

No self, no free will, no problem
Implications of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*
for a perennial philosophical issue

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The free will problem

Are we free agents? The free will problem remains one of the great ongoing debates of western philosophy. This paper investigates the Buddha's views on human freedom. It suggests that the Buddha's position is a unique one, implying a negative response to the question of a metaphysically free will but a positive response to the question of moral responsibility and the possibility of human freedom in a spiritual sense.

The problem of free will in its most general terms can be formulated as follows. All events are caused. A full understanding of the causes of any particular event and of the laws of nature would allow for the accurate prediction of that event. The actions we perform, including the choices we make, are events. Therefore they are all predictable in principle, if not in fact. Therefore the idea that one can do other than one actually does is false. If one cannot do other than one actually does, one cannot be morally responsible for one's actions. Therefore human beings cannot be justifiably held morally responsible for their actions.¹

¹ This is a modified version of the argument presented by Van Inwagen (1982), who frames the issue in terms of knowledge of the state of the physical world and the laws of physics. Here I have generalized the formulation to exclude such ontological considerations. Strictly speaking they are irrelevant to the deterministic thesis, which depends only on the notion that all events have causes, past and present, su

have drawn is that between *empirical* and *metaphysical*

as asserting that at least some of her actions or decisions are *un-caused*.³ On the other hand, to make this statement is taken as asserting that at least some of her actions or decisions are *self-caused*.

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date. This is where we begin our own exploration of Buddhism and free will.

Buddhism and free will

Harvey's review of the primary and secondary sources on this topic is extensive and it cannot be my aim here to provide a detailed critique of the account he provides. The conclusions he derives are complex, but by and large fall into two parts. Initially he concludes that Buddhism accepts a form of compatibilism.⁵

"On the whole, it can be said that the implied position of Theravada Buddhism on the issue of 'freedom of the will' is a middle way between seeing a person's actions as completely rigidly determined, and seeing them as totally and unconditionally free [...] It accepts a variable degree of freedom within a complex of interacting mental and physical conditions. This freedom of action is such that present awareness always offers the possibility of not being wholly determined by past patterns of internal or external conditioning [...]" (Harvey 2007: 86)

Nevertheless he also maintains that there is a second sense in which the Buddha's teachings imply that neither free will nor determinism can be true:

"In a different way [...] if a person is wrongly seen as an essential, permanent self, it is an 'undetermined question' as to whether 'a person's acts of will are determined' or 'a person's acts of will are free.' If there is no essential person-entity 'it' can not be said to be either determined or free." (Harvey 2007: 86)

Harvey's answer is difficult conceptually. In this paper I will mainly take issue with its second part: I will argue that if there is no essential person-entity, the implication is not that the will is neither free

⁵ This would also appear to be the view of Thanissaro Bhikkhu who speaks of "some room for free will" in Buddhism (1996: 13). This author also provides a similar rationale for the attribution of freedom, in terms of the reflective capacity of present awareness

nor determined, but rather that there is no metaphysical freedom of the will, which is to say no will that is free of ordinary causality.⁶

At least two general points arise from Harvey's conclusions. First, with regard to its first part, it is important to note the qualification that Therav

Buddhist “middle way” in this context? Harvey seems to suggest that Buddhism adheres to a compromise position, i.e. one that lies “between” strict determinism and complete freedom from causality (or as he puts it “between seeing a person’s actions as completely

the five aggregates. The five aggregates are all that a person is. The implication is clear: there is no self.¹⁴

In his notes on this *sutta*, Bhikkhu Bodhi makes some insightful observations about the basis of this argument. The five aggregates' lack of selfhood is demonstrated, he says:

“on the ground that they are insusceptible to the exercise of mastery (*avassavattitā*). If anything is to count as our ‘self’ it must be subject to our volitional control; since, however, we cannot bend the five aggregates to our will, they are all subject to a *ti*ction and therefore

between the idea of 'Self' and the idea of 'volitional control.' If there were a Self, whatever else it might be, we would be able to control its states.

Thus in the above passage, concerning *rūpa*, the idea is that we would all choose not to suffer and to be well in our bodies if we could; indeed this is our natural wish and predisposition. In spite of this, we remain afflicted and disposed to affliction. Suffering is inherent to *rūpa*. It is not possible to simply wish it away. If *rūpa* were Self we would be able to do this. It is important to notice that the sense in which it is said that we do not have control over *rūpa* seems to be one of *direct* control over its *states*, in particular its state of being subject to affliction. In the passage above there is no denial of the idea that we *can do* as we wish with respect to the actions we perform with and through our bodies; the denial is of the notion that we *can be* as we wish with respect to the presence or absence of affliction. The wish that the Buddha describes as impossible to fulfill is "Let my form *be* thus, let my form *not be* thus," not

vocal.¹⁷ It would appear, then, that volitional formations, qua *volitional* formations, constitute the very aggregate in virtue of which

ty to make *saṅkhāras* unacted directly by wishing them to be so. In glossing this passage, Mahasi Sayadaw indicates the manner in which we would change our volitional formations if we only could: we would make them all wholesome (*kusala*) and not unwholesome (*akusala*) respectively.¹⁹ Unfortunately this is impossible. This is a critical consideration, for it suggests that the very mental factors determining the morality of action are not subject to control.

