

CAUSALITY, AGENCY, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN NIKAYA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper, I aim to examine the relationship between the Buddhist notions of causality and agency, the questions of whether the Buddhist notion of causality affirms causal determinism and whether the Buddhist notion of agency affirms libertarian free will, the implications of the Buddhist notions of causality and agency for moral responsibility, and the implications of the Buddhist rejection of the metaphysical self for agency and moral responsibility. My claim is that although the question of whether the early Buddhist notions of causality and agency affirm causal determinism and libertarian free will respectively remains open, they are compatible with each other, and with the Buddhist notion of moral responsibility, without needing to affirm or deny libertarian free will, causal determinism, their compatibility with each other, or retrospective moral responsibility.*

Keywords: *agency, causality, Nikaya Buddhism, responsibility*

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the Buddhist positions on the causal determinism, libertarian free will, and retrospective moral responsibility debate in the Western analytic position, with proposals spanning the spectrum from some form of incompatibilism (both libertarian and determinist) to some form of compatibilism (Repetti 2016). In this paper, I aim to examine the relationship between the early Buddhist notions of causality (as dependent arising) and agency (as the efficacy of action), the questions of whether dependent arising affirms causal determinism and whether the efficacy of action affirms libertarian free will, the implications of dependent arising and the efficacy of action for moral responsibility, and the implications of the Buddhist denial of the metaphysical self for the efficacy of action and moral responsibility. In short, my aim is to comparatively examine the ontological commitments of the early Buddhist position pertaining to causality, agency, and moral responsibility, both in its own terms and in Western analytic terms. My claims are that (i) the early Buddhist notions of

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causality (as dependent arising) and agency (as the efficacy of action) are compatible because the latter is understood within the framework of the former, (ii) the Buddhist discourses discussed below offer strong but inconclusive reasons to affirm causal determinism, and deny both libertarian free will and retrospective moral responsibility, and hence (iii) leave the possibility of denying causal determinism, and affirming both libertarian free will and retrospective moral responsibility open. Throughout this paper, I shall confine myself to the views of early Indian Buddhism (otherwise known as Nikāya Buddhism) as expounded in the translated scriptures and commentaries of the Pali Canon. And I shall not address the views from the time of sectarian Abhidhamma scholasticism onwards.

2. BUDDHIST NOTIONS OF CAUSALITY, AGENCY, AND THEIR COMPATIBILITY

I shall derive my claim from assessing a few sets of premises and conclusions of an extended argument. The first set of premises – P1 to P3 – discusses the notions of causality, agency, and their compatibility in Buddhist terms:

- P1: Buddhism affirms dependent arising, including *vipāka* as experiential effect.
- P2: Buddhism affirms the efficacy of action, including karma as volitional cause.
- P3: Dependent arising is compatible with the efficacy of action. [‘Compatible’ means ‘can be both true’.]

P1: The Buddhist Affirmation of Causality

The Buddhist affirmation of causality is expressed by the generic formula of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) in the *Discourse of the Uninstructed (Assutava Sutta)*: “When this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that is not; with the ending of this, that ends.” (Tan 2006)

The first and third statements accounting for conditional relation between events (this is a condition of that), and the second and fourth statements accounting for genetic relations between events (this generates that). Moreover, all statements express a dependency relation (that depends on this). A more specific formula of dependent arising refers to the conditional/genetic /dependence relations among a chain of factors linking ignorance (*avijjā*) all the way to suffering (*dukkha*). That is, suffering is conditioned by/generated by /dependent on ignorance.

In his *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, 5th century Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa defines dependent arising as a set of causes or conditions acting together, rather than a single cause or a single condition acting individually, in producing a set of effects (Buddhaghosa 2010: 537). The set of effects will not be produced if some of the causes or conditions from the set are absent, or if they are present but not acting together. In other words, “when this” and “with the arising of this” in the positive statement refer to the presence of a co-acting set of causes or conditions; “when not

this” and “with the ending of this” in the negative statement refer to the absence of a set of causes or conditions (or the presence of a set of non-co-acting conditions).

The *Discourse on Conditions (Paccaya Sutta)* elaborates on the characteristics of dependent arising:

Whether there is the arising of Tathagatas [Buddhas thus come] or no arising of Tathagatas, this element [dependent arising] stands as the fixity of things (dhamma-tt̄hitatā), the order of things (paccayo dhamme niyameti), a specific conditionality (idappaccayatā)...
...the suchness (tathatā) therein, the inerrancy (avitathatā), the invariability (anaññathatā), the causal conditionality (idappaccayatā). This...is called dependent arising. (Tan 2007, 2012)

In the first section, “this element” – dependent arising – is said to be natural and universal, no matter whether Buddhas arise or not. “Fixity” suggests that the conditional/genetic/dependence relation operates in an immutable or unchanging manner. “Order” suggests that the conditional/genetic/dependence relation operates in a law-like or nomic manner. Commentaries (Jones 2012) on the sutta list five natural orders (*pañca-niyāma*), including the order of heat or energy (*utu-niyāma*), such as the law of physics; the order of seeds (*bīja-niyāma*), such as the laws of biology; the order of karma (*kamma-niyāma*) or the laws of actions and their results; the order of mental processes (*citta-niyāma*), or the laws of psychology and parapsychology; and the order of spiritual truths (*dhamma-niyāma*), such as the laws of dependent arising. “Specific conditionality” (*idappaccayatā*) can be seen as a specific instance of the generic “causal conditionality” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), such that the specific chain of single events linking ignorance all the way to suffering is a specific instance of the conditional/genetic/dependence relations among events generally.

