

A Metamodern Approach to the Buddhist Problem of Free Will

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Abstract

The problem of free will in Buddhism arises from apparent inconsistencies in its essential doctrines of not-self, dependent origination, and karma. These as well as other Buddhist teachings set up two conflicting theoretical poles: a view of causality and determinism in which there is no substantial self that persists through time and no free will, and on the other hand, a view in which something is reborn and reaps the consequences of its karma, implying a form of moral agency and responsibility that seems impossible without belief in some type of substantial self. This conflict also engenders the Buddhist distinction between absolute truth and conventional truth. In previous scholarship on this problem, the procedure has generally been to decide which aspects of either pole of the conflict are most important and then reconstruct the other aspects in a way that falls in accordance with them. Thus, the paradigm of thought on this problem in the West has been one of compromise within a postmodern deconstructionist dialectic, in which the scholar leans toward either pole of the conflict and attempts to force the other one into agreement. This has led to a variety of proposed solutions, all of which are at least slightly unsatisfactory, both philosophically and to the Buddhist in practice. In recent years, however, scholarship has begun to move away from this paradigm, and I propose in this thesis a new paradigm and solution: a metamodern approach to Buddhism that collapses the distance between the two poles of the conflict, as exemplified by its response to the Buddhist problem of free will.

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Introduction

One of the most serious criticisms leveled against Buddhism is the charge that it is inconsistent regarding moral agency, free will, and causality throughout its doctrines. As it is typically formulated, the Buddhist problem of free will arises from conflicting accounts of existence offered by three of Buddhism's essential doctrines: not-self (Pāli: *anattā*), dependent origination (Pāli: *paṭiccasamuppāda*), and karma (Pāli: *kamma*). The doctrine of not-self, in its simplest form as it is often understood, claims that there is no substantial self that persists through time and that the view that such a self, or ego, exists is merely an illusion. The doctrine of dependent origination claims that the universe is a causal system, reducible to a complex series of *dhammas* (phenomena, constituent factors). In conjunction with the doctrine of not-self, this replaces the egoist view of the self with a causal explanation that presents conscious existence as a series of these *dhammas*, the complex interactions of which give rise to the various states of existence and aspects of human consciousness. Accordingly, the theory of karma presents a specific application of Buddhism's theory of causality in order to explain human action and its moral consequences as governed by a natural law that brings those consequences to fruition, both in this life and in future rebirths. Alone, each of these doctrines remains internally consistent (with exception, perhaps, for karma). That the universe, as well as human consciousness, is reducible to causal mechanisms is certainly no foreign concept in the West, and even karma, in a simplified and appropriated form, has taken on a vogue of belief in Western culture.

The problem arises, however, when these doctrines are combined within Buddhism's overall philosophical system. The doctrine of karma, for example, rests on the general theory of causality found in dependent origination, which is also inherent in the doctrine of not-self.

However, the doctrine of karma also implies moral responsibility and moral agency, which implies a self. If there is no substantial self, then on whom do the karmic consequences of moral action fall? And if the doctrine of dependent origination and its theory of causality are true—and if it does in fact imply strict causal determinism—how can an agent (if there were one) be held morally responsible if they (presumably) have no free will? Similar problems arise with reincarnation, an inherent part of the doctrine of karma, as it seems rebirth should be impossible (or inconsequential) if there is no self to be reborn. Additionally, we must add to the mix the fact that Buddhism is a soteriological system aimed at liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*), which suggests that the individual is at some level in control of their fate—that is, that the individual has the ability to take actions toward their own liberation. This suggests fatalism is false and there is at any moment more than one possible future, thus conflicting with the view of traditional causal determinism, which says that at any moment there is *only* one possible future based on the state of the universe at that moment. Thus, even Buddhism’s general goal of liberation seems to be at odds with its teachings, and we begin to see how these teachings create a web of inconsistencies and problems.

One way Buddhism attempts to resolve some of the apparent inconsistencies in the *suttas* is to make a distinction between ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) and conventional truth (*samvrti-satya*). A prime example of this is the use of the term “self” and other self-referential concepts within the *suttas* and other Buddhist texts. Ultimately, there is no self, no agent that persists through time, but it is useful to refer to such a self conventionally, in everyday speech for example. In such cases, it is to be understood that in the *suttas* the term “self” is being used conventionally, for the sake of convenience and in order to more easily and straightforwardly convey the teaching. Thus, as Steven Collins explains, one dichotomy of Buddhist texts is

between those whose meaning is to be taken literally and those whose meaning is to be interpreted (based on whether the text is couched in the language of conventional or of ultimate truth).¹ While this may seem like a somewhat minor distinction, it is actually (or ought to be, I argue) more fundamental and crucial than is suggested by the way it is often treated.

As seen above, the problem of free will takes on unique characteristics when dealt with in Buddhism that are not ordinarily found in its debate in the West—e.g. rebirth, karma, liberation from *samsāra*—and must therefore be handled uniquely. The problem of free will has been an issue of central concern throughout the history of Western philosophical thought, but until relatively recently, there has been significantly less discourse dedicated to this problem in Buddhist scholarship. What discourse has occurred has generally made the mistake of bifurcating Buddhist thought on two levels:

- (1) Between its not-self, causal determinism views on the one hand, and its karmic, agent-reifying views on the other; and
- (2) Between ultimate truth and conventional truth.

In this way, Western approaches to the Buddhist problem of free will have remained entrenched in a deconstructionist dialectic typical of postmodern thought. On the first level (1), in which both poles of the conflict are supposedly within the realm of ultimate truth, the scholar is forced to decide which aspects are most important or fundamental and then reconstruct the other aspects to be in accordance. On the second level (2), the scholar must decide which of the two types of truth is more “fundamental” so to speak (an odd thing to say here), in which case ultimate truth is of course chosen, due to the very definition of the term. However, both levels of dialecticism

¹ Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 154.

produce approaches to the problem that are ultimately at least slightly unsatisfying. Moreover, whereas recent scholarship has begun to move toward an attempt at correcting the errors of the first-level dialectic, significantly less effort (if any at all) has been directed at recognizing and correcting the errors of the second-level dialectic.

The primary issue of this postmodern approach is that it is impossible to completely and satisfactorily collapse the distance between the poles of the dialectic without compromising the poles themselves (and thus making essentially unsatisfying compromises to the original Buddhist teachings). Despite attempts to overcome the problems produced by this paradigm of thought—and so long as discourse remains rooted in it—the results that it produces will remain fundamentally unsatisfying.

Thus, I propose in this thesis a new paradigm: a metamodern approach to Buddhism that overcomes the problems of the postmodern paradigm, as exemplified by its solution to the Buddhist problem of free will. Namely, I argue that the concepts of ultimate and conventional truth are specifically essential to an understanding of the Buddhist problem of free will, as Buddhism requires both for its soteriological system to be successful—that is, I propose that ultimate truth is in a sense *not* more fundamental or “ultimately true” than conventional truth, but rather that both are equally legitimate and necessary. The argument for this rests on the necessitation of both causal determinism as well as free will and a sense of agency, but without compromising either concept in favor of the other. In this sense, the metamodern approach could be considered essentially compatibilist, except that it moves beyond the dichotomy inherent therein. Additionally, I argue for a clarification (predicated on the metamodern approach) of how morality operates in Buddhism that is crucial to solving the problem of free will, arguing that Buddhism is essentially amoral in the traditional sense.

In “A History of the Problem,” I begin with a more in-depth discussion of the various aspects of the Buddhist problem of free will as it appears in the early Buddhist texts of the Pāli Canon. This section serves to provide background on as well as argue for an essential understanding of the problem as it appears in the Pāli Canon. Then, in “The Metamodern Interest,” I introduce and define the concept of metamodernism and propose it as a new paradigm for research and scholarship in Buddhism. Finally, in “A Metamodern Solution,” I discuss how an approach to the Buddhist problem of free will based on the metamodern paradigm answers the shortcomings of previous approaches and provides a solution that is more holistically satisfying.

Before going any further, however, a brief note: In order to handle the Buddhist problem of free will as uniquely Buddhist, rather than as a general philosophical or scientific problem in the context of Buddhism, any approach to Buddhism must recognize it and treat it as it is: an artifice of language and thought aimed at the very specific goal of liberating individuals from suffering and rebirth. At its core, it is not especially concerned with providing an ontologically or cosmologically accurate description of the universe/reality, except insofar as doing so is useful to its methodology and goals. Accordingly, the Buddha places himself under no obligation to tell the truth nor the whole truth, except in instances where doing so is skillful and beneficial to the individual’s attaining liberation. We must therefore be careful in situations where we approach Buddhism and Buddhist thought *as it is* that we remain, as well as possible, within the realm of Buddhist thought—that is, that we follow the same rules (so to speak) as Buddhists themselves. It is possible we could discount Buddhism, or at least some aspects of Buddhism, as an accurate description of the universe and reality by resorting to the wealth of modern knowledge we possess today. Likewise, it is possible we could solve some of Buddhism’s apparent problems and inconsistencies by utilizing that same realm of modern knowledge. Such approaches,

however, result in interpretations that, at best, cease to be completely Buddhist and at worst, are fundamentally unsatisfying to Buddhists or Buddhist practice in much the same way that approaches predicated on the paradigm of postmodern thought are unsatisfying in their compromise of essential teachings. Therefore, the metamodern approach proposed will, as well as possible, remain within the realm of Buddhist thought and practice, except to illustrate concepts.

