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Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency? ed. by
Rick Repetti (review)

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expressed in the theory of the three natures of reality. Although this position can be read as idealistic, Garfield understands it as primarily phenomenological (that is, as a claim about the structure of our experience). Taken in this way, he argues, the simile of the elephant, alongside a number of arguments put forth by Candrakīrti and Śāntarakṣita, support four alternative conclusions: that our phenomenological status resembles that of a brain in a vat, that our status is not that of a brain in a vat, that both claims are true, and that neither is true. The Madhyamaka and Yogācāra views exemplified in this philosophical move converge in concluding that the answer to the vat question must remain ineffable. The reason is that this hypothesis rests on a category mistake, erroneously presupposing an epistemic subject that is distinct from its object (contrary to the Yogācāra view) and that has an ultimately real referent (contrary to the Madhyamaka view). Both are merely conceptual-perceptual constructions.

The themes covered by the remaining five chapters are: the development and consolidation of the terms *pratīyasamutpāda* and *dharmadhātu* in the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* and in the *Mādhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* (Suwanvarangkul); the polemics between the Yogācāra, the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika, and the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika surrounding the three-nature theory (Thakchöe); the Yogācāra's and Madhyamaka's conflicting views concerning the nature of truth and the role of philosophy in praxis (Siderits); Yogācāra motifs in the writings of Nāgārjuna as indicating the important role that Yogācāra ideas play in philosophical refinement and Buddhist practice (Westerhoff); and the philosophical affinities between Nāgārjuna's and Vasubandhu's metaphysics and their possible convergence in the classical Madhyamaka-Mayopamavāda sub-school (Shulman).

The strength of this book lies in the different perspectives from which the philosophical question is examined, in the polyphonic articulation of competing positions regarding the primary texts, and in its commitment to a deep philosophical investigation of the issue. The collection is an important contribution to the continuous study of the relations between the Madhyamaka and the Yogācāra, as well as to the understanding of each school separately.

Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency? Edited by Rick Repetti. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2017. Pp. xxv + 240. Hardcover \$145.00, ISBN 978-1-138-95034-4.



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Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency? gives voice, for the first time, to exclusively Buddhist perspectives on free will. In bringing together the work of

some of the most important thinkers in this relatively new area of Buddhist studies, editor Rick Repetti gives the reader access both to the best theories on Buddhism and free will currently available and to the scholarly debates shaping articulations of and responses to the problem under consideration. Structurally, the book represents a philosophical exchange so that each chapter either foreshadows or responds to those surrounding it. While each chapter offers a unique snapshot image of the relationship between Buddhism and free will, Repetti's editorial work makes the transition between chapters smooth enough for a sequential reading to be the most fruitful. The reader should not feel disappointed by the fact that several debates initiated here are not finally resolved—this book shows that the topic of Buddhism and free will is accessible through a variety of inroads and that, for this reason, the reader must decide between (sometimes mutually exclusive) routes out of the problem. However, while for the most part a sequential reading takes the reader through the core of the debate, there are chapters that feel more peripheral than others, but, again, it is for the reader to determine where, if at all, ring roads or perhaps even dead ends lie.

Broadly speaking, the collection may be divided into three parts: (1) challenges against and defenses of Buddhist theorizing about free will, (2) advancement and rejection of Buddhist free will theories premised on the separability of conventional and ultimate truth/reality, and (3) arguments in support of Buddhist theories of free will that characterize the problem in psychological rather than metaphysical terms. In several places contributors reach fundamentally different conclusions despite working from the same premises. Thus, the reader is confronted by a melting pot of Buddhist free will problems and an even larger collection of potential solutions.

Traditionally, Buddhist philosophers have not problematized free will. This further complicates the task of resolving, in a way consistent with key Buddhist tenets, the tensions between concepts that engender the problem but that may be absent from Buddhism. Several contributors denounce philosophically reconstructive projects delivering Buddhist perspectives on free will. For example, in chapter 1, Christopher Gowans argues that the soteriological orientation of Buddhism renders theorization about free will pointless. He suggests that the Buddha did not explicitly discuss free will because: (a) as a matter of historical fact, his interlocutors did not perceive a problem in need of resolution, and (b) the remit of Buddhist teaching is confined to the existential problem of suffering. Appealing to the *Mālunkyāputta sutta* for support, Gowans contends that an authentic Buddhist perspective would discourage speculation on free will altogether. The metaphysical questions set aside in the *Mālunkyāputta sutta* are dangerous for two closely connected reasons. First, they distract those preoccupied with them from attending to the more urgent business of extirpating ignorance/craving and, thence, suffering. Second, in the very formulation of such questions, certain false presuppositions are legitimized that further impede the attainment of liberation. Gowans places questions pertaining to free will in the same category as those posed by Mālunkyāputta and concludes that Buddhist free will theorizing risks undermining the primacy of pragmatics.