In the second section, “suchness” (*tathatā* – it is exactly so) means the true state of things or way things really are. In context, it refers to being dependently arisen – being conditioned, generated, and dependent – as the true state of things or way things really are. “Inerrancy” (*avitathatā*) means that when a complete set of co-acting conditions are present, the set of effects conditioned by/generated by/dependent on the set of co-acting conditions will occur. Conversely, when any member of the set of co-acting conditions is absent, then the set of effects conditioned by/generated by/dependent on the set of co-acting conditions will not occur. “Invariability” (*anaññathatā* – not otherwise) refers to the exceptionless-ness or regularity of the conditional /genetic/dependence relations among events. That is, the same set of co-acting conditions are present, the same set of effects (and not any other set of effects) will occur. Conversely, when the same set of effects (and not any other set of effects) does not occur, then the same set of co-acting conditions must have been absent.

As mentioned above, a more specific formula of dependent arising refers to the conditional/genetic/dependence relations among a chain of factors linking ignorance (*avijjā*) all the way to suffering (*dukkha*). Volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*), the second factor in the chain after ignorance, has both a passive connotation (dispositions or latent behavioural tendencies) and an active connotation (synonymous with action or

karma).¹ While the generic formula applies to events broadly, the specific formula applies narrowly to action or karma and its results. In the *Discourse on Intention (Catukka Sañcetanā Sutta)*, karma is described as follows:

When there is the body, speech, and mind, then, there arise, with bodily/verbal/mental intention as cause, internal pleasure and pain [as effect], with ignorance as condition.”
 Either by oneself (sāmaṃ), ...or, on account of others (pare), ...Either with clear comprehension (sampajāna), ...or, without clear comprehension (asampajāna), one creates bodily/verbal/mental formation, conditioned by which there arise internal pleasure and pain. (Tan 2016, 2017)

The first section explains the three karmic doors of action done intentionally through the body, speech and mind conditioned by ignorance, which will eventually end in various forms of suffering despite moments of happiness. Ignorance can be defined as the inability to see dependent arising (including karma) as the true state of things or the way things really are.

The second section states that we can act through our own initiative or instigation from others, with or without our conscious awareness. We act “with clear comprehension” when we are consciously aware of the wholesome or unwholesome results (*vipāka* – ripening or maturation) of our act (karma). Conversely, we act “without clear comprehension” when we are unaware of the wholesome or unwholesome results of our act. That is, karma includes both our conscious/deliberative and unconscious/habitual acts, which conditions the “internal pleasure and pain”, or the wholesome or unwholesome results, to be experienced by us.

In the *Discourse to Sīvaka (Sīvaka Sutta)* (Tan 2003), the Buddha states that karma is only one among a set of co-acting factors conditioning our experiences. These factors can be categorised under the natural orders other than the order of karma, especially the order of mental processes, given that intention, a mental process, is central to karma.

P2: The Buddhist Affirmation of Agency

The Buddhist affirmation of agency is evident in both the *Discourse on the Sectarian (Tittthāyatana Sutta)* and the *Discourse the Doer of One’s Own Deeds (Attakārī Sutta)*.

¹ In my view, karma is essential to the Buddhist notion of agency. However, karma can be naturalised to mean intentional action with potential experiential effects on the agent (empirical, not metaphysical), which are actualised when suitable non-karmic conditions are present, e.g., intentional actions motivated by greed, anger, and delusion result in ill-being when suitable non-karmic conditions are present, whereas intentional actions motivated by non-greed, non-anger, and non-delusion result in well-being when suitable non-karmic conditions are present. One need not subscribe to the religious, retributive, or rebirth-involving notion of karma to hold the Buddhist view.

While the former proceeds in a negative way by rejecting the sectarian doctrines against agency, the latter proceeds in a positive way by appealing to empirical evidence.

The *Discourse on the Sectarian (Titthāyatana Sutta)* states:

There are three sectarian doctrines which when fully examined, investigated, discussed by the wise, even if taken in any other way, will remain a doctrine of non-action (akiriyavāda)...: Whatever a person experiences, whether pleasurable, painful or neutral,

1. *...all that is caused by past action (pubbekata hetu)*
2. *...all that is caused by God's creation (issara nimmāna hetu)*
3. *...all that is uncaused and unconditioned (ahetu appaccaya) ...*

1. *...One who falls back on past action*
2. *One who falls back on God's creation*
3. *One who falls back on the notion that there is neither cause nor condition*

...as a decisive factor will lack the desire and effort for doing this and not doing that. (Tan 2013)

The first sectarian doctrine – all experiences are caused by past action – is ascribed to the Jains. The second sectarian doctrine – all experiences are caused by God's creation – is common among the Brahmins. The third doctrine – all experiences are uncaused – was held by the *Ājīvikas*. All three doctrines, known collectively as the doctrine of non-efficacy of action (*akiriyavāda*), are rejected by the Buddha because they lead to fatalistic or futilitarian attitudes. Since they teach that present action is irrelevant to future results, there will be no motivation to perform wholesome acts and avoid unwholesome acts – bodily, verbal, or mental. And since there will be no motivation to perform wholesome acts and avoid unwholesome acts, spiritual regress will likely ensue. The Buddha's contrasting position, known as the doctrine of the efficacy of action (*kiriyavāda*), is that although the present experience/results of past action cannot be removed by present action (which is itself conditioned by past action), present action – in response to present experience/results – conditions both future action and future experience/results, along with ignorance, contact, and non-actional factors (factors under the non-karmic natural orders mentioned above). This is a clear denial of fatalism or futilitarianism.

