truth of the interdependent but maximally effective agency exhibited by adepts in the unconditioned state that appears to be agentless agency, perhaps what the Pudgalavādins considered the indeterminate self, and (2) the truth of the absence of that agency in the rest of us, caught up in conditioned phenomena, aflame with ego-craving, pushed and pulled by attractions, aversions, with little self-control.

As I have suggested elsewhere, while the literalist no-self doctrine holds that enlightenment is the discovery that the self is an illusion and does not exist, it is possible that the altered states of advanced meditation practice eclipse an existing self, however minimal that self may be, but they do not obliterate it. For what is eclipsed is simply hidden from view, in which case they do not count as evidence of its unreality—or worse, they actually disassemble an existing self, in which case the practice constitutes a form of psychic suicide. These momentous differences matter, so we should not leave it up to pre-modern traditions, however venerable or otherwise rich, to tell us which view to take.

Ironically, on this analysis, the enlightened possess a real self, with maximal self-controlling powers they never need to exercise, given that they have transformed their volitional systems, and the unenlightened lack significant self-control, and thus any self, both of which they could benefit from greatly. These two radically different truths about Buddhism suggest that the traditional idea, that Buddhism is the path from the illusion of a personal self to the reality of an impersonal no-self, is reversed.

This is also consistent with ubiquitous experience. For consider the emergence of agency in all of us, as toddlers. We began our lives flailing our limbs, without understanding they are ours or what moves them. Gradually, we learn those are our limbs and they move by our volitions or willings. Around age four, we think free will is being able to *do* what we *want to do*. By age six, we think free will is being able to *not do* what we want. Our sense of ourselves as able to control whether we enact our desires drives our sense of ourselves based on those choices made and actions performed, and the causal/counterfactual control we experience throughout countless cases of effective agency reinforces our sense of ourselves as the agents of our actions. What explains my eating a sandwich is my desire to do it, my efforts to eat it, and my eating it.

Oddly, however, as an adult doing walking meditation, I find it mysterious trying to locate my walking volitions as I walk. It is really puzzling, phenomenologically. The mystery that attended the flailing of my infant limbs lives on. Given the infant's inability to control its limbs, and my

inability to locate my intentions to move my limbs in walking meditation, the question is not theoretical: How does the Buddha move his limbs and vocal chords? The Buddha prescribes certain activities, not others, but if we are not agents, how can we follow his advice? Such considerations problematize the idea that there is no agent-self. The truth must be more nuanced.

Is enlightenment agentless? Perhaps that is *what it is like* when the agent is *so* at one with the action that there is no *phenomenological division* between agent, agency, and action. Nāgārjuna insists that potter, pot-making, and pot are interdependent. It makes sense that, when we are fully engrossed in pot-making, or anything, we experience no separation between the triadic nodes of agent, agency, and action. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) examines this idea in multiple contexts, arguing that when the individual's skills match the task at hand, there is ego-boundary-transcending synergy. But this remains paradoxical, like "speech without a speaker." How can there be speech without a speaker? Intentions to communicate ideas without someone who intends them, or someone to whom they are intended? Do such things happen by themselves? Are the fatalists' legs and the Buddha's vocal chords moved by what moves clouds, waves in the ocean, wind? Buddhist doctrine suggests so, but experience and understanding resist such ideas.

One standard attempt to resolve the paradox, that many Buddhist scholars have developed (Thakchoe 2007), appeals to the two truths doctrine, according to which agent and agency are "conventional" notions that dissolve at the "ultimate" level. The idea is that, as agency increases along the path, the sense of a real agent-self decreases, and culminates with the realization of agentless agency in *nirvana*. However, in an *exploratory* consideration of *alternate* possibilities, I propose two *radically different* possible truths that run counter to the idea that enlightenment consists in the realization that there is *literally* no self: first, *there is* no real self at or prior to *the beginning* of the path, and second, *upon enlightenment*, *there may be* a real self. That is, if the Buddha's no-control-over-aggregates argument is correct, this presupposes that if there *is* control over the aggregates, there is a self.

The basis for many Buddhists thinking the literal no-self doctrine is supported, apart from Buddhist doctrine, is meditative phenomenology: in *nirvana*, no self is seen, and we are constituted by momentary mental phenomena, with nothing uniting them. The deepest meditative states are thought to approximate *nirvana*, to be nondualistic, undifferentiated. Can experiencing an undifferentiated meditative trance count as evidence of the unreality of agency? I doubt it, despite how awesome such states are. For absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Otherwise, dreamless sleep disproves the self each night, as there is no awareness of a self during deep

sleep, but that line of thinking seems more like a *reductio ad absurdum*—*against* the idea of the no-self—than a *proof* of the no-self.

Nirvana—the blowing out of the flame of ego-craving, the cause of suffering by attachment to, and/or aversion from, all conditioned phenomena—is unconditioned, unlike everything else in *samsara*, which is conditioned, relative, momentary, changing, and interdependent with everything else. However, the unconditioned presents a puzzle analogous to the dualist's mind-body problem: how can nonphysical mind interact with physical bodies, raise my arm as opposed to yours? Similarly, if *nirvana* is unconditioned, how does the Buddha engage with conditioned phenomena, walk, speak, eat? The Buddha performs these actions *masterfully*, but claims he can have and not have any mental state he wishes to have or not have, respectively.