For the sake of scope, this investigation deals only with the early Buddhist teachings of the Pāli canon and the Theravāda tradition. With the exception of “karma,” I use the Pāli spellings of Buddhist terms.

I. A History of the Problem

The Buddhist problem of free will is a uniquely Western concern. Throughout its roughly 2,500-year history, Buddhism has notoriously refrained from dealing directly with issues of free will. Indeed, there is not even a Buddhist term or concept equivalent to “free will.”² This silence on the subject of free will and agency suggests that it was by and large considered a non-issue by the Buddha and his followers.

First, if there is ultimately no substantial self, and if the doctrine of dependent origination adequately describes the processes that we typically take to be the self, then it makes little sense to worry about whether or not we have free will, since the concept of “we”—of self-hood—is ultimately illusory anyway.

More fundamentally, however, Buddhism is markedly less interested in metaphysics than it is in soteriological pragmatism. While we do find a highly detailed account of Buddhist metaphysics in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, this collection of texts is aimed specifically at the intellectual inquiring into the complex nature of existence. The overall focus of the Buddha’s teachings, however, is how best to achieve *nibbāna* (nirvana) and ultimately liberation from *samsāra* (the endless cycle of death and rebirth). Thus, he presents the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-fold Path in order to give the individual insight into the problem of suffering as well as a means of solving the problem. Understanding this pragmatism must therefore be an essential component of any approach to Buddhism.

Contrary to the historical silence of Buddhism on the problem of free will, Western scholars of Buddhism have begun in recent decades to explore this issue more explicitly and in

² Karin Meyers, “Free Persons, Empty Selves,” in *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Matthew R. Dasit and Edwin F. Bryant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 42.

greater depth than before. According to Ricardo Repetti in his four-part series of articles reviewing scholarship on the topic, Buddhist scholars “were relatively silent on free will” until around the 1970s, after which time scholarship has generally been divided into roughly the compatibilist camp and the incompatibilist camp.³ In his series of articles, he traces a progression from “early period” scholarship (characterized by compatibilism between Buddhist doctrine, determinism, and free will), through “middle period” scholarship (which shifted to a focus on incompatibilist views), to “recent period” scholarship (divided along incompatibilist and compatibilist lines, but with special interest on understandings of Buddhism that move beyond this dichotomy). It is in this “recent period” scholarship that we find the most notable attempts to move beyond the postmodern paradigm—the end goal toward which I propose the new paradigm of metamodernism.

In the following section, I begin with a discussion of how the Buddhist problem of free will and its surrounding concepts are treated (and not treated) in the texts of the Pāli Canon, with the goal of more explicitly defining the problem and its origins. In the process, I argue for an essential understanding of Buddhism founded on pragmatism in regards to its ultimate goal of liberation. Further, I argue for particular understandings of how Buddhism understands causality and karma that are essential in approaching the Buddhist problem of free will.

³ Ricardo Repetti, “Earlier Buddhist theories of free will: compatibilism,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17, (2010): 279, accessed April 29, 2015, http://www.academia.edu/17262090/Earlier_Buddhist_Theories_of_Free_Will_Compatibilism.

In the Pāli Canon

The Pāli Canon is the standard collection of scriptures in the early Buddhist tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. Thought to have been originally composed in North India, it was preserved orally before being committed to writing during the Fourth Buddhist Council in 29 BCE in Sri Lanka, roughly four-hundred fifty years after the death of the historical figure Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha.⁴ Containing thousands of texts, the Pāli Canon is organized into three basic groupings (*piṭakas*, “baskets”) as follows:

- 1) The Vinaya Piṭaka, comprising rules and guidelines for monastic life,
- 2) The Sutta Piṭaka, comprising discourses mostly attributed (contentiously) to the Buddha, but also to some disciples,
- 3) The Abhidhamma Piṭaka, comprising scholastic reworkings of the material in the *suttas* into classified summaries and lists.

Whereas the Vinaya Piṭaka is clearly aimed at the monastic life, and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka at the intellectual interested in the technical classifications and breakdowns of the metaphysical material from the *suttas*, the Sutta Piṭaka comprises the core teachings of Buddhism, as laid out by the Buddha and expounded upon by his disciples, aimed at the general audience. It is in the Sutta Piṭaka that the heart of Theravāda Buddhism is found, both in its teachings and in its tone. Likewise, it is here that the Buddhist problem of free will resides—as well as the foundations of the approach to it that I propose. Therefore, this investigation will deal primarily with the Sutta Piṭaka.

⁴ Peter Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.

To begin to understand the Buddhist problem of free will, however, we need first to understand the system of thought the Buddha created and taught to his disciples, beginning with the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. In his enlightenment/awakening, the Buddha saw that ignorance to the true nature of existence is the conditioning factor that allows suffering to prosper in the world.⁵ Thus, after his awakening, the Buddha introduces the Four Noble Truths as the fundamental teaching of Buddhism, aimed at enlightening the individual to the true nature of existence. The Four Noble Truths as stated in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth) may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Life/Existence is suffering (*dukkha*, also translated as “unsatisfactoriness,” “stress,” “anxiety,” etc.),
- 2) The origin of suffering is craving/attachment (*tanhā*), which ties the individual to the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*),
- 3) The cessation of suffering can be attained through the cessation of attachment, and thereby release from the cycle of rebirth,
- 4) The path to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.⁶

The first noble truth, The Truth of Suffering, states that all of existence is fundamentally unsatisfying, painful, and characterized by suffering and anxiety. The individual finds suffering in birth, in ageing, in sickness, in death, in not having what one desires, in having what one does

⁵ *Avijja Sutta* (SN 45.1), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.001.than.html>.

⁶ *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.piya.html>.

not desire, and so on.⁷ Essentially, suffering arises from the transient nature of existence. This suffering is due not only to specific instances of dissatisfaction and suffering—such as physical pain, of not getting what one desires, of sorrow and despair—but also to the fact that the very nature of existence is inherently unsatisfying. “In brief, the five aggregates subject to grasping are suffering,” the Buddha states.⁸ These five aggregates—material form, feeling, perception, volition (mental formations), and consciousness—are presented throughout Buddhist teachings as the constituent factors of sentient beings. Thus, by explaining every constituent part of sentient existence as dissatisfying and full of suffering, the Buddha shows that existence itself is inherently full of suffering. Existence *is* suffering. The experience of sensory existence, for example, is imperfect and leaves the individual craving more pleasure (perfect pleasure) and less discomfort (perfect discomfort), and likewise for mental existence and so on.⁹ Additionally, pleasures (e.g. worldly comforts) bring suffering in that they lead to worrying, stress, and anxiety in regards to maintaining those pleasures against their transient existence. In this way, due to the inherent nature and transiency of existence, existence is seen as fundamentally unsatisfactory and full of suffering.

The second noble truth, The Origin of Suffering, then explains that suffering has a cause that can be seen and analyzed—namely, *tanhā* (craving, attachment). It is craving and attachment that tie the individual to the cycle of rebirth and the inherent suffering therein.¹⁰ This is manifested fundamentally in attachment to the five aggregates of sentient existence, which

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Saccavibhanga Sutta* (MN 141), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.141.than.html>.

¹⁰ *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.piya.html>.

constitutes the “I am” conceit (*asmi-māna*). The “I am” conceit is the illusion that there is a substantial self that persists through time and that such a self is identifiable with one of the five aggregates in one of four ways:

- a) the aggregate as the self,
- b) the aggregate as possessed by the self,
- c) the aggregate as contained in the self, or
- d) the aggregate as containing the self.¹¹

In this way, the unenlightened individual develops a self-identity view and clings to the five aggregates, thereby clinging to existence, thereby clinging to rebirth, and thereby binding him- or herself to suffering. The Buddha elaborates on how self-identifying leads to worry and suffering in the *Upaadaaparitassana Sutta*, explaining,

Here, monks, the uninstructed worldling, . . . unskilled and untrained in the Dhamma [teaching; path; truth] of the Noble Ones, . . . regards body [material form] as the self, the self as having body, body as being in the self, or the self as being in the body. Change occurs to this man's body, and it becomes different. Because of this change and alteration in his body, his consciousness is preoccupied with bodily change. Due to this preoccupation with bodily change, worried thoughts arise and persist, laying a firm hold on his mind. Through this mental obsession he becomes fearful and distressed, and being full of desire and attachment, he is worried. [*Likewise with the other aggregates “feeling,” “perception,” “mental formations,” and “consciousness”*]¹²

¹¹ *Maha-punnama Sutta* (MN 109), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.109.than.html>.

¹² *Upaadaaparitassana Sutta* (SN 22.7), trans. Maurice O’Connell Walshe, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.007.wlsh.html>.

Here the Buddha uses an example dealing with suffering in the present, current life, but the same connection holds true for suffering in future lives. It is attachment—fundamentally, attachment to the “I am” conceit—that ties the individual to the cycle of rebirth. By clinging to the conceit of the ego, the individual craves for the perpetuation of that ego, and this in turn conditions the aggregates—namely, consciousness—to return again in rebirth. In the *Atthi Raga Sutta*, the Buddha states,

Where there is passion, delight, & craving for the nutriment of consciousness, consciousness lands there and increases. Where consciousness lands and increases, there is the alighting of name-&-form. Where there is the alighting of name-&-form, there is the growth of fabrications. Where there is the growth of fabrications, there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is the production of renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, aging, & death, together, I tell you, with sorrow, affliction, & despair.¹³

Thus, we see how attachment leads to and is the root cause of both suffering as well as rebirth. This logical connection between suffering and attachment is absolutely crucial in Buddhism’s system of liberation because it shows that suffering has causes and that these causes follow a logical pattern that can be understood and anticipated, which in turn means that suffering, presumably, can be prevented.