In response to a Brahmin who denies agency in the *Discourse on the Doer of One's Own Deeds (Attakārī Sutta)* (Tan 2004), the Buddha questions how we can deny agency when we can step forward or backward when we want to, and when we can observe the element of initiative (*ārabhadhathu*), exertion (*nikkamadhātu*), endeavour (*parakkamadhātu*), effort (*thāmadhātu*), steadfastness (*thitidhātu*), and undertaking (*upakkamadhātu*) in us. While these elements refer to agency generally (wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral acts which condition wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral results respectively), they can refer more specifically to the agency involved in spiritual progress (performing wholesome acts and avoiding unwholesome acts) in the *Discourse of the Body (Kāyagatāsati Sutta)* (Tan 2005) and the *Discourse on the Food for Ignorance (Āhāra Avijjā Sutta)* (Tan 2009), collectively

known as “right striving” (*sammappadhāna*). While the sectarian doctrine of non-efficacy of action (*akiriyavāda*) holds that there is no conditional/genetic /dependent relation between action (what we do) and results (what we become), the Buddha’s doctrine of the efficacy of action (*kiriyavāda*) holds the contrary view. This is a clear affirmation of the relevance or efficacy of agency.

As the doctrine of the efficacy of action (*kiriyavāda*) is also known as *Kammavāda*, agency can be seen as a synonym for volitional activity (karma), especially when it means an initiation/exertion/endeavour/effort/steadfastness /undertaking that condition wholesome or unwholesome results. And since karma is only one among a set of co-acting factors conditioning our experiences, initiation/exertion/endeavour/effort/steadfastness/undertaking can be seen as one among a set of co-acting factors conditioning our wholesome or unwholesome results.

P3: The Compatibility of Buddhist Causality and Agency

As discussed above, Buddhism affirms both causality (in the form of the doctrine of dependent arising) and agency (in the form of the doctrine of the efficacy of action). The problem of the compatibility of these two doctrines does not arise in Buddhism because the doctrine of the efficacy of action is understood within the framework of the doctrine of dependent arising. Since the efficacy of action is part of the order of karma, which is in turn part of dependent arising, agency or action is conditioned and subject to the characteristics of dependent arising, including the fixity of things, the order of things, specific conditionality, suchness, inerrancy, invariability, and causal conditionality.

It can even be argued that the efficacy of action requires the framework of dependent arising. The intent behind the doctrine of the efficacy of action is soteriological, that is, to make effort relevant to spiritual progress. The generic formula of dependent arising states: “When this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that is not; with the ending of this, that ends”. And the specific formula can be derived by substituting “this” with “ignorance” and “that” with “suffering”. The negative part of that specific formula that “when ignorance is not” or “with the ending of ignorance”, “suffering is not” or “suffering ends”, as expressed in the *Discourse of the Uninstructed (Assutava Sutta)*:

...with the utter fading away and ending of ignorance, volitional activities ends; ...such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering. (Tan 2006)

Within the framework of dependent arising, the efficacy of action refers to the relevance of effort towards removing suffering by removing ignorance as its condition. More generally, the relationship between dependent arising and the efficacy of action, or between causality and agency in short, can be derived by substituting “this” with “agency” and “that” with “causality”: “when causality is, agency is; when causality is not, agency is not”. Without dependent arising (causality), action (agency) is

inefficacious because the results of action (experience) is not conditioned by/generated by/dependent on action, hence leading to fatalism or futilitarianism.

The *Discourse on the Rise and Fall of the World (Samudayatthaṅgama Loka Sutta)* locates the point where the efficacy of action operates within the framework of dependent arising:

With contact as condition, there is feeling; with feeling as condition, there is craving. But with the remainderless fading away and ending of that same craving comes the ending of clinging... there is the ending of decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair. (Tan 2003)

The chain of factors linking ignorance to volitional activities and to other factors leading to suffering includes contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*) and craving (*taṇhā*), where the previous conditions the next. Contact refers to the meeting of the sense object, sense organ, and act of consciousness. Feeling refers to affective aspect of experience, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Craving refers to the unwholesome desire for the sense object. The efficacy of action becomes operative between feeling and craving, depending on how we respond to the feeling conditioned by contact. If we respond with craving conditioned by ignorance, further conditions of suffering are generated. But if we respond with dispassion (*virāga* – the antonym of craving: the lack of unwholesome desire for sense objects) conditioned by wisdom (*paññā* – the antonym of ignorance: the ability to see dependent arising as the true state of things or the way things really are) instead, further conditions of suffering are removed (Bodhi 1984:12). The more we are aware of the chain of factors leading to suffering (as a condition of our response), the more we can respond with dispassion instead of craving.