I cannot overemphasize the fact that this ability far exceeds the ability that the libertarian asserts, namely, to have been able to have chosen the peach instead of the cake, even if all deterministic causes putatively led to or are consistent with her choosing the cake, an ability alleged to be incoherent for reasons similar to those facing the mind-body interaction problem. Analysis of this asymmetry suggests the fallacy of special pleading: the Buddha's titanic mental control is not a problem, but the libertarian's ability to choose otherwise is problematic.

The suggested explanation is that the successful Buddhist practitioner attains the unconditioned state through practice, but as she cultivates mental freedom, approximating the unconditioned, her agency increases while her erroneous sense of herself as an *independently* existing homunculus-type ego decreases. At the culmination of this process, there is no separateness, no dualistic division between agent, agency, and action, and thus the flame of ego-based resistance is blown out. There is such harmony between agent, agency, and action that it is *as if* there is no *separate* self. Perfect flow: *wu wei*. But it does not follow that *there is no* self, only that there is no *erroneously construed, independently existing, separate* self.

The correct theoretical articulation of that reality is secondary to the soteriological imperatives of Buddhism, and given the problematic eternalism of the close view of the *ātman* as a (causally inert, changeless) drop of Brahman and the dangers of reifying the ego that probably attend that view, it is conceivable these considerations explain why the Buddha was cryptic about the nature of the self—his remarks being limited to what the self *was not*. He never claimed that *there is no self*, only that it was not the aggregates, nor separate from them—something, recall, that the Pudgalavādins asserted.

In the book, I explore all these ideas in much greater detail, but cannot develop them further here. But I have sketched enough of them to suffice for purposes of addressing the objections of my critics.

Objections and Replies

Let me begin my response to my friend Gregg Caruso's objections to my account by repeating his own summary:

> I therefore conclude that the skeptical perspective is not only one a Buddhist *may* adopt, it is one they *should* adopt if they wish to take Buddhist ethics seriously. While Repetti's account of mental freedom provides important and interesting insights into Buddhist meditative practices and how they can enhance degrees of mental autonomy, we should reject the idea that such "mental freedom" amounts to a "Buddhist theory of free will."

First, I would not deny that Caruso has plausible arguments for free will skepticism, and plausible objections to what appear to be weaknesses in my defense of free will, which we cannot vet here, but I doubt that he has established that one should reject the idea that my account of mental freedom *amounts to a Buddhist theory of free will*, if, as he says, one takes Buddhist ethics seriously. On my account, Buddhist ethics presupposes a form of agency that is significantly more robust than that presupposed by libertarian conceptions of free will. I will leave it to the reader to decide whether Caruso's claim that serious considerations of Buddhist ethics entail free will skepticism or a very robust form of agency that is *prima facie* more autonomous than what libertarian free will theorists propose.

The bulk of Caruso's article presupposes a view I explicitly reject, that the only conception of free will that matters is one that hinges on moral responsibility generally, and on the rejection of moral desert specifically. Caruso develops analyses of various aspects of Buddhist ethics he considers consistent with the no-self model he takes to imply a no-desert principle. Most of Caruso's ethics objection relates to his having found a felicitous consistency between his quarantine model of punishment and Buddhist ethics, which model he takes to be consistent with free will skepticism and which would be a perfect fit were free will skepticism correct. The main idea of the quarantine model is that backward-looking retributive punishment is unjustifiable on many grounds, including free will skepticism, whereas we can achieve all the desirable ends of punishment absent backward-looking appeals if we accept the analogy between crime and disease: We do not punish the highly contagious, but we are justified in quarantining them. By analogy, we can quarantine the criminally dangerous, without punishing them. That would make sense if people's morally relevant actions were things they could not control, the way coming down with a contagious disease might be beyond one's control. But the Buddha clearly thought we can control our actions, an idea implicit in the third part of the Eightfold Path, namely, Right Action. Teachings on Right Action only make sense under the assumption that we can enact Right Actions and refrain from enacting the opposite actions.

The quarantine model is nevertheless reasonable on the ground that unless and until one established the existence of a level of autonomy sufficient to ground desert, the least risky position to take on punishment would be the quarantine model. I think the model is more defensible than the alternatives, on *epistemic* grounds. For, admittedly, we have not yet *proved*, and thus we do not yet *know*, whether there is desert. If there is no desert, but we do not adopt the quarantine model, the risk will be that we might punish people who do not deserve it; if there is desert, but we do adopt the quarantine model, the risk will be that we might fail to punish people who do deserve it. There is risk on both sides, but we tend to think the lesser of the two evils is to fail to punish someone who deserves it by merely quarantining them rather than to punish someone who does not deserve it when we simply could have quarantined them. Thus, one could prefer the quarantine model on grounds independent of the autonomy issue, pending the solution of the free will problem.