Gowans' opening chapter initiates discussion on a recurrent theme, namely Buddhism as therapy. A particularly intriguing feature of this collection is that several

contributors, who ostensibly share the view of Buddhism as therapy, hold diametrically opposed views on Buddhist free will theory. In chapter 2, Repetti endorses Gowans' assessment of the "medicinal" quality of Buddhist teaching. However, rather than designate it distracting, Repetti commends Buddhist free will theorizing as "soteriologically instrumental." Repetti presents a powerful case for examining free will through the lens of Buddhism, since he sees the truth of impermanence as entailing the potential for change in what count as soteriologically relevant considerations. Buddhism's encounter with the West has inaugurated the dawn of Buddhist free will theorizing, and scope remains for such theories to function as skillful means. In this chapter, Repetti preemptively responds to the charge, made later by Jay Garfield and Owen Flanagan, that formulating a Buddhist free will theory involves making a category mistake. Throughout this collection, numerous scholars grapple with the problem of harmonizing the ideas of free will and *anātman*. For Repetti, automatic dismissal of the possibility of free will on the basis of *anātman* is unwarranted: should we cut through the Gordian knot so readily? Further, to suggest that *anātman* precludes the formulation of a Buddhist free will theory is to fall into the trap of conflating "a negative theory with no theory."

In chapter 3, Charles Goodman, who sees Buddhism as implicitly committed to hard determinism, argues that benefits may nevertheless ensue from sustaining belief in an ultimately illusory free will. Informed by perspectivalist readings of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Goodman encourages spiritual aspirants to adopt "doubly asymmetric" views.¹ This involves constantly alternating between the first and third person perspectives so that we hold ourselves morally responsible for faults but not merits, and hold others responsible for merits but not faults. Goodman acknowledges the *philosophical* implausibility of double asymmetry, yet, following Śāntideva, recommends its spiritual advantages. Although the doubly asymmetric view may be distorted, it acts as a corrective to the harmful tendency displayed by the spiritually unenlightened—that is, a tendency to blame others where they would excuse themselves. Eager to correct the notion that abandonment of reactive attitudes would prevent the exercise of social justice, Goodman invites reflection on "moderately futuristic toasters," which respond exclusively to angrily uttered commands. Here Goodman's consequentialist analysis of Buddhism becomes evident: it might be irrational to grow angry with causally conditioned/mechanistic entities such as toasters (or people), but this may be justifiable when doing so promotes desired outcomes.²

The invocation of "moderately futuristic toasters" may understandably raise doubts about the legitimacy of free will theorizing on behalf of Buddhists. The next two chapters, by Garfield and Flanagan, respectively, are therefore perfectly situated. Both scholars allege "incommensurability" between Buddhist and Western accounts of agency, a motif linking several chapters. Identifying the origins of the free will problem in Augustine's theodicy, they question any methodology permitting the expression of a Buddhist free will theory. Since Buddhism does not need to show that the omnipotence and omni-benevolence of a creator God are consistent with the reality of suffering, it can avoid the free will problem altogether. While Flanagan

implores us to “get over” the free will problem, insisting that “nothing good” comes from discussing it, Garfield’s critique is more nuanced. For him, questions about autonomous agency are meaningless in the context of thoroughgoing interdependency, where the concept of *ātman* has no applicability. Thus, the free will problem cannot be formulated within a Buddhist philosophical framework. He suggests that so-called Buddhist free will theories really consist of the superimposition of Western categories onto Buddhist thought. Although the contributors to this collection perhaps take greater care than others to avoid this pitfall, superimposition manifests itself at certain points (e.g., in Marie Friquegnon’s description of *bodhicitta* as “a kind of holy will”). If Garfield is right that free will cannot be problematized when commitment to “soul” or “*ātman*” is abandoned, then he must explain why so many contemporary Western thinkers continue to see the issue as intractable despite having long ceased subscribing to the notion of eternal, simple, and substantial selves.