The *Discourse on Necessary Conditions (Upanisā Sutta)* (Tan 2003) extends the framework of dependent arising from a chain of negative factors linking ignorance to suffering (known as the forward sequence) and the ending of ignorance to the ending of suffering (known as the backward sequence) to a chain of positive factors along the path of spiritual progress linking faith (*saddhā*) all the way to freedom (*vimutti*) and the knowledge of the destruction of the influxes (*khaya*), where agency is involved in striving rightly along the spiritual path. Faith refers to the commitment to end suffering and to the practice to end suffering. Freedom refers to the ending of suffering. The knowledge of the destruction of the influxes refers to the insight into the removal of ignorance and craving. A crucial statement in this discourse is that suffering (the last factor in the chain of negative factors) is a condition of faith (the first factor in the chain of positive factors), further reinforcing the claim that the framework of dependent arising is integral to the efficacy of action pertaining to spiritual progress.

3. BUDDHIST POSITIONS ON CAUSAL DETERMINISM, LIBERTARIAN FREE WILL, AND THEIR COMPATIBILITY

Through the first set of premises, P1 to P3, I have shown that Buddhists affirm causality, agency, and their compatibility in their own terms. The second set of premises and

conclusion below – P4 to P6 and C1 – attempts to situate the Buddhist notions of causality and agency within the free will discourse in the Western analytic tradition:

P4: Dependent arising, including *vipāka* as experiential effect, requires causal determinism.

P5: The efficacy of action, including karma as volitional cause, requires libertarian free will.

P6: Causal determinism is incompatible with libertarian free will. [‘Incompatible’ means ‘cannot be both true’.]

C1: Therefore, dependent arising is incompatible with the efficacy of action.

C1 contradicts P3.

To affirm P3, Buddhists must deny C1.

To deny C1, Buddhists must deny P4, P5, P6 or any conjunction of these.

Buddhists can deny C1 by denying P4 and/or P5, without affirming or denying causal determinism, libertarian free will, or P6.

Causal determinism is the thesis that (1) all events have sufficient causal conditions which necessitate them (Hesslow 1981) and (2) if the past and the laws remain exactly the same, then no events could have been otherwise (Van Inwagen 1989). Causal indeterminism is the contrasting thesis that (~1) it is not the case that all events have sufficient causal conditions which necessitate them and (~2) it is not the case that if the past and the laws remain exactly the same, then no events could have been otherwise. In context, it is the thesis that (~1a) some events – actions – have no sufficient causal conditions that necessitate them and (~2a) even if the past and the laws remain exactly the same, some events – actions – could still have been otherwise. On top of causal indeterminism (~1/~2/~1a/~2a), the libertarian free will thesis requires either (3a) unconditioned mental events or substances as causes of action (Chisholm 2003) or (3b) conditioned but undetermined mental events or substances as causes of action (Ekstrom 2019). In contrast, compatibilist free will is compatible with (1) and (2) so long as certain factors are included (Campbell 1997). It affirms (1) when sufficient causal conditions include both external (outside the agent) and internal (inside the agent) conditions, and both positive (facilitating /supportive) and negative (inhibitive/restraining) conditions (Meyer 2010: 39-41). And it affirms (2) when the past includes both the remote and recent pasts and the laws include the laws of both the natural and social sciences broadly construed.

To ascertain the truth of P4, or whether the doctrine of dependent arising requires the truth of causal determinism, it is useful to translate the formula of dependent arising into the standard conditional analysis in Western analytic philosophy. There are at least three ways to do it. I shall discuss the two less plausible ways and put them aside before I discuss the third, more plausible, way. The first way is to treat “this” as a sufficient condition of “that” in the generic formula, or “ignorance” as a sufficient condition of “volitional activities” in the specific formula, deriving “if ignorance, then volitional activities”; “if not ignorance, then not volitional activities”. A problem with the first way is that ignorance is not sufficient for volitional activities because “this” refers to a

set of causes or conditions acting together rather than a singular cause or condition; contact (the meeting of the sense object, sense organ, and act of consciousness) is also required, as discussed above. Another problem is its implication that volitional activities is then necessary for ignorance, which is not the case. One other problem is that it commits the fallacy of denying the antecedent. The second way is to treat the positive statement as a sufficient condition and the negative statement as a necessary condition, where the antecedent of “if ignorance, then volitional activities” is read as a sufficient condition and the antecedent of “if not ignorance, then not volitional activities” is read as a necessary condition. The second way shares two problems with the first way, namely that ignorance is insufficient for volitional activities and that volitional activities are unnecessary for ignorance. Another problem is its implication that ignorance and volitional activities are bi-conditionals (necessary and sufficient for each other), which cannot be the case because ignorance is insufficient for volitional activities, which is in turn unnecessary for ignorance.

The third way is to treat “this” in both the positive and negative statements as a necessary condition for “that” in the generic formula, or “ignorance” in both the positive and negative statements as a necessary condition of “volitional activities”, deriving “only if ignorance, then volitional activities (= if volitional activities, then ignorance); if not ignorance, then not volitional activities”, where ignorance (as one among a set of co-acting conditions) is necessary but insufficient for volitional activities (as one among a set of effects) and volitional activities are sufficient but unnecessary for ignorance. It represents the doctrine of dependent arising adequately without the problems faced by the first two ways. The third way leaves open the question whether all events, including actions, have sufficient conditions that necessitate them. Generically, if causal determinism is true, then a set of complete co-acting conditions will necessitate its set of effects – affirmation of (1) and (2). Specifically, if ignorance, contact and some other factors are sufficient for volitional activities, and they are all present, then volitional activities will certainly follow with constancy or regularity – affirmation of (1a) and (2a). Generically, if causal indeterminism is true, then a set of complete co-acting conditions will incline but not necessitate its set of effects – affirmation of (~1) and (~2). Specifically, if ignorance, contact and some other factors are sufficient for volitional activities, and they are all present, then volitional activities will likely follow with constancy or regularly – affirmation of (~1a) and (~2a). The characteristics of depending arising including fixity, order, inerrancy, invariability offer strong but inconclusive support for the affirmation of causal determinism. Hence, the doctrine of dependent arising is consistent with but does not require causal determinism.