Pending proof of desert, then, I acknowledge that it makes sense to think desert-agnosticism and desert-denial may reasonably converge on the quarantine model. I am not so confident as to think that desert is established. If anyone has fully robust desert on my model, however, it is likely that such persons will never need to be punished, for only fully enlightened beings have full autonomy on my model, so Caruso's concerns do not really place pressure against my claims. The quarantine model could also be justified if shown consistent with Buddhist ethics, which is the thrust of Caruso's intentions in this arena. There is much in Buddhist ethics for that, insofar as that model seems compassionate, and seems to work even if there is no free will—given the widespread denial of the self in Buddhism, and with it the denial of autonomous agency and thus desert.

However, Caruso's focus on ethics circumscribes my main arguments. Caruso has not addressed my strongest arguments. I think my strongest argument is that the advanced meditator is able to control his own mind regardless of whether the causes feeding into his mind are deterministic, indeterministic, a function of luck, randomness, manipulation, or even when a mad scientist has control of one's brain, when one is a brain in a vat, or a digital mind in a virtual world. Instead of addressing these arguments, Caruso's objections to my arguments consist in claims that other arguments within the Western philosophical literature imply that my arguments do not succeed in their stated aims, but he has not specified, much less summarized, those arguments, and whether they undermine my arguments is a matter of interpretation, so we can leave that to readers to explore. *De rigueur*, philosophers disagree, they insist their views are cogent and their opponents' views are not, and in the free will literature, that is the norm. *C'est la vie*.

Further, Caruso claims that mental autonomy is not sufficient for ultimate desert-entailing responsibility, but has not stated why, much less

stated why clearly and convincingly. If the meditation master's mind control is insufficient for the desert that grounds moral responsibility, nothing is, but this level of autonomy is maximal.

As I argued in my first book on free will (2010a), autonomy is causal authorship or causal responsibility, thus a purely metaphysical concept. Desert and moral responsibility presuppose causal authorship and causal responsibility, but are secondary. Desert presupposes causal authorship: I do not deserve to be held responsible for *X* unless I did *X* (or caused others to do it, or allowed it to happen when I could have prevented it), my doing so is attributable to me, and only if I was robustly autonomous in doing *X*.

The titanic Buddhist adept's autonomy is a counterexample to Strawson's Impossibility Argument. Strawson argued our choices are a function of our conditioned mental states, so we cannot be ultimately responsible for our choices, since only a *causa sui* could escape the influence of previously conditioned mental states, but we cannot be self-creating beings. However, Buddhism rejects the idea that we cannot move from being conditioned to being in the unconditioned mental state of *nirvana*. Without *nirvana*, there is no Buddhism. Caruso has not addressed this issue of total mental freedom in *nirvana*, but my thesis rests on it.

Caruso has challenged me to better engage with some of the Western philosophical literature surrounding the free will issue, allegedly better versions of arguments I critique and more of the literature on moral responsibility. Fair enough, and I will more deeply engage with them, going forward, looking for rebuttals of my views, but I haven't seen any knockdown arguments against my view, and he has not provided any; of course *there may* be arguments that could do the trick, but we will see if they exist. I refer readers first to my own arguments, in the book under consideration, to the effect that my Buddhism-informed account of mental freedom includes not only freedom of volition (of the will), but also freedoms of thought, emotion, attention, and so on, all forms of freedom of the mind, freedoms the Buddha himself clearly expressed that he possesses, and second to my arguments to the effect that this Buddhist ability that represents the crowning achievement constituting the telos of Buddhism constitutes a solid counterexample to all the major arguments in Western philosophy for free will skepticism. Caruso has not shown how even one of these arguments for free will skepticism can withstand the Buddhist counterexample I adduced.

Further, in this project I am engaging in comparative philosophy, however conceived,[5] the point being that it is to be expected that, since I am addressing both Western philosophy and Asian philosophy, I will have to present both at a level of resolution that is more coarse-grained than the level that would be expected for a work on only one or the other of these two types of philosophy. Thus, there not only may be, but it can be predicted that there probably are, various more nuanced arguments on

both sides than those I present. Caruso thus claims that there are some details in the Western philosophical discourse I have left out, and Meyers, conversely, claims the same thing from the Buddhist side. These are both predictable responses. My reply to both is generic: There is only so much that can be said in one book, first, and because the objections generally arise for the above reasons, they are arguably trivial objections, if they are not more substantive, second. I doubt that they are more substantive.

Returning to Caruso's objections, then, the Buddhist interest in mental freedom is not conceived as only warranted on moral grounds. Rather, what Buddhism asserts about the propriety of philosophical interests is that they be soteriological: an item of philosophical inquiry is valid only if it is instrumental in leading to *nirvana*. Indeed, a criticism of Buddhist ethics is that it is instrumental to Buddhist soteriology, and thus is a system of hypothetical imperatives, what Kant derided as lacking moral value altogether.