Accordingly, the third noble truth, The Cessation of Suffering, states that suffering can in fact be ended through the cessation of the prior causes—namely, craving/attachment (and more fundamentally, ignorance). By removing the conditions that create suffering, one not only mitigates suffering in this life, but also in the future by escaping the cycle of death and rebirth

¹³ *Atthi Raga Sutta* (SN 12.64), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.064.than.html>.

altogether. In the *Bhāra Sutta*, the Buddha illustrates this release from clinging to the five aggregates with a revised presentation of the Four Noble Truths, constructed around the image of a burden one carries, concluding:

A burden indeed
are the five aggregates,
and the carrier of the burden
is the person.

Taking up the burden in the world
is stressful.

Casting off the burden
is bliss.

Having cast off the heavy burden
and not taking on another,
pulling up craving,
along with its root,
one is free from hunger,
totally unbound.¹⁴

Thus, in relinquishing one's attachment to the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness—and the conceit “I am,” one removes craving, as well as the root causes of craving and thereby the root causes of suffering, and attains *nibbāna*.

Finally, in the fourth noble truth, The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering, the Buddha provides the means by which to eliminate attachment, and thereby suffering, through the

¹⁴ *Bhāra Sutta* (SN 22.22), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.022.than.html>.

framework of the Noble Eightfold Path. It will be useful here to briefly summarize each of the steps as analyzed by the Buddha in the *Magga-vibhanga Sutta*:

1) Right View:

simply holding the Four Noble Truths as true, accurate descriptions of existence

2) Right Resolve:

being “resolved on renunciation, on freedom from ill will, on harmlessness”

3) Right Speech:

refraining from lying, abusive and divisive speech, as well as “idle chatter”

4) Right Action:

abstaining from killing, stealing, and “unchastity”

5) Right Livelihood:

not making one’s livelihood anything that transgresses one of the other steps of the path, e.g. not being an arms dealer, soldier, butcher, etc.

6) Right Effort:

- a. put effort into the prevention and abandonment of “unskillful [evil] qualities”
- b. put effort into the cultivation and maintenance of skillful qualities

7) Right Mindfulness:

being self-aware and focusing on the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities in and of themselves, “ardent, aware, and mindful”; seeing each of these things as they truly are, free from illusion and attachment

8) Right Concentration:

for this final piece of the Noble Eightfold Path the Buddha provides a brief description of each of the first four *jhānas* (the *rūpajhānas*—“meditations of form”) which are not especially important for our purposes here.¹⁵

Importantly, we begin here to see more clearly a unique aspect of Buddhism’s teachings: its pragmatism. For example, as each part of the Path is labeled “Right —,” it is easy to read a moral code from this, and indeed, Right Action, Livelihood, and Effort are typically grouped together under the designation of ethical conduct. However, the Pāli term usually translated here as “right”—*sammā*—means “right” or “good” in a slightly different connotation, i.e. “proper” or “correct.” Thus, each of these instructions could be relabeled (perhaps more accurately) as e.g. “Correct View” or “Proper View.” One further clue into the true connotation of Buddhist ethics that we find here, as well as throughout the Pāli Canon, is the use of the words “skillful” and “unskillful” as synonyms for “good” and “evil.” That which is evil and unskillful is that which leads to attachment and suffering, and good and skillful is that which cultivates detachment and nonsuffering. Thus, it is a very pragmatic interpretation of morality in which the ultimate goal is liberation from *samsāra*. In this way, the Buddha provides clear means by which the individual can eliminate suffering and attain *nibbāna*.

In these foundational teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, we begin to see the general character of Buddhism—that of pragmatism with a clear goal—and it is out of these fundamental teachings that other important doctrines arise—specifically, the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*), and the doctrine of karma (*kamma*). These three closely intertwined doctrines elaborate on the concepts

¹⁵ *Magga-vibhanga Sutta* (SN 45.8), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.008.than.html>.

found or implied in the Four Noble Truths—causality, detachment from the concept of a “self,” and rebirth, respectively—and advance our understanding towards the Buddhist problem of free will.

The doctrine of dependent origination (commonly translated numerous other ways, e.g. dependent arising, interdependent co-arising, etc.), elaborates on the causality that lies at the base of the Four Noble Truths by discussing in more detail how things are causally linked. One way this mechanism of causality is sometimes interpreted (and by which scholars often attempt to avoid the problems that will arise for determinism later in this investigation) is as what we may call “conditionality,” in which the existence of one thing creates the *conditions* necessary for something else to exist. This interpretation rests, at least in part, on one of the ways dependent origination is typically presented, specifically through the use of the term “requisite conditions.” For example, in the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta* (The Great Causes Discourse), the Buddha says, “From birth as a requisite condition come ageing and death.”¹⁶ The other causal connections are similarly formulated: “From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging,” “From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving,” and so on, tracing back to consciousness and name-and-form.¹⁷ Using the example of the birth-death causal connection, the doctrine states that “ageing and death” can only obtain if the required condition of “birth” also obtains. For there to be ageing and death, there *must* be birth. Formulating dependent origination in this way is useful when tracing backward from suffering, or ageing and death, or any other point in the causal chain for the purpose of identifying prior causes to eliminate.

¹⁶ *Maha-nidana Sutta* (DN 15), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

However, this formulation fails to close the door in the other direction, so to speak. While it states that birth is a necessary precondition of ageing and death, it fails to state that ageing and death are necessary results of birth. That is, it fails to state that birth, in every instance, leads to ageing and death, that the two pieces of the causal chain are directly tied. This is the difference between what we may call a strictly deterministic chain of causality and a merely conditional or probabilistic chain of causality, and it is a difference that is of prime importance to an understanding of the Buddhist problem of free will. A merely conditional chain of causality seems to imply the possibility that birth can obtain without leading to ageing and death—or (as that example is somewhat absurd at this point), that craving can obtain without causing suffering, or that clinging can obtain without causing rebirth. The conditionality formulation is thus very useful for leaving plenty of room for free will to operate, but beyond that singular interest, it is unsatisfactory. To say that craving or clinging or birth do not always in every instance lead to suffering would seem to be a highly counterproductive claim given the human propensity to make wagers on probabilities. Indeed, considering Buddhism’s teachings and goals, it makes no sense to leave the door open to the possibility that one can enjoy worldly pleasures, becoming thoroughly attached, without suffering because of it. Additionally, there appear to be passages from the Pāli Canon that could support this more strictly deterministic understanding of dependent origination—namely, in the other most common way it is formulated in the *suttas*: “This being, that is; from the arising of this, that arises.”¹⁸ This formulation makes a slightly stronger connection between the cause and the effect, implying that *if* (a) obtains, (b) also obtains (in every instance). Granted, the stronger implications here could be merely semantic, resulting from the simplification of the doctrine into a concise phrase, as the Buddha does proceed to

¹⁸ *Bodhi Sutta* (Ud 1.3), trans. John D. Ireland, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.03.irel.html>.

qualify and explain the doctrine using the same “conditional” terminology from before. Nonetheless, for the reasons discussed above, a strictly deterministic causal chain seems necessary. Or, at the very least, it seems necessary that we *treat* the Buddhist understanding of causality as deterministic, and attribute the Buddha’s “conditionality” expression here to his awareness of the potential dangers of the fatalism that strict determinism implies.

The purpose in all of this is to show that each causal link in the chain has a preceding cause—a reason why it exists in the form of a necessary condition that must obtain for the causal link under consideration to obtain. As with earlier in the Four Noble Truths, this knowledge of necessary conditions means that the individual has a way to prevent each of the causal links from arising in the future through the cessation of each one’s requisite condition. Additionally, it is important to note here that the Buddhist understanding of causality found in dependent origination is not unilateral. Just as there is a causal chain that connects ignorance, through consciousness, name-and-form, and the other links, to suffering, there is also a causal chain that connects the small-scale details of how suffering arises from craving (as seen above in the example from the *Upaadaaparitassanaa Sutta* of self-identifying with the body). Thus, the doctrine of dependent origination includes a broad theory of causality that operates in every relationship and serves as the underlying logic in Buddhism. This is reflected in the constant use of the structure of reasoning “from (a) arises (b), from (b) arises (c), etc.” throughout the *suttas*. Thus, dependent origination states that *everything* has a cause through the cessation of which it can itself be ended or prevented, thus making Buddhism’s goal of liberation possible.