To ascertain the truth of P5, it is helpful to compare the doctrine of the efficacy of action with the requirements of libertarian free will – (3a) and (3b). The doctrine of the efficacy of action denies that our experiences – or the results of our action – are determined wholly by our past action, or by God’s creation, or are uncaused and unconditioned. This makes our present action efficacious in conditioning our future experiences/results. So, this doctrine clearly denies fatalism or futilitarianism. However, as discussed above, the efficacy of action in general, and towards spiritual progress

specifically, is understood within the framework of dependent arising and is hence subject to its characteristics. Although our present action is efficacious and not determined wholly by our past action and past experiences/results, it is still determined partly by them, along with ignorance, contact, and non-actional factors (factors under the non-karmic natural orders mentioned above). This rules out (3a), which requires unconditioned mental events or substances as causes of action. As Buddhism reject substances in general or metaphysical agents in particular (more below), this also rules out the substance-causal version of (3b) that requires conditioned but undetermined mental substances as causes of action. However, the event-causal version of (3b) that requires conditioned but undetermined mental events as causes of action is not ruled out.

A further question is whether the doctrine of the efficacy of action requires the event-causal version of (3b). Although our present action is determined only partly by our past action and past experiences, it is also determined partly by our responses to present feelings/experiences. These responses may be conscious/deliberative or unconscious/habitual. As discussed above, this is where the efficacy of action operates. We may respond with wisdom and dispassion (leading to wholesome experiences/results or spiritual progress), or ignorance and craving (leading to unwholesome experiences /results or spiritual regress), as conditions. Moreover, suffering (unpleasant feelings/experiences), both past and present, conditions faith (the commitment to end suffering and to the practice to end suffering). In other words, we can avoid suffering if we have experienced suffering, desire to end it, believe that wisdom and dispassion will end it while ignorance and craving will perpetuate it, intend to end it, and act accordingly, within the framework of dependent arising. This is consistent with compatibilist free will. It affirms (1) when sufficient causal conditions include internal (inside the agent) conditions such as the desire to end suffering, the belief that wisdom and dispassion will help end suffering, and the intention to end suffering, negative (inhibitive /restraining) conditions such as the avoidance of ignorance and craving in an effort to end suffering. And it affirms (2) when the past includes recent results /experiences and conscious/deliberate responses to them, and the laws include all of the five natural orders, particularly the order of karma and the order of mental processes. Since compatibilist free will is consistent with the evitability of suffering through the removal of its facilitative/supportive conditions – the mental habits of ignorance and craving – and through the acquisition of its inhibitive/restraining conditions – the mental habits of wisdom and dispassion, it is not fatalistic or futilitarian. Hence, the doctrine of the efficacy of action is consistent with but does not require the event-causal version of (3b).

4. BUDDHIST POSITIONS ON CAUSAL DETERMINISM, LIBERTARIAN FREE WILL, AND RETROSPECTIVE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Through the second set of premises and conclusion, P4 to P6 and C1, I have shown that Buddhists can deny C1 (the incompatibility between the doctrines of dependent arising and the efficacy of action) by denying either P4 (dependent arising requires causal

determinism) or P5 (efficacy of action requires libertarian free will), or both. Moreover, Buddhists need not affirm or deny P6 (the incompatibility between causal determinism and libertarian free will) even if many find it plausible. The third set of premises and conclusion examines the implications of the Buddhist notions of causality and agency for moral responsibility within the free will discourse in the Western analytic tradition:

P6: Causal determinism is incompatible with libertarian free will.

P7: Retrospective moral responsibility requires libertarian free will.

C2: Therefore, retrospective moral responsibility is incompatible with causal determinism.

P4: Dependent arising, including *vipāka* as experiential effect, requires causal determinism.

C3: Therefore, retrospective moral responsibility is incompatible with dependent arising.

Buddhists can either deny C3 by denying P4, or affirm C3 and deny retrospective moral responsibility, without affirming or denying P6, P7, and C2.

Moral responsibility is the practice of expressing attitudinal responses or reactive attitudes towards moral or immoral behaviour, usually in terms of praise or blame (Strawson 1962). Praise is a response/reaction towards moral behaviour and it is usually associated with pride; blame is a response/reaction towards the immoral behaviour and it is usually associated to shame. There are two approaches to moral responsibility - retrospective/retributive/backward-looking and prospective/reformative/forward-looking. The former approach justifies responsibility practices based on desert and retribution, where those who behave morally deserve to be praised (feel proud) while those who behave immorally deserve to be blamed (feel ashamed). The latter approach justifies responsibility based on results and reformation, where those who behave morally should be praised (feel proud) as praise/pride will encourage/incentivise them to behave morally and those who behave immorally should be blamed (feel ashamed) as blame/shame will discourage/disincentivise them from behaving immorally (Smart 1961).