The bulk of Caruso's article centers on showing the felicitous coincidence between his quarantine model and Buddhist ethics, a coincidence I acknowledge as valid and worthy of deeper exploration. It is excellent scholarship, compared to which his objections to my article are relatively minor. Because his objections motivated his work on the fruitful coincidence between Buddhist ethics and his quarantine model, they served a noteworthy end.

My main response to Meyers is a demurrer, a slightly more specific version of my generic reaction to both Caruso and Meyers: I acknowledge the greater accuracy of her claims about various fine-pointed distinctions in Buddhism, about which she is admittedly much more intimately familiar than I, while asserting that they do not undermine my main argument. The basic thread running throughout Meyers' objections to my work is that she clarifies ways in which various claims I make may be understood differently within various Buddhist traditions. An implicit objection is that I do not sufficiently explore various elements of textual exegesis, but if I did, I might see that what I take away from my cherry-picking of various Buddhist ideas plays different roles in Buddhist thought that may not support my account. Her objections along these lines suggest I do not engage carefully with the exegetical, historical facts.

My demurrer is that she may well be right in making such claims, but that is technically not relevant to my work, because the theory of autonomy I am developing is *informed by* various elements of Buddhist thought and practice, but does not aspire to be "the" Buddhist theory of free will. It is "a" theory. That is why I say that differences between characterizations of meditative states across Buddhist traditions are not relevant to my argument. They matter, but not to my arguments. I am not engaged in the project of articulating what various Buddhists think about free will, as I have stated repeatedly, but what they *could* say.

While such objections thus arguably constitute trivial objections, I have three reasons for not dismissing them on that ground. First, I take Meyers to be keen in her analytic abilities. Second, I take her objections to be supplementing my account with details that will sharpen my exegesis. Third, we agree in outline on the central aspects of our accounts. Meyers is more familiar with Buddhism than I am, so I am fortunate to have her guidance.

However, if one takes Meyers' objections to undermine my theory, either they will be committing the fallacy of trivial objection, as these objections do not undermine my account, or the fallacy of straw man, as they would have to conceive of my account as trying to be one that represents Buddhist ideas in ways I do not intend. My arguments *are* intentionally coarse-grained regarding complexities of Buddhism I deliberately gloss to prioritize what is relevant to my argument, and I explicitly prefaced both my books on this (2017, 2019a) with specific disclaimers to that effect. Thus, whereas Meyers might be right that, on certain conceptions of Buddhism, this or that detail of her descriptions is orthogonal to mine, for example, she makes pointed claims along these lines about the Buddhist emphasis on the heart-mind or the heart, or the fact that there is a somatic emphasis in Buddhism, whereas I do not focus on such matters in my presentation, two generic rebuttals appear to be *prima facie* correct: first, Buddhism is a collection of disparate, often contradictory philosophies and religions, in which case the fact that she emphasizes the heart-mind or somatic matters and other traditions within Buddhism focus more on the mind is something to be expected, but amounts to no more than a disagreement about what should be emphasized, so even if our disagreement on this detail mattered, it would not amount to much, and second, our disagreement on these details does not matter to my account, as my account is not an attempt to articulate what the Buddhist conception is, or, more realistically, what the many different Buddhist conceptions are, but to formulate an account of free will based on elements of Buddhism that are relevant to that account.

Let us turn to Cummiskey's objections. Cummiskey explicitly embraces the "no self; thus no autonomous self" meme I identify as viral within contemporary Buddhism, which meme I consider dubious and therefore resist. However, he is also a philosophical friend who explicitly hopes to contribute to my project "by sketching a conception of agency that fits nicely with his defense of semi-compatibilism." I am fortunate to have friends like Caruso, Cummiskey, and Meyers. There is another similarity between Cummiskey and Meyers: both identify elements of imprecision in my account that do not undermine my account, but which may improve it. Thus, most of my replies to Cummiskey will, like my responses to Meyers, also be demurrers.

Cummiskey claims my model of autonomy is inconsistent with the three central Buddhist metaphysical principles of momentariness/

impermanence, interdependent arising, and no-self. As with my demurrer replies to Caruso and Meyers, he may or may not be correct, but I doubt this undermines my account. If my analysis of the sort of mental freedom the Buddha claimed to possess is correct, then it is the Buddha's claims about his autonomous abilities that are at odds with his core metaphysical teachings, but that is a problem for Buddhists, but not for me, on the one hand, and, again, since I am not claiming that all Buddhist claims are correct, but only that certain Buddhist claims may be appealed to in support of my theory of mental freedom and its auxiliary theory of volitional autonomy or free will, it follows that any inconsistency between my claims and certain Buddhist beliefs is irrelevant, on the other hand.

Cummiskey reasons about my views as if they imply I think the agent exists above and apart from the aggregates, but I am not obviously committed to that interpretation. He claims I have a Kantian conception of autonomy, but I do not know that he is correct about that. Cummiskey objects that my references to ideas I take from Frankfurt regarding metavolition and Fischer regarding reason-responsiveness do not recount the dialectical developments and conceptual relationships between them, but my first book (2010a) does that in great detail. He states:

> Repetti focuses on hierarchical structure and control and seems to assume this includes reason-responsiveness, but these are distinct capacities. He argues that meditation increases mental control, but he does not explain how it increases reason or Dharma-responsiveness.