This deterministic causality begins to run into problems, however, when it gives rise to the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*), which is also a fundamentally important part of Buddhism’s system of liberation. I use the “not-self” translation of *anattā*, rather than the other common

translation “no-self,” due to the way the doctrine is typically formulated throughout the *suttas*. For example, in the *Anattā-lakkhana Sutta* (The Not-Self Characteristic Discourse), the Buddha teaches the doctrine in the format of “Form is not self... Feeling is not self... Perception is not self... Formations are not self... Consciousness is not self...” followed by a discussion of why each of these (the five aggregates) are not the self—namely, that they are each transient, constantly changing, and subject to “dis-ease” (i.e. they are stressful/suffering).¹⁹ They are transient because they are each dependently co-arisen (as seen in the doctrine of dependent origination)—that is, they arise dependent on prior, necessary causes and are not independent of the causal chain. Thus, it is improper (and makes little sense) to try to identify a substantial, permanent, independent self in any of them. Indeed, doing so is what leads one to craving, clinging, rebirth, and suffering. For this reason, I use the translation “not-self”—because the doctrine is formulated as “each of these is not the self”—rather than the translation “no-self,” which implies that a stance has been taken on whether or not a self exists. Taking such a stance was, in fact, rebuked by the Buddha. As Thānissaro Bhikkhu notes,

The one place [in the Pāli Canon] where the Buddha was asked point-blank whether or not there was a self, he refused to answer. When later asked why, he said that to hold either that there is a self or that there is no self is to fall into extreme forms of wrong view that make the path of Buddhist practice impossible.²⁰

Likewise, in the *Phaggunā Sutta*, the Buddha responds to questions of the self in the form of “who makes contact,” “who feels,” “who craves,” etc. with “Not a valid question... I don’t say ‘craves’... the valid question is “From what as a requisite condition *comes* craving” [emphasis

¹⁹ *Pañcavaggi Sutta* (SN 22.59), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html>.

²⁰ Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “No-self or Not-self?” *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 24, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/notself2.html>.

added].²¹ Thus, the correct way to approach Buddhist concepts in practice is not in terms of any concept of self, but in terms of the arising and cessation (devoid of an agent) of the constituent parts of conscious experience and especially of the causal chain that leads to suffering and rebirth. What appears to be one possible exception to this treatment is found in the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta*, where the Buddha warns against delineations of a self, saying, “[when] delineating a self possessed of form and finite... possessed of form and infinite... formless and finite... [or] formless and infinite... it is proper to say that a fixed view of a self... obsesses [the individual].”²² However, the Buddha is specifically discussing here how one delineates or reads a self into one’s experience of reality (and how that should not be done), rather than making a statement regarding whether any of these types of self do or do not exist. As we have seen, obsession (read: attachment) to a self-identity view is dangerous and counterproductive to Buddhism’s goal, and the Buddha thus warns the individual against delineating any self in such a way. Rather, he suggests the individual focus instead on all the things which are *not* the self and seeing them as they are (as “not-self”) in an effort to break one’s attachment to a self-identity view and the conceit “I am,” which leads to craving, clinging, and suffering. Thus, we find the following example at the end of a line of questioning in the *Mahā-punnama Sutta*:

Now at that moment this line of thinking appeared in the awareness of a certain monk:
“So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, formations are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?”

²¹ *Phagguna Sutta* (SN 12.12), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.012.than.html>.

²² *Maha-nidana Sutta* (DN 15), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html>.

Then the Blessed One, realizing with his awareness the line of thinking in that monk's awareness, addressed the monks: "It's possible that a senseless person — immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving — might think that he could outsmart the Teacher's message in this way... Now, monks, what do you think — [Are] form... feeling... perception... formations... consciousness constant or inconstant... And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful... And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?"

"No, lord."²³

In this passage, the Buddha, realizing the monk's line of thinking—realizing what he is *really* getting at—changes his mode of response from what it was earlier (actually answering the questions posed) to, now, reviewing the doctrine of not-self. The Buddha recognizes that, through the monk's question, the monk is implicitly clinging to the concept of self-hood by trying to find a self that exists (or does not exist)—a practice that is counterproductive and harmful. It is more skillful to, instead, focus on seeing the five "clingable aggregates" as what they are ("not-self"). Thus, the Buddha responds as he does.

Technically, the Buddha's responses here and elsewhere—as intellectually unsatisfying as they may be—do not preclude the ultimate existence of some type of self, which would appear to be good news for solving the Buddhist problem of free will. If some type of self, or the possibility thereof, exists, then we have an easy answer for questions regarding what is reincarnated, where moral agency and responsibility rest, and wherein free will could exist. However, the not-self doctrine's role in the Buddhist problem of free will remains, as does the

²³ *Maha-punnama Sutta* (MN 109), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.109.than.html>.

problem itself, because Buddhism *does not contain* any view on the existence or non-existence of a self, which means “the self” cannot be used to answer questions within or regarding Buddhist thought. For all practical purposes, not holding a view on whether or not a self exists is equivalent to holding the view that a self does not exist—the only difference being the semantics, which, it turns out, are quite important to Buddhism’s methodology and ultimate goal. Thus, the Buddhist problem of free will remains, as does the not-self doctrine’s role in the problem.

While not especially problematic on its own, the doctrine of not-self runs into serious problems when combined with the Buddhist theory of karma and rebirth. The theory of karma (*kamma*, literally “action”) arises from the same basic principles that give rise to the doctrine of dependent origination—i.e. Buddhism’s general understanding of causality and the conditioning of aggregates. Simply stated, karma is the application of a cause/effect understanding of the universe to what we would traditionally call “moral actions,” with good moral actions creating good, pleasurable results in the future and bad moral actions creating poor results and suffering in the future. Additionally, it is karma specifically that ties the individual to the cycle of rebirth (and the creation of further karma) and determines in what conditions he or she will be reborn. However, the Buddhist understanding of karma is slightly more nuanced than this simplistic formulation, and in approaching it for the purposes of our investigation, it will be useful to focus specifically on three aspects of Buddhist karmic theory that set it apart and begin to create problems: its relation to concepts of not-self/identity; how it understands the operation of karma (specifically in regards to free will); and, its treatment of action vs. intent.

The doctrine of not-self and how Buddhism treats identity figure as prominently in its karmic theory as they do elsewhere. In the *Ariyamagga Sutta*, the Buddha explains that there are four kinds of karma (rather than just two: good or bad):

There is dark kamma with dark results; there is bright kamma with bright results; there is kamma that is dark and bright with dark and bright results; there is kamma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright results, which leads to the destruction [ending, cessation] of kamma.²⁴

As Thānissaro Bhikkhu notes, once the Buddha, during the process of his awakening, realized the possibility of this fourth type of karma that allows the escape from karma, he began to recognize that he must abandon the contexts of personal narrative and cosmology that had informed his realization and understanding of the first three types.²⁵ He recognized that these forms of understanding are characterized by the dualities of existence and non-existence, of self and others, and that operating under such concepts made the complete cessation of karma impossible. Good, “bright” karma can be cultivated and the results experienced despite one still holding some belief on and attachment to a self, but this fourth type of karma can only be practiced and experienced through the Buddha’s teachings of the middle-way (the Four Noble Truths; focusing on the causal chain). Thus, the Buddha says,

This world is supported by a polarity, that of existence & non-existence. But when one sees the origination [and cessation] of the world as it actually is with right discernment, ‘non-existence’ [and ‘existence’] with reference to the world [do] not occur to one.

‘Everything exists’: That is one extreme. ‘Everything doesn’t exist’: That is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle: From ignorance as a requisite condition come... aging & death, sorrow,

²⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 155.

²⁵ Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “Wings to Awakening: Part I,” *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/part1.html#part1-b>.

lamentation, pain, distress, & despair... Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.²⁶

By operating under concepts of duality—such as being vs. non-being, or self vs. other (note the similarity here to post-modern dialecticism)—ignorance implicitly persists in the individual. Therefore, such approaches, while useful for comprehending karma and the nature of existence *up to a point*, are ultimately a hindrance to one’s full realization and liberation. In this way, we see that “not-self” and the abandonment of the concepts of personal and cosmological narrative are crucial to the practice of the ultimate, fourth kind of karma that releases the individual from the karmic cycle.

Another important subtlety that sets Buddhism’s theory of karma apart from that of other philosophical traditions is how it understands the operation of karma. The Buddha saw understandings of karma that claim present karmic consequences are the result *only* of past action as problematic because they seem to preclude the ability of the individual to effect any change with regard to present suffering. Instead, the Buddha claimed that “the present experience of pleasure and pain is a combined result of both past and present actions.”²⁷ As Thānissaro Bhikkhu notes, “this seemingly small addition to the notion of kamma plays an enormous role in allowing for the exercise of free will... In other words, this addition is what makes Buddhist practice possible.”²⁸ One could rebut the Buddha’s argument to the ascetics (that they presently experience the pain of present starvation)²⁹ on the technicality that cause/effect mechanisms

²⁶ *Kaccayanagotta Sutta* (SN 12.15), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.015.than.html>.

²⁷ *Devadaha Sutta* (MN 101), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.101.than.html>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

require the passing of time, however near-instantaneous. But we may also just as easily accept the “present” and “past” to be general temporal terms, and the point remains that for Buddhism’s process to be efficacious, the individual must be able to involve him- or herself in the causal flow of events. If past karma alone has the ability to effect the present (and the individual obviously cannot change the past), then the individual could reasonably experience issues finding a way to escape the suffering from past karma (i.e. karma from past lives, which they, importantly, do not remember, and which to them appears to just keep coming). Instead, Buddhism’s approach to karma allows the individual the possibility of effecting the present and ending suffering in the present. Further, in doing so, it appears to avoid the pitfalls of fatalism and provide the individual a means of producing a neutral, unbinding karma (rather than merely producing good karma instead of bad).