Many find P7 plausible since retrospective moral responsibility – the practice of praising or blaming people because they deserve it seems to require either (3a) unconditioned mental events or substances as causes of action or (3b) conditioned but undetermined mental events or substances as causes of action, along with either (~1a) some events – actions – have no sufficient causal conditions that necessitate them or (~2a) even if the past and the laws remain exactly the same, some events – actions – could still have been otherwise. The intuition is that if people deserve praise or blame for what they did, then they cannot be causally determined to do what they did.

Assuming that P6, P7, and C2 are true, which many believe them to be, and that Buddhists affirm dependent arising, then Buddhists who deny C3 (retrospective moral responsibility is incompatible with dependent arising) must deny P4 (dependent arising requires causal determinism). A further question is whether Buddhists can affirm C3 and deny retrospective moral responsibility. An answer can be found in the following

three Buddhist discourses, beginning with the *Discourse on Moral Shame and Moral Fear (Hiri Ottappa Sutta)*:

...there are two bright states that protect the world.... moral shame and moral fear...
 ...if these two bright states were not to protect the world, then there would be no mothers, nor mothers' sisters, nor uncles' wives, nor teachers' wives, nor the wives of the respected....
 ...since these two bright states do protect the world, therefore there are seen mothers, mothers' sisters, uncles' wives, teachers' wives and wives of the respected.... (Tan 2003, 2017)

Moral shame (*hiri*) refers to disgust at immoral behaviour and moral fear (*ottappa*) refers to the fear of such immoral behaviour. While moral shame arises from a respect for self and is directed inwardly to inhibit/restrain immoral behaviour, moral fear arises from a fear of social consequences and is directed outwardly to inhibit/restrain immoral behaviour. Together, they are known as the “bright states” (*sukkā dhamma*) or “world-protectors” (*lokapāla*), the foundation of public morality or the preconditions of a moral society.

Next, the *Discourse of the Bright Protectors (Sukkā Dhamma Sutta)* extends moral shame and moral fear to individual morality:

For those whom moral shame and moral fear are at all times unknown – they, turning away from the roots of light, are those who go to birth and death.
 But those for whom moral shame and moral fear are ever always fully founded – they, prospering in the holy life, are at peace with rebirth destroyed. (Tan 2003, 2017)

The intent behind the prescription of moral shame and moral fear is soteriological, where individual morality is seen as the foundation stage along the path towards the spiritual goal. When the two “bright states” are absent, spiritual regress – “turning from the roots of light (having ignorance and craving)” and “go(ing) to birth and death (suffering)” – follows. And when they are present, spiritual progress – “prospering in the holy life (having wisdom and dispassion)” and “(being) at peace with rebirth destroyed (end of suffering) – follows.

Finally, the notion of taking responsibility for one's behaviour is discussed in the *Discourse on the States that Should Be Often Reviewed (Abhiṅha-Paccavekkhitabba-Thāna Sutta)*:

...beings have wrong deeds of body, wrong deeds of speech, wrong deeds of mind. But for one who often reflects on this state [“I am the owner of my deeds, the heir to my deeds, the womb of my deeds, the relative of my deeds, my deeds are my refuge; whatever deed I have done, good or evil, I will be its heir”], his wrong deeds will all vanish or at least lessen. (Tan 2003)

Although the notion of responsibility in this discourse (taking ownership of one's deeds) – appears to differ from the previous discourses (having moral shame and moral fear),

they can be seen as two ways of expressing moral responsibility in Buddhist terms. Moreover, while the aims of the last two are similar, for the “vanishing or lessening of wrong deeds” is another way of saying “prospering in the holy life”, the overarching aim of all three discourses is the same – well-being, whether individual or social.

The responsibility practices of moral shame, moral fear, and taking ownership of one’s deeds can be seen as reactive attitudes towards one’s own behaviour. However, they are employed more prospectively than retrospectively. More precisely, they are employed as retrospective/retributive means to prospective/reformative ends. They are not employed to judge the deservingness or worthiness of praise or blame for moral or immoral behaviour (retributive/backward-looking); they are employed to “reflect on this state (taking ownership of one’s deeds)” (retributive/backward-looking) so that “his wrong deeds will all vanish or at least lessen” (reformative/forward-looking). Since, all three discourses offer strong but inconclusive support for the denial of retrospective responsibility, Buddhists can affirm C3 (retrospective moral responsibility is incompatible with dependent arising) and deny retrospective moral responsibility.

5. BUDDHIST POSITIONS ON THE EFFICACY OF ACTION, LIBERTARIAN FREE WILL, AND THE METAPHYSICAL SELF

Through the third set of premises and conclusion, I have shown that Buddhists need not affirm or deny P6, P7 and C2. However, assuming that P6, P7, and C2 are true, Buddhists can either deny C3 by denying P4 or affirm C3 and deny retrospective moral responsibility, depending on whether they affirm or deny causal determinism. The fourth set of premises and conclusion examines the relationship among the efficacy of action (which Buddhists affirm), libertarian free will, and the metaphysical self or mental substance (which Buddhists deny).

P5: The efficacy of action, including karma as volitional cause, requires libertarian free will.

P8: Libertarian free will requires a metaphysical self [necessary for the agent-causal – uncaused mental substance – but not for the event-causal – uncaused mental state – account].

C4: Therefore, the efficacy of action requires a metaphysical self.

Since Buddhists affirm the efficacy of action and deny a metaphysical self, they must deny C4 by denying P5, P8, or both.