Cummiskey seems to think that I claim that a metavolitional structure is sufficient for free will, but I do not. He speaks as if I do not explain how meditation increases Dharma-responsiveness or how Dharma-responsiveness relates to Frankfurt, Fischer, or Buddhism, but I thoroughly explicated the connections between those ideas in my first article on the topic (2010b).

Immediately after claiming I do not explain how meditation increases Dharma-responsiveness, Cummiskey adds that "The obvious answer is that meditation increases one's awareness of dependent-origination and no-self, and the dissolution of the self in turn increases loving kindness and compassion—but Repetti never makes this argument." I never made that argument, because I disagree with it. I do not think *the dissolution of the self* occurs as a result of meditation, nor that it would guarantee increased lovingkindness and compassion. Many violent animals lack a sense of self, so there is no entailment from nonself to compassion, contrary to popular but unsupported Buddhist assumptions. Absence of self is not "selflessness" in the altruistic sense. Rather, the case I made for the meditative increase in the virtues is from the Eightfold Path prescriptions to cultivate a dharmic metavolitional (Frankfurtian) will (through the interdependent workings of Right View, Intention, Speech, Action, Effort, and so on), where "Right" is

understood to be *nirvana*- or mental-freedom-oriented, through meditative discipline applied to these aspects of one's life.

Immediately after claiming I do not make the argument from no-self to compassion, Cummiskey adds, "He instead claims that his practice of meditation increases his agential control over his self, and argues that agential control is best captured by the concept of 'source autonomy.'" But it does not follow from the idea that meditation increases agential control that agential control "is best captured" by the concept of source autonomy, and I do not recall saying that it is. I do say the Buddha's control over his mental states may constitute source autonomy, as it entails his choices are *up to* him, regardless of their origin, and that counts as a form of source autonomy.

Cummiskey immediately adds that "In short, he argues that the practice of meditation provides evidence of an autonomous self." I do not argue that *meditation evidences an autonomous self*. I say it evidences agency, and that other arguments within Buddhism could be used to argue for an autonomous self. But I explicitly refrain from asserting that view. I entertain it, develop it, consider what can be brought in its support, and so on, but I leave it as an open question.

Another objection merits being quoted verbatim:

> My main reservation about Repetti's defense of free will is that he does not incorporate the interdependent relationship among meditation, insight, and virtue into his Buddhist conception of free will. If he did, I argue that the doctrine of no-self would play a more prominent role.

In response, my first article on the subject of Buddhism and free will emphasized, explicated, and significantly analyzed the mechanics at work precisely between those interconnections, but I have also addressed them in greater or lesser detail in many of my other works on the topic, which facts suggest that Cummiskey has simply not read all of my work on the subject. In my first article on this topic (2010b), I explained the interdependence between the three subdivisions of the Eightfold Path—wisdom (insight), virtue, and meditative discipline—in great analytic detail. I also addressed the interdependence of all eight factors in the Eightfold Path in the very book Cummiskey is critiquing (2019a), and, again, I have done so in most of my writings on the subject. I have repeatedly analyzed the no-self doctrine in most of those writings, but problematized that doctrine, while noting the paradoxically inverse relationship between increased autonomy from meditative practice and the lessening of egoic clinging and the diminishing of more worldly/substantive self-conceptions. I also argue that at the peak of the path there may well be agentless agency, but not being there myself it would be theory-driven Buddhist apologetics on my part to assert what does not seem to follow from my phenomenological investigations nor from my analyses based thereon.

Cummiskey goes to some lengths to spell out his interpretation of the no-self doctrine, how he sees it implicit in the Four Noble Truths and in the teaching on the 12 links in the chain of interdependent arising, in the teachings on the divine abodes (the core virtues), and so on, as if to suggest that his reading of the no-self doctrine is correct, as opposed to mine, simply by virtue of his account of these details. But he does not engage with the arguments I offered to think his eliminativist/literalist reading of the no-self doctrine is problematic. His responses, generally from the Buddhist side, resemble Caruso's from the Western philosophical side, in that they share a confidence in the no-self doctrine that enjoys somewhat of a consensus in their respective dialectical domains, but which ignores the force of my arguments.

Similarly, he acknowledges that the path requires a robust agency and conception of the person that is theoretically consistent with the agentless conception, but that is basically a *summary of my position*. My account is intentionally and explicitly presented as consistent both with agency and agentless agency, and thus I remain somewhat agnostic about which of the two possibilities is more plausible.

But then he tries to press aspects of my discussion as if they commit me to an autonomous Kantian agent, essentially ignoring my numerous hedges against a commitment to such a position. He states that I claim "that when meditating, one can experience oneself as distinct from the five aggregates, which are supposed to constitute and exhaust the self," but I do not recall stating my thinking in terms of experiencing one's *self* as distinct from the aggregates, but rather in terms of experiencing *agential ability* as not being identical with the aggregates. But even in saying that the phenomenology of agency presents something not identical with the aggregates, this does not commit me to the view that agency is *distinct from* the aggregates, if the aggregates are "whatever constitutes us."