Although the first five chapters approach it from distinctive angles, their main focus is on the possibility, legitimacy, and value of Buddhist free will theorizing. In the next five chapters, the contributors’ aims seem to be to delineate, in psychospiritual terms, the consequences of abandoning belief in autonomous agents. In chapter 6, Galen Strawson notes that intellectual abandonment of belief in strong free will is rarely accompanied by the kinds of behavioral changes we might expect. If interpersonal relationships are to be paradigmatically transformed, commitment to strong free will must also be relinquished affectively. Strawson is unsure whether *all* reactive attitudes can be subdued but recognizes the power of meditation as a tool for aligning intellectual and psychological commitments.³ In chapter 7, Susan Blackmore personally testifies that meditation practices promote freedom, including, perhaps ironically, freedom from worrying about the free will problem! The content and style of Blackmore’s chapter provide the reader with a refreshing break from the rather more dense chapters surrounding it. Certain readers may be frustrated by the lack of a discernable “argument” in Blackmore’s chapter, but others will appreciate the novel way in which she introduces and discusses a perennial problem. Her mode of presentation (a stream of consciousness) also contributes to the content, illustrating the significance of this problem to moral psychology as well as metaphysics. She takes interdependency as precluding free will and, granting that others may benefit from sustaining the illusion (as per Goodman), strives to disabuse herself of it in her own life. In arguing that by subverting intellectual approaches a new kind of freedom—freedom from the illusion of free will—becomes available, Blackmore’s chapter, while fascinating, raises at least as many questions as it answers.

Blackmore hints at the paradox that Christian Coseru carefully scrutinizes in chapter 8, namely that *real* freedom amounts to the realization of the ultimate impossibility of freely willing, morally responsible, autonomous agents. Where Blackmore might embrace this counterintuitive claim, Coseru thinks it comes at too high a cost. For him, interpersonal relationships are unintelligible without the idea of moral responsibility. If *bodhisattvas* extirpate reactive attitudes, then they can no longer engage interpersonally and, thence, are free *from* moral responsibility. Again, multi-

ple contributors agree that bodhisattvas may be free from responsibility yet fundamentally disagree on what this means. While for Coseru “no responsibility” does not just mean “no justification for action” but also “no agency,” even at a conventional level, for B. Alan Wallace (chapter 10) the bodhisattva’s freedom from responsibility is indicative of her/his spiritual transcendence over mundane philosophical concerns. Moral responsibility is a characteristic of *agents*, and, for Coseru, the fleeting sets of *skandhas* are not robust enough to count as the center/ground of meaningful agency. Ben Abelson (chapter 13) later adds interestingly to this line of discussion, but, on its own, Coseru’s approach seems to be jeopardized by his failure to explain why elimination of reactive attitudes undermines moral responsibility, given that he seems happy to inherit rather than provide justification for the essentially empirical claim that reactive attitudes are necessary for interpersonal relationships.

In chapter 10, setting in motion a trend sustained in subsequent chapters, Wallace allows that without *ātman* metaphysical free will is impossible but contends that ample scope nevertheless remains for psychological/empirical freedom. In chapter 12, Mark Siderits examines this distinction more fully. Siderits negotiates the free will problem, proffering what he calls a paleo-compatibilist response, by placing the “truth” of causal determinism at the level of ultimate reality and the “truth” of human free will and moral responsibility at the conventional one. This approach is perhaps one of the most sophisticated attempts at constructing a Buddhist version of compatibilism. Nevertheless, various arguments can be brought against it. To begin with, if the truth of determinism and free will are placed in different semantic categories preventing their collision, in what sense does paleo-compatibilism render them consistent? Second, how viable is the complete semantic insulation between conventional and ultimate domains of truth required by the theory? According to Abhidharma thought (which Siderits targets), conventional truths about wholes are true by virtue of their eventual reducibility to ultimate truths about impartite *dharmas*. Thus, absolute semantic isolation cannot be guaranteed. Third, and this critique applies to the collection as a whole, Siderits pays insufficient attention to the relationship between the Buddhist doctrine of interdependence and the Western thesis of causal determinism. This could be thought to lead him too hastily, and arguably erroneously, to assimilate the one with the other.

Abelson’s chapter is the last in this collection really to protest against the conjunction of the terms “Buddhism” and “free will.” Principally, he criticizes the idea that conceptually constructed people, composed of constantly shifting “coalitions” of impersonal aggregates, can possess morally relevant free will. Even if these shifting coalitions enable radical self-revision, we cannot hold people responsible, because whether they possess the set of coalitions necessary for self-revision will itself be a “matter of deterministic luck.” Abelson, like Gowans, resists the notion that sustaining the illusion of free will and moral responsibility forms part of Buddhism’s soteriological agenda. According to Abelson, all Buddhist free will theories contribute to the maintenance of self-appropriating and self-identifying practices and must therefore be antithetical to the Buddha’s teachings on non-attachment. Abelson’s stance could be viewed as unnecessarily dogmatic, and readers might be inclined to remark

that attachment to non-attachment is itself a species of attachment. Even though Buddhists warn against self-appropriation and self-identification, they do not reject the conventional reality of persons as possessors of certain properties. Overall, strategies advocating a process of “weaning” self-graspers off the self seem better placed than Abelson’s at fostering spiritual growth. Realizing that the categories of property and property-bearer are defunct is essential to liberation, but Abelson needs to proceed more cautiously if he wishes to avoid inducing apathy in those he convinces of the ultimate impossibility of free will and moral responsibility.