The Buddhist notion of the empirical self or person consists of a ‘bundle’ (*khandha*) of five continuous and connected psychological and physiological aggregates by way of ‘dependent arising’, without positing a metaphysical self (*attā*) behind these aggregates. In *The Debate of Milinda*, it is explained via the following analogy: just like a ‘chariot’ arises when the parts are rightly set, a ‘person’ arises when the aggregates are rightly set. And just like the ‘chariot’ is not an unchanging and independent entity over and above the rightly set parts, the ‘person’ is not an

independent and unchanging entity over and above the rightly set aggregates (Pesala 2001: 34). As the Buddha examined his own person, he did not encounter an unchanging and independent self (*attā*), but the different facets of experiences instead, such as feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*sañña*), disposition (*saṅkhāra*), or consciousness (*viññāna*). And if there was anything other than these psychological facets constituted the person, it was the body (*rūpa*). However, the Buddha observed that all the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) comprising the empirical self or person are subject to dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and hence subject to impermanence (*aniccā*) and soullessness/insubstantiality (*anātman*). As with the Buddhist notions of causality, agency, and moral responsibility discussed above, the overarching aim of denying the metaphysical self (also known as the doctrine of selflessness /soullessness specifically or essencelessness/insubstantiality generally) is soteriological. Seeing the soullessness/insubstantiality of the self and things is one way of seeing the true state of things or the way things really are (wisdom as opposed to ignorance). And seeing soullessness/insubstantiality as the true state of the self and things or the way things really leads to dispassion results in the detachment to (or disenchantment with) the self and things (dispassion as opposed to craving). Finally, the detachment to (or disenchantment with) the self and things leads to the end of suffering.

In his *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, 5th century Buddhist scholar linked the doctrine of selflessness/soullessness to agency and responsibility by declaring:

There is no doer of a deed or one who reaps the deed's result; Phenomena alone flow on –
No other view than this is right. (Buddhaghosa 2010: 627)

The “doer of a deed” and “one who reaps the deed’s result” that Buddhaghosa rejects refer to the metaphysical self or mental substance, whether mental or physical, as the agent. However, Buddhaghosa’s statement need not be read as rejecting the empirical self, which comprises the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*), expressed as “phenomena alone”, as the agent. Of these five aggregates, scholars agree that the disposition aggregate (*saṅkhāra*) is the “doer of a deed” and feeling aggregate (*vedanā*) is the “one who reaps the deed’s result”. Apart from these parts of the empirical self, there is no metaphysical self to sow the seeds or reap the fruits. “Agent”, “ego”, or “person”, are only conventional terms for the impermanent and interdependent psycho-physiological compound (*nāma-rūpa*) which constitutes the empirical self. In this sense, there is no actor apart from the action, no perceiver apart from perception, no conscious subject apart from mere consciousness. This doctrine is what rules out mental substances or metaphysical selves as causes of action as discussed above under (3a) and the agent-causal version of (3b). Hence, Buddhists affirm the efficacy of action (part of the empirical self as the “doer of a deed” and another part of the empirical self as “one who reaps the deed’s result”) but denies the metaphysical self. Buddhists who affirm the conditioned but undetermined event-causal version of libertarian free will and deny causal determinism can affirm P5 and deny P8; Buddhists who affirm causal determinism and deny any version of libertarian free will can deny P5 without affirming or denying P8.

6. BUDDHIST POSITIONS ON RETROPECTIVE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, LIBERTARIAN FREE WILL, AND THE METAPHYSICAL SELF

Through the fourth set of premises and conclusion, I have shown that Buddhists must deny C4 because they affirm the efficacy of action but deny the metaphysical self. However, they can deny C4 by denying either P5 or P8, depending on whether they affirm or deny libertarian free will. The fifth set of premises and conclusion examines the relationship among retrospective moral responsibility, libertarian free will (which Buddhists need not affirm or deny), and the metaphysical self (which Buddhists deny).

P7: Retrospective moral responsibility requires libertarian free will.

P8: Libertarian free will requires a metaphysical self.

C5: Therefore, retrospective moral responsibility requires a metaphysical self.

Since Buddhists deny the metaphysical self, they can either affirm retrospective moral responsibility and P7 and deny C5 by denying P8, or deny retrospective moral responsibility without affirming or denying P7, P8, or C5.

Although Buddhists need not affirm or deny P7, P8, or C5, they deny the metaphysical self. However, there is an apparent contradiction between two discourses discussed above concerning the self, agency, and responsibility, namely “*I am the owner of my deeds, the heir to my deeds*” in the *Discourse on the States that Should Be Often Reviewed (Abhiṅḡha-Paccavekkhitabba-Ṭhāna Sutta)* and “*There is no doer of a deed or one who reaps the deed’s result*” in *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. While the former seems to affirm the self, agency, and moral responsibility, the latter seems to deny them all.

One way of resolving this apparent contradiction can be found in the *Discourse on Direct and Indirect Meanings (Neyyattha Nītattha Sutta)*:

Those who explain a sutta whose sense is drawn out (*nītattha*) as to be drawn out [whose sense is direct as indirect]. Those who explain a sutta whose sense is to be drawn out (*neyyattha*) as drawn out [whose sense is indirect as direct]. These...are the two who misrepresent the Tathagata.