In trying to convey this, I frequently note that I sympathize with the Pudgalavādins' idea that the self is neither identical with nor distinct from the aggregates. Cummiskey adds,

> Repetti's line of reasoning, however unintended, suggests an implicit commitment to a conception of the locus of agency as somehow 'over and above the aggregates,' a conception that appears to run counter to standard Buddhist interpretations. Since Repetti explicitly includes executive control in the space between the aggregates, I follow Korsgaard and often refer to this as [a] conception of the autonomous self as over and above the aggregates.

I do not explicitly locate agency "in the space between the aggregates," but problematize agency as the Pudgalavādins did. He seems to be reading into my text things I repeatedly disavow. Cummiskey quotes me, stating "The fact that I am not these things—that I am not any of the aggregates—does not entail that I lack this feature of mental autonomy," but I am *denying*

that I am the aggregates, not *asserting* that I am something over and above them. While I do *explore* conceptions of autonomy that resemble Kant's, I do not *assert* them. Besides, these skirmishes are not at the core of my argument, and the fact that they amount to attempts to force a Kantian self versus a no-self dichotomy on my account, as if those are the only alternatives and I cannot endorse either, sounds challenging on the surface, but on analysis of what my account actually asserts arguably reveals a failure to recognize the uniqueness of my claims, if not simply committing a false dichotomy.

Cummiskey also objects to my characterizations of leeway and source autonomy. Leeway autonomy is the ability to do otherwise, and source autonomy is being the ultimate source of one's choices, implicit in Strawson's argument that we cannot be the ultimate originators of our choices unless we are unconditioned by anything other than our own original selves. Cummiskey says leeway autonomy is insufficient for free will, but does not explain why, and says he thinks it is a mistake to characterize the agent's ability to have what he chooses be ultimately up to him as source autonomy, but it is not clear why he claims this either. I did not say leeway autonomy is sufficient for free will, however. I think ability to control one's mental states makes one the source of one's choices, and thus suffices for source autonomy.

My analysis of source autonomy is imprecise regarding the metaphysical status of the *agent*. However, I only claim that the causality associated with mental autonomy grounds the reality status of *agency*. I *consider* how one might try to use similar arguments for the self, but I do not *assert* those arguments. I problematize agentless agency, nirvanic action, speakerless speech, and so on, more to *raise* questions for further inquiry than *answer* them.

Cummiskey thinks I need to account for how reasons can be mine if they are external or alien in origin. However, I emphasized that it does not matter to the meditation master what is the original source of her mental contents, for she may approve or disapprove them. Cummiskey claims, "For action to be an act of will, we must first recognize the reasons that justify actions (or inaction), and also identify with those reasons." On my account, the meditation master can assess whether the considered volition (or action) is conducive to mental freedom. But I doubt she must *identify* with those observations and assessments, except in the nominal, tautological sense that they are *hers*. Nobody can act without intentions, however altruistic, but the enlightened do not necessarily *identify* with or *appropriate* them as *mine*.

Cummiskey also tries to draw me into Korsgaard's framework, but I will leave that project with him. The main problem with Korsgaard's or Frankfurt's models of personal identity is that Buddhism is about disidentifying with volitions, and thus disassembling or deconstructing the

illusory sense of self. I think this process of deconditioning occurs up to the moment of full mental freedom the Buddha attained in *nirvana*, the *unconditioned*. Cummiskey ignores the Buddha's mental freedom claim when he claims that "There is no perspective that is not causally, historically, perceptually and conceptually conditioned" and that "Agency is never truly unconditioned, and thus human freedom, as significant as it is for self-transcendence, is never truly autonomous."

My account departs from what most Buddhists say about autonomy, but I do not intend to represent what they say. I am not a Buddhist, but my multiple-decades Buddhist meditation practice is the primary ground for my hesitance regarding elements of Buddhism that contradict it. Committed Buddhists can say I am not meditating right, but that is a No True Buddhist version of the No True Scotsman fallacy. It is equally plausible that Buddhists who get the same result are guilty of confirmation bias, and that Buddhists do not *discover* there is no self, but bring it about that their practices *eclipse* or *disassemble* it. But eclipses do not obliterate what they hide, whereas disassembling an existing self is committing psychic suicide. These differences, again, matter too much to be left up to pre-modern doctrines, however venerable or fitting.

Cummiskey quotes Garfield about the primal confusion about the self as what is responsible for suffering, and adds that "Repetti is correct that '*Meditative practice increases mental freedom and free will*,' but he needs to also emphasize that meditation increases freedom because it helps us overcome our primal confusion and thereby *increases dharma-responsiveness*." I frequently claim that meditation increases Dharma-responsiveness, but I do not think the proper interpretation of the primal confusion, *avidyā*, *not knowing*, is *whatever contradicts the literalist interpretation of the no-self doctrine*. Rather, I repeatedly problematize the no-self narrative. I argue that the autonomy cultivated through the path *could* be counted as constituting a self, however interdependent, indeterminate, or conventional, based on an Indo-Tibetan causal-ontological analysis, according to which *the reals* are whatever is causally efficient. For an advanced practitioner's will is far more causally efficient than the average person's.