Additionally, it is important to notice how Buddhism understands the actual causal mechanism of karma, which seems to be predicated on the concept of clinging. In the *Cula-kammavibhanga Sutta*, the Buddha explains why there is disparity in human existence (why some are short-lived, others long-lived; why some are intelligent, others unintelligent) and gives us a glimpse at how karma operates on the causal level. For example, the Buddha explains,

There is the case where a woman or man... does not ask: ‘What is skillful, venerable sir? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? What, having been done by me, will be for my long-term harm & suffering? Or what, having been done by me, will be for my long-term welfare & happiness?’ Through having adopted & carried out such actions, on the break-up of the body, after death, he/she reappears in the plane of deprivation... If instead he/she comes to the human state, then he/she will be stupid wherever reborn. This is the

way leading to stupidity: ... not to ask: ‘What is skillful? ... Or what, having been done by me, will be for my long-term welfare & happiness?’³⁰

Here, we find that cultivating ignorance—that is, specifically, not cultivating discernment, insight, and awareness—leads to one’s rebirth as ignorant or unintelligent. This same concept applies to the other disparities of character discussed in the *sutta*. When one cultivates each characteristic, good or bad, if they are reborn in “the human state,” they are reborn with the effects of that cultivation on their character. This understanding appears to derive from the Buddhist understanding of how attachment and clinging condition the consciousness to be reincarnated, thus tying the individual to the cycle of karma and rebirth. Just as, by clinging, one cultivates attachment to becoming, conditions the aggregate of consciousness as such, and is reborn, so too does the cultivation of any other characteristic condition one’s future states, including rebirth. This is the manner in which the causal mechanism of karma operates, based on the same causal system presented in dependent origination.

Lastly, in examining how Buddhism approaches the operation of karma, we must also note one *sutta* in particular: the *Sivaka Sutta*, which appears to state that not everything one experiences is a result of past karma.³¹ As the translator notes, while this *sutta* is often interpreted in this way—that some, even many, experiences are unexplainable by karma—this appears to be in disagreement with other *suttas* on the topic.

In the *Kamma Sutta* (not to be confused with the Hindu *Kama Sutra*), the Buddha explains old and new karma, explaining that the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect are all to be seen as old karma, and that whatever is done with the body, speech, and intellect is to be

³⁰ *Cula-kammavibhanga Sutta* (MN 135), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.135.than.html>.

³¹ *Sivaka Sutta* (SN 36.21), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.021.than.html>.

seen as new karma.³² Thus, several of the alternative causes given in the *Sivaka Sutta* for what one experiences (i.e. “bile,” “phlegm,” and “bodily humors”) can be seen as “old karma” in the form of the body (as given in the *Kamma Sutta*). And of the alternatives that remain—namely, “change of the seasons,” “uneven care of the body,” and “harsh treatment”—only one is obviously not related to “new karma,” that being “seasons.” Uneven care of the body is a present action and thus new karma, and as we saw above, the Buddha held that new, present karma could affect the present experience.

Likewise, “harsh treatment” is shown in the *Devadaha Sutta* to include asceticism, which the Buddha himself even considers to be present, new karma.³³ Further, one of the arguments he gives in that *sutta* for why it is improper for the Niganthas to hold the view that all present experience is created by past karma is particularly interesting. The Buddha seems to suggest that it is improper for them to hold such views because they do not know for themselves that they existed in past lives, nor that they did evil actions in past lives, nor what those evil actions were.³⁴ They have no knowledge of their past lives, and so it is improper for them to say, for example, that their present harsh self-treatment through asceticism is the result of past karma of which they have no knowledge. The Buddha even says,

If, however, *you knew* that you existed in the past... that you did evil actions in the past... that you did such-and-such evil actions... that so-and-so much stress has been exhausted, or that so-and-so much stress remains... then — that being the case — it

³² *Kamma Sutta* (SN 35.145), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.145.than.html>.

³³ *Devadaha Sutta* (MN 101), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.101.than.html>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

would be proper for you to assert that, "Whatever a person experiences — pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain — all is caused by what was done in the past."³⁵

[emphasis added]

This passage is extremely interesting in that it appears to introduce the concept of subjectivism into Buddhism's system of thought, suggesting that the fact of one's subjectivity—that one does not have an objective perspective—is relevant and meaningful. This subjectivism can be seen in other *suttas* as well, such as the *Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta* in which the Buddha states that, because one does not know the full extent of one's past karma, "there is action that is ineffectual [in bringing good rebirths] and apparently ineffectual... action that is ineffectual but apparently effectual... action that is both effectual and apparently effectual... [and] action that is effectual but apparently ineffectual."³⁶ For example, depending on the extent and character of one's past karma, good karma now might not be enough to offset the effects of bad karma in past lives, resulting in unfavorable rebirths (thus: effectual but apparently ineffectual). In this way, one's perspective influences one's experience of existence. Thus, it appears that the fact of subjectivism must inform any approach to Buddhist practice accordingly.

For these reasons, the Buddha's comments in the *Sivaka Sutta* appear peculiar. It is unclear why the Buddha makes the claims he does, but one possible explanation is that he is attempting to avoid what he saw as the dangers of deterministic and fatalistic beliefs and is altering his teachings accordingly. The argument could be made, however, (and I think it should) that the Buddhist formulation of karma is—despite the Buddha's claims otherwise—a strictly deterministic law, and that everything one experiences is in fact the result of karma (both past

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta* (MN 136), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.136.than.html>.

and present). In fact, karma would in reality appear to be none other than the *same* law behind dependent origination, rather than a separate but similar law. Thus, from a scholarly perspective, we can fundamentally understand “karma” (and its operation in Buddhism) as merely a term given to the principle of dependent origination, or to its underlying concept of causality, in situations where said principle is applied to actions that typically fall under the umbrella of “ethics.” (And the Abhidhamma Piṭaka suggests as much as well.)

Naturally, however, such an understanding of karma will significantly inform our understanding of and approach to Buddhist ethics and morality. Namely, it casts karma (and Buddhist ethics) as amoral in the traditional sense. Karma, we have seen, is understood as a natural law of causation that operates through the same mechanisms as dependent origination and the general principle of causality in Buddhism. Thus, karma is not a meting-out of punishments and rewards following some form of ethical mechanism, but rather a simple cause-effect understanding applied to the actions and consequences of the individual. In the same way, the Buddhist system of ethics that derives from karma (as well as from the principle of dependent origination as it informs the Noble Eightfold Path) is essentially amoral, based instead on pragmatism. We see this reflected in the language used to describe and discuss karma—i.e. “bright” vs. “dark,” and “skillful” vs. “unskillful,” instead of “good” vs. “bad.” What is considered “good” karma is that which is skillful in the attaining of Buddhism’s goal. “Good” karmic actions, therefore, always prevent clinging or ignorance in some way—fundamentally to ignorance and a concept of a self. All “immoral” actions, we find, are predicated on a concept of self—e.g. greed is founded on desiring things for oneself; inflicting harm is founded on a desire to assert oneself over others; etc. Thus, “bad” karmic actions are those that reinforce the ego conceit and produce clinging and are therefore unskillful and counterproductive to Buddhism’s

goal. In this way, despite karma and Buddhist ethics being *conventionally* treated as traditionally moral, the ultimate truth as to the reasons—as to what makes good actions good and bad actions bad—is a pragmatic one of prudence and what is skillful in achieving final liberation.

Additionally, this understanding of karma as part of the strictly deterministic causal chain refutes another common interpretation and argument regarding Buddhist karmic theory: that karma does not override other causal factors but instead finds its expression within them.³⁷ By understanding karma both as part of (even synonymous with) the causal, deterministic process (rather than separate from it) and as the progenitor of the entirety of one’s present experience, we eliminate the possibility that an individual’s good or bad karma could fail to express itself due to outside factors (i.e. other causal factors). This secures karma as an all-encompassing law, rather than as merely a potential or a possibility, much the same way as a deterministic understanding of the doctrine of dependent origination protects it against similar dangers as discussed above.

The final subtlety we must consider when approaching the Buddhist formulation of karma is its differentiation between action and intention. Contrary to other traditions that held action and the results of action as the primary determining factor in the character of one’s karma, Buddhism holds that it is intention (which precedes and is the cause of action) that determines the character of karma. “Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and intellect,” the Buddha says in the *Nibbedhika Sutta*.³⁸ Such a formulation protects the agent, at least to some extent, against unintended consequences while also protecting the impetus for truly “good will.” This is notable because it is the mental realm of intentions and volition that conditions consciousness either to attachment or to release. If an individual is

³⁷ Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “Wings to Awakening: Part I,” *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/part1.html#part1-b>.

³⁸ *Nibbedhika Sutta* (AN 6.63), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.063.than.html>.

merely doing good karmic deeds for the purpose of receiving a favorable rebirth but still clinging to attachments such as self-hood, they will never be released from the cycle of karma and *samsāra*. Thus, such karmic practice would be counterproductive to Buddhism’s ultimate goal of liberation.