If the *saṅkhāras* are not subject to control, this means that we are unable to directly determine their *composition*. The mental states that direct our actions—the very desires, attitudes, and values we identify with and which determine the morality of our actions—are *themselves* not under control. In this case, it might be said that we are unfree with respect to the volitional aspect of ‘who or what we *are*,’ rather than with regard to the aspect of what we *do*.

If this is indeed the implication, then it would appear that the Buddha probably would not have disagreed with the following assertion, famously attributed to Schopenhauer: “A man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants.”²⁰ The Buddhist analysis suggests that the problem of free will is not simply first-order issue as to whether we can do what we want. There is a much deeper problem—one that turns on second-order considerations as to whether we can be what we want to be, or, put another way, whether we can have the wills we want to have. The issue of the freedom of the will is a question regarding whether we have freedom with respect to our own constitutions. The Buddha’s answer appears to be negative. While it may be the case that we can be judged empirically free to the extent that we can do as we want, we are not metaphysically free in the sense of being able to directly

determine the constellation of factors we identify with, and out of which our actions proceed. In the context of this *sutta*, the reasons for this assertion are clear: the will is not subject to control in this way, because, quite simply, there is no independent entity over and above the shifting configuration of mental factors to do the controlling. There is no self-controlling controller. There is no one (i.e. no single unified being) holding the reins. There is no Self.

Harry Frankfurt and the Buddha

The Buddha's implied position on the freedom of the will can be fruitfully analyzed by comparing it with a recent and influential

will with the first-order desire that actually moves, or would move, an individual to act.²¹ This he terms the agent's *e effective desire*

(The notion of the will) is the notion of an *e effective desire* one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action. Thus the notion of the will is not coextensive with what an agent intends to do. For even though an agent may have a settled intention to do X, he may none the less do something else instead of doing X because, despite his intention, his desire to do X proves to be weaker or less *e effective* than some conflicting desire.²² (Frankfurt 1982: 84)

Frankfurt's account of free will turns on the notion that one is free only if one wants to be moved by the desire that actually does move

²¹ This conception of the will is not entirely dissimilar to the general Buddhist understanding of *cetanā* as the mental factor lying behind voluntary behaviour, in virtue of which such behaviour is considered action (*kam-*

one to act. If one does not want to be moved to act by that desire but is nevertheless moved by it then the will is unfree.

The example Frankfurt employs as an illustration is that of an unwilling drug addict. Frankfurt's analysis of the condition of such a person is that he is the subject of conflicting first-order desires and a second-order volition towards one of these. He both wants and does not want to take the drug. But in taking the drug he is being moved to act in a way that he desires not to. His desire to take the drug on these occasions, because it moves him to act, may be identified with his will. And in this case it is unfree. It is unfree because the agent does not want it.²³

²³ In refining his account Frankfurt employs the notion of second-order *volitions* as a special kind of second-order desire. Second-order desires, in the most general sense, are simply desires for desires. A second-order volition is a second-order desire that has as its object *the efficacy* of a particular first-order desire. This is an important distinction, insofar as it is possible for someone to want to possess a particular first-order desire without wanting it to be effective. To see this we can imagine the case of another addict, a gambler, who is actually quite happy with his habit, who yet wants to have the desire to give it up, but who does not want this latter desire to be effective. "If I didn't want to give it up at least a little bit," he might reason, "then my friends wouldn't be sympathetic and lend me the money I need." This person has a second-order desire (a desire for a desire), but not a second-order volition.