My argument does not aim to conclude that *there is* a self, or that there is *not*. But that analysis of meditative skills supports the idea that such skills constitute a functionally effective agency, agent-type self, or agent-self, but such skills could be used to disassemble the self, or to discover that there is none, and it is an open empirical question which happens, to whom, and under what conditions. It being important *which is the case*, and it not being *solved*, we ought not simply adopt doctrines that fit our preferences. But my model of mental freedom is indifferent to differences between these models of the self, as my purposes do not hinge on more specific assertions about the nature of the self.

My account is indifferent to the nature of causality, whether it is deterministic or indeterministic, as my treatment of causality as a function of counterfactual analyses does not hinge on either. My account is indifferent to differences between naturalism and supernaturalism, and I present it that way because I think it is more important than any of those ideas. I think my account is consistent with all models of causation and reality, and the same general reason is that it is a causal, functional analysis, which is severable from which items in each pairs of such distinctions turns out to be true. The key to all these claims is the Buddha's mental freedom claim, which transcends all such differences.

Caruso has objected that because I claim my account is compatible with all of these things, which position I call *Soft Compatibilism* (the view that free will is compatible with determinism and with indeterminism, basically, but also with other differences), all that would be needed to defeat my account would be one good argument to the effect that my account is incompatible with any one of them. He is technically correct. But all the incompatibilisms that my account opposes arguably have the greater burden of proof insofar as they need to prove that any pair *x*/*y* that I consider compatible with the Buddha's mental freedom claim is incompatible with it. If *x*/*y* are incompatible, that is a matter of logic, and logic admits of proofs, but it only takes one possible world in which *x*/*y* can both exist to ground my position, whereas Caruso has to prove that there are no possible worlds in which *x*/*y* co-obtain. Although Soft Compatibilism is ambitious, all it is saying is that the Buddha's mental freedom is possible in deterministic and indeterministic worlds, worlds in which causation is this or that way, worlds in which the self has this or that metaphysical status, and so on. Hard incompatibilism—Caruso's position—much more ambitiously claims there are no possible worlds where the Buddha's mental freedom exists.

Cummiskey goes on to almost preach the Buddhist antidote strategy through the lens of the no-self doctrine, in terms of how cultivating the virtues of compassion, equanimity, and so on, would work to reverse the vices of ego-centrism. However, nothing in my analysis is inconsistent with these virtues. Rather, I have argued that one could cultivate them and strengthen the causal/functional efficacy of one's agency and the constitution of one's self. To think these skills can only be cultivated under a literalist no-self interpretation is unwarranted; the Pudgalavādins did not think that.

I have acknowledged that the tradition suggests that as these skills increase they diminish the extent of the primal confusion. I have described this inverse relationship—*as agency increases, the sense of agency decreases*—as paradoxical, for as one attains maximal agency, this is thought to coincide with the realization of agentlessness. I have argued that even enlightened beings apparently retain agency, however. If and when one of us becomes

enlightened, we *might* then know for sure. Till then, when the Buddha speaks, walks, lectures, eats, and so on it is doubtful these phenomena just occur, with nobody home. As the Buddha suggested to the fatalists, his legs do not walk themselves, nor do his vocal chords enunciate articulate speech on their own. The Buddha's reasoning undermines the literalist no-self doctrine, despite its popularity.

Cummiskey argues that there must be a minimal, narrative self, but that such a self does not entail a metaphysically substantive self. I agree that if there is a narrative self, it need not entail a metaphysically substantive one. But I made similar arguments throughout the book and most of my writings on the subject. But I also argued that advanced practitioners possess *titanic* forms of agency that are far more robust than the mundane agency asserted by libertarians. Thus, minimal agency does not entail a substantive autonomous agent, but Buddhism is implicitly committed to the existence of titanic agency and possibly also agents, its denials notwithstanding.

Cummiskey insists on the no-self doctrine, but allows for a subjective person, a minimal self, a narrative self, and so on, and yet speaks as if my similar set of bifurcations is weighed down by the baggage of a Kantian agent that exists above and apart from the aggregates. But my interdependent empirical agent is not Kantian. Cummiskey claims: "He says that through meditation he experiences increased source autonomy," but the way I would put it is that my experience is consistent with the Buddha's mental freedom claim, which is consistent with source autonomy, but not identical with the aggregates. I say *agency* consists in the ability to control the aggregates, using the Buddha's own implicit criterion for what would constitute selfhood when he says each aggregate is *not* the self because *if it were* it could have it that the aggregate would be as it wished it to be. *We* cannot do this *at will*, but the meditation virtuoso can have his entire mind be as he wishes it to be, as the Buddha said of himself, thus he arguably implicitly has a self, whatever its nature.