However, we find a particularly insightful discussion of intention/volition in the *Cetana Sutta* which casts intent in a different light. Here, the Buddha illustrates how “mental qualities lead on to mental qualities... [and] bring mental qualities to their consummation, for the sake of going from the near to the Further Shore.”³⁹ Notably, the explanation of the causal connection from mental quality to mental quality is formulated as, for example, “For a person endowed with virtue, consummate in virtue, there is *no need for an act of will*, ‘May freedom from remorse arise in me.’ It is in the nature of things that freedom from remorse arises in a person endowed with virtue, consummate in virtue.” [emphasis added]⁴⁰ This illustrates Buddhist causality in a very particular way. In this formulation, the agent and the agent’s volition are illustrated as *part* of the causal chain, rather than separate but affected by it. Just as action has causes, as explained in the *Nidana Sutta* (the six causes of action being: greed, aversion, delusion, non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion),⁴¹ so too does intention/volition have causes. Ignorance and clinging create the mental states, intentions, and actions that tie the individual to the cycle of rebirth. Furthermore, the Buddha explains that the “support for the stationing of consciousness”—that is, for the renewed becoming of consciousness, and thus rebirth—is “what one intends, what one

³⁹ *Cetana Sutta* (AN 11.2), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an11/an11.002.than.html>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Nidana Sutta* (AN 3.33), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.033.than.html>.

arranges, and what one obsesses about.”⁴² Because intention carries with it the implication of some attachment to an action, idea, or a concept of self, it therefore provides a “landing of consciousness.” Thus, despite the importance of intention over action in early karmic practice, it appears that in later, more advanced karmic practice—and in order to achieve ultimate liberation from *samsāra*—there must be the cessation even of intention (or, that the cessation of intention follows from that advancement in practice).

Still, Buddhism needs to provide for the individual (at least in the early stages of practice) a means of acting and of effecting change in the causal chain of events. The ability to effect change is of prime importance to Buddhism’s goal of liberation, as we have seen. Thus, we find the Buddha, in the *Attakāri Sutta*, speaking of a “self-doer,” saying, “How, indeed, could one — moving forward by himself, moving back by himself — say: ‘There is no self-doer, there is no other-doer’?”⁴³ Here, we can read the Buddha’s statements as, in part, warding off the dangers of deterministic/fatalistic thinking, as such thinking is extremely counterproductive and unskillful in reaching *nibbāna*. Additionally, however, just as Buddhism recognizes the requirement of being able to take actions and, seemingly, effect change, it also recognizes the procedural mechanism of taking actions on the subjective level. The Buddha states, “when there is the element of initiating, initiating beings are clearly discerned; of such beings, this is the self-doer, this, the other-doer.”⁴⁴ As the translator notes,

Although the Buddha taught that there is no permanent, eternal, immutable, independently-existing core “self” (*attā*), he also taught that there is “action” or “doing,”

⁴² *Cetana Sutta* (SN 12.38), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.038.than.html>.

⁴³ *Attakāri Sutta* (AN 6.38), trans. K Nizamis, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 2, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.038.niza.html>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

and that it is therefore meaningful [and efficacious/conventionally useful] to speak of one who intends, initiates, sustains and completes actions and deeds, and who is therefore an ethically responsible and culpable being. It should be quite clear from its usage in this sutta, and from the argument of this sutta, that kāra in atta-kāra must be an agent noun, “doer, maker.”⁴⁵

This recognition of a “doer”—of some kind of initiator of actions—is crucial to Buddhism’s soteriological aims and must therefore be accounted for in some way by any approach to Buddhist practice. However, we find that Buddhism’s treatment of intention (and causality in general) significantly informs this requirement and places qualifications upon it that seem to be in many ways irreconcilable.

So have we, then, found some kind of agent or some form of self—any entity at all—to take possession of free-will, of karmic/moral consequences, and of rebirth? Not quite. But we do see more clearly how Buddhism backs itself into a philosophical corner, especially in the extrapolation of its teachings to their logical ends within the context of karma. Further adding to the issues and confusion is the idea that the specific operation of karma is taken to be “unconjecturable.” The Buddha states, “The [precise working out of the] results of kamma is an unconjecturable that is not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness & vexation to anyone who conjectured about it.”⁴⁶ Thānissaro Bhikkhu appears to take this to be evidence against a causally deterministic understanding of karma, claiming that, because “the results of kamma are imponderable”—because “only a person who has developed the mental range of a Buddha... would be able to trace the intricacies of the kammic network”—the relationship

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *Acintita Sutta* (AN 4.77), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.077.than.html>.

between a karmic action and its results is therefore not direct (is too complex to be direct) and is not causally deterministic.⁴⁷ He is correct when he says that the operation of karma, due to the way it is formulated in Buddhism, is more complex than a simple this-for-that relationship between action and result (such as was believed by the Vedists and Jains), but ignorance of the precise workings of the karmic system does not mean they do not exist, nor that they are not perfectly deterministic. The only relevant point that can be made here is that the Buddhist practitioner, in his or her subjective experience, is unable to know the full extent of the workings of karma, and this seems to be of little to no special significance except insofar as it was discussed above in introducing subjectivism to the equation.

Thus, the Buddhist problem of free will persists. We still have not clearly seen how an agent (if there effectively is no “self”) can exercise free will (if there is no agent to be in possession of free will) with the goal of effecting change in the causal sequence (if that causal sequence is strictly deterministic) for the benefit of his or her liberation. If intentions and actions are all the result of the causal process, who is it that really acts? Does any type of agent exist? And if consciousness is (as it is) what is reincarnated and creates continuity across multiple lives, why is that not the self? And if consciousness is not the self, why should the individual care what happens to it in future lives—why should rebirth be of any consequence? These are questions any approach to Buddhism must answer, and answer in a way that is satisfactory to the Buddhist in practice.

One way that Buddhism does attempt to address and resolve some of these issues in the Pāli Canon is through the distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth. “Ultimate truth” is taken to mean the objective truth of the universe and existence. In contrast,

⁴⁷ Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “Wings to Awakening: Part I,” *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/part1.html#part1-b>.

“conventional truth” is taken to mean a type of assumption or convention used for the purpose of easier speaking and of more straightforwardly conveying the teachings of Buddhism. For example, the doctrine of not-self is treated as an ultimate truth—especially when it is (mistakenly, I have argued)—taken as a statement on the objective non-existence of a self. Even as we have understood it in this investigation, though, it still operates as an objective, ultimate truth. Ultimately, one is to practice Buddhism in the absence of any concept of a self. Conventionally, however, it is often useful to speak in terms of agents, persons, entities that carry out actions, etc. One implication of the ultimate vs. conventional truth distinction is that not all Buddhist texts can be taken literally; in some texts, the meaning is to be inferred or interpreted. For example, the Buddha speaks, in the *Chiggala Sutta*, of one’s rebirth in the human realm as “sheer coincidence:”

“Monks, suppose that this great earth were totally covered with water, and a man were to toss a yoke with a single hole there... And suppose a blind sea-turtle were... [to] come to the surface once every one hundred years. Now what do you think: would that blind sea-turtle, coming to the surface once every one hundred years, stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole?”

[Monks:] “It would be sheer coincidence...”

“It's likewise a sheer coincidence that one obtains the human state. It's likewise a sheer coincidence that a Tathagata, worthy & rightly self-awakened, arises in the world. It's

likewise a sheer coincidence that a doctrine & discipline expounded by a Tathagata appears in the world.”⁴⁸

Given that we know (as the Buddha himself teaches) that one’s rebirth as a human is *not* sheer coincidence—that it is, instead, caused by the operation of karma and dependent origination—it would, therefore, seem strange that he calls it “sheer coincidence” in this passage. However, the Buddha’s purpose in this passage is not to teach the operation of karma, but rather to illustrate how rare and valuable is this human existence, and how crucial it is not to waste it. We know that, ultimately, one’s rebirth is determined by karma, and even (if the universe is strictly deterministic) that every rebirth is fated and determined to occur just as it does. Objectively, there is no coincidence in any rebirth in any state or realm of being. Subjectively, however, returning as a human—and, especially, returning as a human during the time of a buddha’s (a “Tathāgata’s”) existence—is like winning the lottery. This is in part because one does not know subjectively (personally, through their own knowledge/experience) that this rebirth was objectively determined, as well as because they subjectively care—to at least some small implicit extent—about this present existence (at least until more advanced practice, or until they attain *nibbāna*). Thus, we see this distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth—between the objective and the subjective—and we see how the Buddha employs this distinction skillfully to the benefit of Buddhism’s goal of liberation.

In this way, pragmatism rears its head once more, and before concluding this section, it will be useful to remind ourselves of this fundamental pragmatic nature of Buddhism. It is a soteriological system aimed at achieving release from the cycle of suffering and rebirth, and for that reason, the Buddha adjusts his teachings accordingly. Most of the *suttas* comprising the

⁴⁸ *Chiggala Sutta* (SN 56.48), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.048.than.html>.