Those who explain a sutta whose sense is drawn out (*nītattha*) as drawn out [whose sense is direct as direct]. Those who explain a sutta whose sense is to be drawn out (*neyyattha*) as to be drawn out [whose sense is indirect as indirect]. These...are the two who do not misrepresent the Tathagata. (Tan 2003, 2010)

The Sutta makes a distinction between direct meaning (“sense is drawn out” – *nītattha*) and indirect meaning (“sense is to be drawn out” – *neyyattha*): the former is literal and no further clarification is required while latter is figurative and further clarification is required. This distinction is closely related to two others: one between definite teachings (*nippariyāyena*) and provisional teachings (*pariyāya*), and another between and ultimate/spiritual truths (*paramattha sacca*) conventional/worldly truths (*sammuti sacca*). These related distinctions are motivated by the Buddha’s expedient or skillful

means (*upāya*) in expounding his discourses, considering his listeners' aptitude and background and adapting his discourses accordingly. When his listeners lack the capacity to understand the former, the Buddha will adopt the latter. And when his listeners have the capacity to understand the former, the Buddha will adopt the former. So, in reading the discourses, it is important to note these distinctions and avoid misrepresenting the teaching by treating the direct/drawn out /definite/ultimate explanations as indirect/to be drawn out/provisional /conventional explanations and vice versa.

Applying these closely related distinctions to the two apparently contradictory discourses, "*I am the owner of my deeds, the heir to my deeds*" can be interpreted as indirect/to be drawn out/figurative/provisional /conventional while "*There is no doer of a deed or one who reaps the deed's result*" can be interpreted as direct/drawn out/literal/definite/ultimate. While the former employs "owner" and "heir" as indirect/figurative/provisional /conventional terms that once drawn out (clarified), do not refer to the metaphysical self, the latter states directly/literally/definitely/ultimately, without the need to draw out (clarify), that the terms "doer" and "one who reaps" do not refer to the metaphysical self. That is, the former "*explain(s) a sutta whose sense is to be drawn out (neyyattha) as to be drawn out [whose sense is indirect as indirect]*", while the latter "*explain(s) a sutta whose sense is drawn out (nītattha) as drawn out [whose sense is direct as direct]*". Hence, the two discourses "*do not misrepresent the Tathagata*" and the apparent contradiction between them is resolved.

There is another way of explaining the apparent contradiction without misrepresenting the doctrine. Both the above interpretations assume that the referent of "owner/heir/doer/one who reaps" is the metaphysical self. While the former discourse indirectly and correctly states that "owner/heir" are just convenient terms without referents, the latter discourse directly and correctly states that "doer/one who reaps" have no referents. Another interpretation is to assume that "owner/heir" and "doer/one who reaps" have different referents: "owner/heir" refer to the empirical self, while "doer/one who reaps" refer to the metaphysical self. This interpretation also assumes that the former discourse denies the metaphysical self while the latter discourse does not deny the empirical self, as mentioned above. Hence, there is no contradiction between the two discourses because their similar terms have different referents.

It is uncontroversial that Buddhists deny the metaphysical self and affirm the empirical self. However, those who affirm P7 (retrospective moral responsibility requires libertarian free will), libertarian free will, and retrospective moral responsibility, can deny C5 (retrospective moral responsibility requires a metaphysical self) by denying P8 (libertarian free will requires a metaphysical self). They must also hold that the empirical self is sufficient to ground libertarian free will and retrospective moral responsibility despite it being subject to impermanence, insubstantiality, and dependent arising. In contrast, those who deny retrospective moral responsibility need not affirm or deny P7, P8, and C5, but they need to affirm that the efficacy of action and prospective moral responsibility require the empirical self that is subject to impermanence, insubstantiality, and dependent arising.

7. CONCLUSION

Buddhists affirm causality in the form of dependent arising and agency in the form of the efficacy of action. The problem of the incompatibility of causality and agency does not arise in Buddhism because the efficacy of action (agency) is understood within the framework of dependent arising (causality), with the aim of fostering spiritual progress. Buddhists also affirm moral responsibility in the form of moral emotions such as moral shame and moral fear, and moral attitudes such as taking ownership of one's action with the aim of promoting individual/social well-being. And the problem of incompatibility of causality and moral responsibility does not arise in Buddhism because moral emotions and moral attitudes are among the causes/conditions of encouraging spiritual progress and individual/social well-being within the framework of dependent arising. Buddhists also deny the (unchanging and independent) metaphysical self for similar soteriological and consequentialist reasons but they do not deny that the (impermanent and interdependent) empirical self is required for agency and moral responsibility. However, the Buddhist position on the causal determinism, libertarian free will, and retrospective moral responsibility debate in the Western analytic tradition remains open, as the Buddhist discourses examined above offer strong but inconclusive reasons to affirm causal determinism, and deny libertarian free will and retrospective moral responsibility. So, Buddhists have at least three options: (i) form no opinion on the problem as debated in Western analytic tradition, (ii) affirm causal determinism, deny libertarian free will (but affirm compatibilist free will), and deny retrospective moral responsibility (but affirm prospective moral responsibility), or (iii) deny causal determinism (but affirm the causally indeterministic kind of universal conditionality), affirm libertarian free will (but not the kind that requires substances as causes or uncaused/unconditioned events), and affirm retrospective moral responsibility (but not the kind that encourages resentment towards others, which is not soteriologically conducive), while noting that the Buddhist discourses examined above support (ii) more than (iii).

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