It is an open conceptual/metaphysical question whether *an individual consciousness that is a perspectival center of subjectivity, with this sort of autonomous agency*, may be considered to constitute a self, and the extent to which such a self is minimal but nonetheless substantive. It strikes me as though an affirmative answer to that question makes more sense than a negative answer. The Buddha rejected the *ātman*, the changeless Vedic soul, but never unambiguously stated *there is no self*. Caruso and Cummiskey insist that the bulk of Buddhist ethics rests on the no-self doctrine, and that the core insight of Buddhist soteriology consists in the realization that the primary ignorance at the core of all suffering is the erroneous belief in a self. But if that was accurate, why did not the Buddha speak unequivocally about it in his decades of teaching? The mere existence of Pudgalavādins as a significant portion of the early Buddhist community attests to the fact that the teachings were not unambiguous or explicit on the subject. Their

conception of the self was a reflection of this ambiguity, for they described the self not as a positive entity that exists distinct from the aggregates, *nor* as identical with the aggregates. Its nature was *indeterminate*. I have left the *nature* of the agent-self indeterminate, and described it by reference to its causal abilities, as the Buddha implicitly did.

In his concluding paragraph, Cummiskey says, "My view is that agency does presuppose minimal subjectivity and personhood, but not a substantive self or Kantian autonomous agent; and that free agency, freedom of the will, is realized through ego-less agency." In my first article on the subject, however, I argued for that interpretation. In the book Cummiskey is critiquing, I also argued for that possibility, although I gave arguments for how one who accepts that view could slip into arguments for an interdependent agent. I left it open what the nature of such an agent might be, but addressed the possible defense of both minimalistic and substantive conceptions. These I noted were not my target. My target was a model of mental freedom that includes freedom of the will, based on the Buddha's claims about his mental freedom, along with freedoms of the emotions, attention, thought, and any other voluntary mental phenomena.

In his concluding paragraph, Cummiskey states, "If Buddhist meditation actually supports the idea of an autonomous self, over and above the aggregates, as Repetti suggests, this fact would undermine the primary Buddhist approach to normativity and reason-responsiveness." First, I do not argue that it is a fact, but only a possibility: meditative attainment reveals an autonomous ability functionally equivalent to that of a self, free of all defilements that are dependent on erroneously self-grasping, substantive conceptions of the self.

Cummiskey adds:

> In addition, the doctrine of no-self also plays a central role in most (perhaps all?) Buddhist accounts of the virtues of equanimity and boundless compassion. If meditation actually reveals an autonomous self over and above the aggregates, then the centrality of the agent is not a primal confusion; which would mean that we need a completely new form of argument for the virtue of compassion.

Again, I have argued that dharmic action is cultivated through meditative practice, and can ground the virtues (2010a).

Finally, Cummiskey states:

> To avoid this result, we need a non-Kantian account of agency that is consistent with the soteriological point of the doctrine of no-self. My view is that agency does presuppose minimal subjectivity and personhood, but not a substantive self or Kantian autonomous agent; and that free agency, freedom of the will, is realized through ego-less agency. On this interpretation of no-self, the point is not that there is no subject of agency; the point is that the subject does not center their agency on themselves.

I agree with most of this. I think our main disagreement is our divergent characterizations or understandings of the nature of agency. Cummiskey accepts the idea that there is no self. I am open to the possibility that there may or may not be a self, given the agential abilities we seem to agree are cultivated along the path. Trying to elucidate the differences between our views seems to have helped both of us clarify them. Indeed, having able critics like Cummiskey, Meyers, and Caruso has significantly helped me clarify my thinking on this subject.

Conclusion

I have summarized (1) the main arguments for free will skepticism, (2) how my account extracts certain ideas from Buddhism to construct a theory of mental freedom similar to Frankfurt's model of freedom of the will but which more generally includes freedoms of thought, emotion, attention, and so on, based on analysis of the Buddha's own claims of mental freedom, (3) the main objections posed to my account from Caruso, Meyers, and Cummiskey, and (4) my responses. I did not claim that this model was one that most Buddhists would accept, and I acknowledged most might not, but only that it was constructed from core elements of Buddhism and Western philosophy and was defensible on those grounds.

While I think that my account survives each of these objections, I appreciate the ways in which responding to them improves upon my account, and will improve on future versions of my account which will more adequately incorporate them. I am fortunate to have received such constructive criticisms. I doubt, however, that any of them undermine the main claims in my account.

Notes

1. This project was originally conceived and inspired by my participation in a 2012 NEH Summer Institute on "Investigating Consciousness: Buddhist and Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives," College of Charleston, organized by Christian Coseru, Mark Siderits, and Evan Thompson.
2. A more complete summary of the main arguments that appear in my book may be found in Repetti (2019b).
3. In the book, I weigh extrinsic considerations that favor the Pessimist's Dilemma, too complex to summarize here.
4. "AN" abbreviates the Aṅguttara Nikāya, one of the original texts of the Pāli Canon. The Pāli Canon is available at www.accesstoinsight.com.
5. Flanagan (2017) delineates a variety of different forms of comparative philosophy, implicitly presenting an argument by elimination for any form of comparative philosophy that fails to fall under one of his descriptions, but I have argued against that idea (Repetti 2017).

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