Sutta Piṭaka are directed either at one particular individual or at his disciples at a particular point in time, and in either case, they are usually addressing one particular belief or question. Thus, the Buddha teaches to that question or unskillful/incorrect belief and adjusts his teachings as appropriate. This is where the concept of skillful and unskillful means comes into play. As the Buddha explains in the *Pañha Sutta*,

“there are... four ways of answering questions... There are questions that should be answered categorically [straightforwardly yes, no, this, that]... questions that should be answered with an analytical (qualified) answer [defining or redefining the terms]... questions that should be answered with a counter-question... [and] questions that should be put aside.”⁴⁹

Skillful means involves knowing how to appropriately respond to various questions, dependent on what type of answer will be conducive to the questioner’s understanding and practice towards *nibbāna*. Additionally, in the case of the Buddha specifically, it also involves knowing *what* to teach. From the *Simsapa Sutta*:

Those things that I have known with direct knowledge but have not taught are far more numerous [than what I have taught]. And why haven’t I taught them? Because they are not connected with the goal, do not relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. That is why I have not taught them.⁵⁰

The fact that there is apparently some knowledge that would be counterproductive to attaining *nibbāna* is both troubling and insightful. It means we cannot necessarily extrapolate claims on

⁴⁹ *Pañha Sutta* (AN 4.42), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.042.than.html>.

⁵⁰ *Simsapa Sutta* (SN 56.31), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.031.than.html>.

the objective nature of the universe and existence solely from what the Buddha teaches, and, likewise, that we cannot necessarily discount any particular such claim on his teachings alone.

Accordingly, it is because he is skillful in his means, and for the sake of Buddhism's goal of liberation, that the Buddha is wary of endorsing any philosophical belief in the extreme—such as his comments on the continuity of identity,⁵¹ or his warnings against the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism⁵²—regardless of their potential veracity. In each of these instances where the Buddha refrains from endorsing philosophical extremes, he does so on the premise of pragmatism: holding such views is dangerous and counterproductive to the goal of Buddhist practice. Thus, when questioned why he remained silent when asked whether there is or is not a self, the Buddha replies,

If I... were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self? ... And if I were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would [have] become even more bewildered: 'Does the self I used to have now not exist?'⁵³

It is not necessarily that any categorical answer he could have given in this situation would have been incorrect; it is that it would have been counterproductive and unskillful—even harmful—to the goal of Buddhist practice.

As we have seen, this pragmatic approach to teaching and practice is crucial to Buddhism, and it must therefore be deeply understood and lie at the heart of any approach and, indeed, any solution to the Buddhist problem of free will.

⁵¹ *Aññatra Sutta* (SN 12.46), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.046.than.html>.

⁵² *Ananda Sutta* (SN 44.10), trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 30, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn44/sn44.010.than.html>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

II. The Metamodern Interest

Metamodernism is a concept in contemporary aesthetic theory proposed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in 2010 in the *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*. Whereas postmodern thought is founded on concepts of deconstruction and of dialecticism—acknowledging or setting up dialectically opposed poles of discourse, à la Hegel—metamodern thought is an attempt to collapse the distance between those poles and transcend the dualities of postmodernism, but without reverting to the idealism and monisms of the modernist movement before it. Thus, metamodernism is essentially a response not only to the dialecticism of postmodern thought, but also to the dialecticism *between* postmodern thought and previous modern thought. As the authors explain,

the trends and tendencies [of the new generations of artists] can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern. They express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse... This [new, meta-] modernism is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment.⁵⁴

Further:

Indeed, if, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-à-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naïve, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation's attitude—for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation—can be conceived of as a kind of informed naïveté, a pragmatic idealism.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, (2010): 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 5.

In this way, metamodernism is understood as a constant oscillation between poles of dialecticism and between postmodernist and modernist tendencies. This oscillation and simultaneous maintenance of dual beliefs should appear familiar to the Buddhist problem of free will as we have understood it here. For example, Vermeulen and van den Akker discuss approaches to history in the following way:

The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges [as have some critics of postmodern dialectical approaches to history] that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it *as if* it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility.⁵⁶

To clarify, as Curtis Peters explains, according to Immanuel Kant, “we may view human history *as if* mankind had a life narrative which describes its self-movement toward its full rational/social potential ... to view history *as if* it were the story of mankind's development.”⁵⁷

Additionally, the metamodern paradigm, as formulated by Vermeulen and van den Akker, is rooted in what they describe as the metaphor of *metaxis*. They note this understanding of *metaxis* as “constituted by the tension... by the *irreconcilability* of man's participatory existence between finite processes on the one hand, and an unlimited, intracosmic or transmundane reality on the other.”⁵⁸ Finally, they conclude metamodernism as an “atopic *metaxis*”—an in-betweenness that is not in-between, that is at once a place and not a place.⁵⁹ Thus, outside of its foundation in the

⁵⁶ Ibid: 5.

⁵⁷ Curtis Peters, Peters, *Kant's Philosophy of Hope* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 117, quoted in “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, (2010): 5.

⁵⁸ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, (2010): 6.

⁵⁹ Ibid.: 12.

realm of contemporary culture and aesthetic thought, we can formulate metamodernism in the general, fundamental sense as an oscillation between dialectical poles and dualities that entertains both of the opposing poles but in a way that holistically transcends them.

The point to notice in all of this is its strong correlation and relevance to the apparent inconsistencies and constant oscillations of Buddhist thought, especially as found pertaining to the Buddhist problem of free will. Buddhism appears to necessitate both strict causal determinism and free will/agency, and both in a pure, uncompromised form. Complete causal determinism (not conditionality) appears necessary for Buddhism's understandings (for the sake of its soteriological goals) of dependent origination, karma, and the causal flow of events. Likewise, complete free will appears necessary for the individual to have any ability to effect change within that causal flow of events and condition/create their own fate and their own liberation. Thus, any approach to the problem predicated on compatibilism necessarily fails in that it (usually) compromises free will by redefining the term as something slightly weaker than complete agency, or (less frequently) compromises causality as something slightly weaker than complete necessitation and determinism/fatalism. For this reason, metamodernism presents itself as an especially apt means of approaching the Buddhist problem of free will—and, indeed, Buddhism in general.

Specifically, I argue in the following section that a metamodern approach to the Buddhist problem of free will brings us to a crucial understanding of the ultimate truth vs. conventional truth distinction, as predicated upon the understanding and examination of what Pamela Hieronymi discusses as “The Intuitive Problem of Free Will and Moral Responsibility.”⁶⁰ This understanding of the importance of distinguishing between subjective and objective

⁶⁰ Pamela Hieronymi, “The Intuitive Problem of Free Will and Moral Responsibility” (presentation, Texas Tech University Philosophy Department Spring 2015 Speaker Series, Lubbock, TX, February 13, 2015).

experience/awareness provides a clarification that allows for the metamodern approach to operate and, indeed, solve the Buddhist problem of free will in a way that is holistically satisfying to the Buddhist in practice.

Thus, we will begin with a brief discussion of the general free will problem as highlighted and presented by Hieronymi. From there, the discussion will shift to how this understanding of the free will problem informs our treatment and understanding of ultimate and conventional truth, and how this understanding operates under the pretense of the metamodern paradigm of thought. Lastly, we will examine how this metamodern approach, with its understanding of ultimate and conventional truth, addresses and solves the Buddhist problem of free will, both in its handling of the dependent origination/determinism/fatalism vs. free will/agency dialectic, as well as its handling of karma.

The Metamodern Approach

In discussing a metamodern approach and solution to the Buddhist problem of free will, we need to examine how metamodernism addresses both levels of dialecticism found in scholarship on Buddhism, as mentioned at the outset of this investigation:

- (1) Between Buddhism's not-self, causal determinism views on the one hand, and its karmic, agent-reifying views on the other; and
- (2) Between ultimate truth and conventional truth.

An important distinction to be made here is that these two dialectics exist in the realm, as stated, of Buddhist *scholarship*—that is, for example, the distinction between ultimate truth and

conventional truth is not a significant source of serious tension in Buddhist thought itself, nor in Buddhist practice, but rather, only in how scholarly approaches to Buddhism are undertaken. To argue this point, we must hold an understanding of ultimate truth and conventional truth as equally legitimate truths operating in tandem, rather than one (ultimate truth) as more fundamental than the other. This formulation of ultimate and conventional truth is predicated on an understanding of the general “intuitive problem of free will and moral responsibility” as discussed by Pamela Hieronymi.

To begin, Hieronymi provides us with a clarification and examination of the general problem of free will and moral agency as it is traditionally formulated. As she discusses, there exist three potential threats to an agent’s freedom/free will: (1) interfering agents, (2) alien forces, and (3) explanations.

The first two threats are presented as threats that are “both real and avoidable—and so should be avoided.”⁶¹ For example, coercion, disease, impairment, etc. are all threats to one’s freedom in the form of “interfering agents.” Hieronymi thus characterizes such a conception of freedom as “negative freedom,” in which freedom is defined as the lack of interference or constraint.⁶² Thus, anytime the agent is apparently acting free of any interference, they are acting freely—with free will.

However, she provides a thought experiment to analyze this interaction and illustrate how, in a deeper sense, this is not an especially useful definition of free will. Imagine an individual agrees to participate in an experiment conducted by neuroscientists in which they will implant a small chip in the individual’s brain that will allow them to control the individual’s

⁶¹ Pamela Hieronymi, “The Intuitive Problem of Free Will and Moral Responsibility” (presentation, Texas Tech University Philosophy Department Spring 2015 Speaker Series, Lubbock, TX, February 13, 2015).