The final four chapters are more positive about the prospects of a Buddhist free-will theory but, in qualifying free will in psychological rather than metaphysical terms, call for substantial revision to what is ordinarily understood by that term. Peter Harvey (chapter 14) and Emily McRae (chapter 15) distinguish themselves from other contributors by offering tradition-specific reconstructions of Buddhist stances on free will. Some contributors fail sufficiently to stress that Buddhist perspectives on free will, as on epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics, are unlikely to be monolithic. In their respective chapters, Harvey and McRae begin to compensate for this general oversight by offering more particularized accounts of Buddhist perspectives on the matter, and Flanagan’s chapter deserves commendation for its persistent use of “Buddhisms” rather than “Buddhism” as a way of drawing the readers’ attention to the need for greater precision and to differentiate between schools. The psychological freedom emphasized in the final four chapters provides the reader with a new understanding of free will as mastery over mental states so that one is free to choose those emotions/responses conducive to liberation. Karin Meyers continues this theme effectively in chapter 16 by deploying the simile of the snake (*Alagaddupama sutta*): obtuse philosophical speculation on free will is a potentially lethal exercise akin to grasping venomous snakes by their tails, but the practice of cultivating mental freedom through *samādhi* leads a person closer to enlightenment. Meyers’ description of the process of aligning volitions with metavolitions so that a person’s “will” has greater internal integration foreshadows Repetti’s argument provided in the final chapter.

An interesting feature of these “psychological” accounts is their neutrality with respect to causal determinism, which is, after all, a metaphysical thesis. The path from ignorance to liberating insight is characterized by the transformation of a person’s relationship to both themselves and others. As such, the path involves self-revision through adjudicating between dharmic intentions worthy of endorsement and those to be disavowed as spiritually unhelpful. Repetti has argued elsewhere that meditative experiences may equip people with the skills needed to bring harmony to an otherwise divided hierarchy of volitions. Although he draws on Frankfurt’s work in the creation of his model of mental freedom, Repetti is at pains to correct those who see him as endorsing a bizarre version of Frankfurtian-Buddhist free will. Such a hybrid could never work: the wholehearted identification with the higher volitions required for freely willed action cannot be transported to a Buddhist model where identification in any *strong* sense of the word is (as Abelson pointed out) the root cause of bondage. The metaphysics of *anātman* interferes little with Repetti’s

main point, which is that meditation equips a person with “dharmic-responsiveness” so that an inverse correlation between self-regulation and self-identification is established.

By the end of this book readers may be just as unlikely to take a stance on Buddhism and free will as they were at the start. While that may sound like a criticism, it is intended rather as praise. This book invites greater reflection and more self-scrutiny than is normally required from the readers of philosophical works. Its one significant failing, however, is that at no point is the relationship between the Buddhist doctrine of interdependency and the Western thesis of causal determinism explored in satisfactory detail. While several contributors either hint at or else affirm the identity of these theses, these affirmations could be regarded as further examples of hasty and unwarranted instances of the “superimposition” of Western ideas onto Buddhism that other contributors warn against so fervently, and so, inevitably, the argument remains unsettled. Nevertheless, the merits of this collection far outweigh its defects and there can be little doubt of its value to students and scholars alike.

Notes

- 1 – Daniel Breyer, “Freedom with a Buddhist Face,” *Sophia* 52 (2013): 359–360.
- 2 – Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 3 – Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25.

The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics. Edited by Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote. New York and London: Routledge, 2015. Pp. xxiii + 558. Hardcover, ISBN 978-0-415-65933-8. eBook, ISBN 978-0-203-07175-5.



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The *Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, edited by Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote, is unusual among the recent crop of handbooks, encyclopedias, and compendiums in philosophy in a couple of respects. First, as well as presenting up-to-date surveys of the field, the *Companion* includes a number of entries that also engage in argument and negotiate tensions between different positions—some even questioning the nature of virtue ethics (VE) itself. These chapters are particularly interesting as they demonstrate the use of philosophical methodology in debates about VE. Second, the volume engages with non-Western (primarily Chinese) perspectives on virtue theory and VE, with several chapters showing the poten-