⁶² Ibid.

will.⁶³ The individual will then go about their normal routine over the course of the day, and the scientists will, at some undisclosed point in time, turn on the chip and have the individual perform some arbitrary undisclosed action. Now imagine that the individual wants to prove the scientists wrong by showing they cannot control his or her thoughts and actions with a chip. But suppose he or she must decide, at some point during the day, whether to cross a street now or to cross it further down at a different intersection. The individual might think, upon deciding to cross the street now, “What if that is the scientists turning on the chip? What if they are trying to make me cross the street now to prove the effect of the chip?” and in so thinking, he or she might decide to cross the street further down instead. He or she realizes, however, “What if *that* is the scientists trying to control me with the chip?” So, instead, the subject decides not to cross the street at all, but realizes that too might be the effects of the chip. The point in this thought experiment is that it is impossible to know when one’s *will* is being controlled (or caused). While having one’s *bodily actions* controlled—through coercion or even hypothetically through a brain-chip—would be blatantly obvious because of the fact that one’s will did not match one’s actions, having one’s will *itself* controlled would be unnoticeable. As Hieronymi points out, the individual “cannot, as a logical matter, be made to will against [his/her] will,” as he or she only possesses one will.⁶⁴ In the same way as the neuroscientists, determinism poses a threat to the agent’s freedom because, if strict determinism is an accurate understanding of the universe, then the agent’s will must be understood—so far as we understand it to be arising from worldly, physical phenomena—as also strictly determined, and therefore, it would seem, not free.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

However, as Hieronymi notes, simply denying determinism does not solve the problem. The mere possibility of different futures and outcomes and decisions does not create agency. This is due to a problem with understanding agency itself. For action to be considered “free,” it must occur because the agent meant for something to happen, and we cannot understand an agent as having meant to do something unless we can appeal to the features of the agent’s psychology that would explain intention (which should sound familiar to our examination of Buddhist intention).⁶⁵ That is, unless actions and intentions have reasons behind them, they hardly seem to be free in any meaningful sense, appearing instead to be merely arbitrary and random. Thus, the deeper issue here is that when we attempt in any way to discuss or explain agency, we appear to explain it away.⁶⁶

Fundamentally, this problem is rooted in a crucial distinction that is especially relevant, as we saw, in Buddhist thought and practice: the subjective vs. objective distinction in perspective. In example of this distinction, we may examine how an agent can view and experience the actions of another agent vs. how an agent can view and experience his or her own actions. In the first case, the agent can view the actions of another agent objectively by examining causal mechanisms behind the action as well as the intent. For example, we can observe the various reasons why an individual stands up from his or her chair and walks across the room to get a drink from the bar. We can examine their motives for doing so from a purely objective standpoint: they were thirsty, and the biological thirst response caused them to feel the discomfort of thirst and thus seek a way to alleviate it, resulting in their brain deciding to cause the body to stand up and walk towards the bar. However, if we imagine ourselves as that person

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

deciding whether or not to stand up and get a drink, even an exhaustive understanding of determining causes will do little to get us toward the making of a decision and acting upon it.

This is what we may call the “phenomenological problem of free will.” As Hieronymi notes, “If you are going to make a decision, you have to *make* it.”⁶⁷ In the example of the neuroscientist thought experiment, we can suppose that the subject knows for a fact that the scientists will make him or her walk across the street at such and such time. And yet, unless the individual actually *makes the decision* to walk (seemingly of his or her own free will), no crossing of the street will actually occur. This is the fundamental issue with an agent, with his or her subjective perspective, operating in a potentially deterministic universe: knowledge of the deterministic nature a) of the universe, b) of one’s own actions, and c) of one’s own volition does not change the fact that one must operate using one’s volition. In Hieronymi’s words, “decisions are isolated from explanations from ‘the first-person’ point of view.”⁶⁸ Indeed, it is impossible to operate—impossible even to consciously exist—as a “determined agent” with no free will. Even a futile decision to never act on free will—to only act as determined by physical laws—is a *decision made* under the pretense of free will. Existing *is* acting as if one is free. Thus, Hieronymi, like Vermeulen and van den Akker, quotes Kant: “we must act under the Idea of Freedom.”⁶⁹

The similarity to concepts of practice in Buddhist thought should begin to become clear at this point—namely, in that we saw this same subjective vs. objective understanding of perspective informing the Buddha’s teachings on karma and agency. For example, the Buddha claims that it is improper for the Niganthas to view past karma as deterministic (in part) because

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

of the fact they have no personal, subjective knowledge or experience of that past karma.

Similarly, we examined how the Buddha handled the belief that there is “no self-doer.” “How, indeed, could one — moving forward by himself, moving back by himself — say: ‘There is no self-doer, there is no other-doer?’”⁷⁰ This example in particular rings of the same necessitation of actions having agency behind them from the subjective point of view as the discussion directly above. Thus, we see how significant this subjective/objective distinction regarding free will is for Buddhist practice, and how such an understanding crucially informs Buddhist practice and thought.

This phenomenological distinction between subjective and objective experience runs parallel to the ultimate truth/conventional truth distinction. Just as, ultimately there is to be no concept of a self in practice, but it is conventionally useful to speak of such selves and persons, so too is it ultimately true that the individual’s actions—as well as the universe—are completely determined while still remaining conventionally true (even necessary, as described above) to act *as if* one is free. In this way, the individual maintains the necessary agency to (seemingly) effect change in the causal chain of events and work toward their own salvation, even if that agency is ultimately an illusion and their state of existence, actions, intentions, and thoughts are all causally determined by dependent origination and karma. Indeed, it would be impossible to act otherwise—to act as if one had no free will or agency (which, as we have seen, the Buddha specifically warns against).

This is the same “informed *naïveté*” that Vermeulen and van den Akker mention in their proposal of the metamodern paradigm. The individual in Buddhism must act as an agent, as a free entity that must make decisions and initiate actions, despite the knowledge that everything is

⁷⁰ *Attakāri Sutta* (AN 6.38), trans. K Nizamis, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, November 2, 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.038.niza.html>.

causally determined. Indeed, this simultaneity of knowledge is what allows Buddhism to operate. The individual, acting on a premise of freedom, utilizes the knowledge that all things are determined in order to (seemingly) effect change in that causal flow for the benefit of their liberation. Ultimately, this is *all*—including the individual’s thinking and actions—determined to occur precisely as it does, but Buddhism is not fundamentally interested in that ultimate truth (except as it is useful). Instead, Buddhism seeks to provide the individual a framework of thought by which to operate in the causally determined universe (the providing of that framework itself likewise causally determined). Thus, as Buddhism requires both strict determinism *and* free will/agency in order for the individual to be able to use the system to work toward the goal of liberation, a metamodernist approach provides the ability for the maintenance of both.

As this relates to karma in practice, our understanding of karma as discussed and the proposed metamodern approach combine to eliminate some of the problems typically associated with karma. Karma has more philosophical and intellectual problems than is within the scope of this investigation to discuss, but the fundamental problems as already seen in the Buddhist context and for the purposes of this investigation appear resolved. The moral dilemma of karma—how one can be held morally responsible for their actions if there is no agent/self or if determinism obtains—is resolved by our understanding of karma as essentially amoral and thus not truly a moral law. One still has an interest in acting in accordance with Buddhist teachings of “good karma,” but on the premise of a pragmatic interest in one’s own liberation, rather than on the premise of value judgements, i.e. “right” or “wrong,” or on the premise of rewards and punishments. Likewise, one’s rebirth as a human during the time of the Buddha, for example, (a “sheer coincidence” as the Buddha calls it) is seen ultimately as the determined/fated result of

karma: those reborn as humans during that time received the consequences of some especially good, “bright,” beneficial karma from past lives. This fatalism in belief is obviously dangerous and counterproductive if not approached correctly by the individual, and the Buddha thus advocates against it. However, since the individual cannot know the determined/fated future from their subjective perspective and does not know what their actions will be (and, as discussed, because such actions require an act of apparent free will anyway), the dangers of fatalism are not so much dangers of fatalism itself, but of fatalistic *belief*. It is dangerous—and, indeed, erroneous and ill-informed—for the individual to believe, subjectively, that they have no free will and that the future is already set in stone, or that they have no responsibility for any of their actions and may act without the burden of such responsibility. Such belief would, of course, objectively be part of the causal system—that is, the individual’s believing such would be a determined action/event—but that does not bear on the subjective experience of the individual in practice who must still act on the premise of freedom.

In this way, we see in our own discussion of the Buddhist problem of free will (and this understanding of it) how an approach predicated on metamodernism allows us to oscillate between various dialectical poles in order to build a holistic, unified understanding of truth that is, likewise, characterized by oscillation—a truth which is both subjective and objective, ultimate and conventional, with both sides being equally true, necessary, and legitimate in practice. Buddhism is, in essence, a metamodern system of thought, thousands of years ahead of its time. Thus, it is through this metamodern approach that the Buddhist problem of free will can be properly understood and satisfactorily resolved in a way that does not compromise the teachings on either pole of the dialectic.

Conclusion

Thus, we have seen how the metamodern approach I propose solves the Buddhist problem of free will by utilizing a more significant and fundamental understanding of the distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth that forms a foundation upon which Buddhist practice, with its competing needs of both determinism and free will/agency, can operate. By not compromising the truth of any Buddhist doctrine on either side of the issue, this approach should thus prove much more holistically satisfying to the Buddhist in practice than previous approaches predicated on the dialecticism of postmodern thought. Additionally, this metamodern approach should prove to be likewise insightful and useful in future scholarship on Buddhist thought and practice, creating a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Buddhism as both a philosophical and soteriological system of thought.

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