If, *contra* Frankfurt (and Locke), we choose to conceive of the will as the desire we *identify with*, then for this case we could maintain that the unwilling addict's will is free while his *action* is not. This is, in fact, another well-attested usage of the term 'will;' in saying that one wills something, there is no necessary implication of effort by the agent. Rather, the notion of will is linked with our deepest wishes or values, or even our self-concept. The manner in which Bhikkhu Bodhi speaks of the will (see above) seems to reflect this usage: the will is identified with a very deep desire, in this case the desire to be free from affliction, ineffective though this may be. Augustine could be taken as another example of someone who thinks of the will in this way. In general, most philosophical discussions of free will can be usefully divided along the lines of these two different ways of conceiving the will. It is important to be clear about which concept is being presupposed in any case where free will is being discussed; obviously, these two different conceptions of the will will lead to two very different ways of talking about *free will*.

on the presence of higher-order volitions. If the freedom of the will is dependent on the presence of a second-order volition towards it, are we free with respect to that second-order volition? Do we not then require a third-order volition to ensure the freedom of the second? Once this sequence gets started we are quickly faced with the prospect of requiring an infinite number of higher-order volitions, each needed to guarantee the freedom of the one below it; ultimately an infinite series of volitions would be required to guarantee the freedom of the will. But this is impossible.²⁵

Perhaps this difficulty could be dealt with by arguing that, as a point of empirical fact, all we ever really do have are desires of the first and second-order or, at most, of the third order. If we choose to speak of even further, higher-order desires and volitions, it is not really clear that we would be referring to anything at all. The third-order statement, "I want to have the desire to have the effective desire to do X" seems rather dubious in terms of its possible point of reference. And it certainly does not appear that by adding another "I want" to the beginning of the sentence we would be adding any new information about the subject's actual mental life. At some point there is no further "I want;" the causes for one's desires are *impersonal*. One's desires just *are*, they arise without any choice, or even refl

These considerations serve to underline the limitations of Frankfurt's account of free will. They return us squarely to our earlier observations, in the Buddhist context, regarding the freedom of the mental states upon which actions are based. As we have seen, it is indeed possible to sensibly ask whether a person has the will they want to have. A determinist will argue that the causes that give rise to the mental states upon which one's actions are based are not subject to control; they are, when one traces them back, ultimately *impersonal* in nature (in the sense of being e.g. historical, genetic, cultural, etc). Determinists take the fact that choices are caused events very seriously; even if our present awareness can reflect on and evaluate our choices, the thoughts and values entering into these evaluations are, in the last analysis, themselves beyond control — at some point they just *are*; we do not choose

tinguishable as mental, physical, and vocal behaviour that is voluntarily performed or willingly done (i.e. accompanied by *cetanā*); this is the key factor in determining moral responsibility. *Freedom of the will* is not. The point is that the action is voluntary, not that the will is free.²⁶ In any case, it can be seen that the problem of the compatibility of universal causality and moral responsibility does not appear to have been a concern to the Buddha. Causality in terms of such things as motivations, and karmic results itself is a necessary correlate of morality from the Buddhist perspective.²⁷

What did seem to concern the Buddha, however, was perhaps a not altogether unrelated problem, which may be stated as follows. If a person is ultimately only a series of causally interrelated events, some of which are identified with, how is it that freedom, *qua liberation (nibbāna)* is possible? Put another way: if the five aggregates are ultimately beyond our ability to control, how is it possible that we would ever begin to strive for, much less reach, the goal which is the end of suffering?

cause or condition. Such a view would seem parallel that of the indeterminist described at the outset of this paper. The Buddha's

tainment of purification and liberation. Among the possible realms of rebirth, it is the realm of human beings in particular that is considered to have just the right balance of pleasure and suffering as to generate the motivation to aspire for freedom. We are lucky!

Towards an account of freedom in Buddhism.

Freedom in Buddhism is not conceived of as a quality of the *will*. If there is no independent originary source over and above our mental, physical and vocal actions, then there certainly cannot be any free will. Thus the assertion that from a higher perspective the will

tably be trapped in confusion, inconsistent and conflicting desires, and suffering. From the Buddhist perspective this kind of person must be regarded as unfree.

The *sekha*, on the other hand, is a free person in a certain way,

even be described as being free *from* the will. To put the matter in this way depends, of course, on a conception of the will as 'desire one identifies with.' On the other hand, if we follow Frankfurt and identify the will with the 'desire that moves one to act' then the *arahat* can also be described as having the will she wants to have, and therefore a 'free' will.³⁵ While no agent can be said to possess freedom of the will in the *metaphysical* sense of self-causation sought by some western philosophers, the *arahat* can be said to have a free will, indeed a perfectly free will, in the empirical sense of this expression proposed by Frankfurt.

More generally, freedom in Buddhism can be regarded negatively as a freedom from constraints upon a person – either inter-

allows us to gain a clearer understanding of some of Harvey's observations, mentioned at the outset of this paper. We can now see how it is that freedom may be thought of as possessing varying "degrees." The suggestion here is that such variation may best be regarded as occurring among *kinds of person* and not (or at least not principally) within an individual person over the short term (although, of course, an ordinary person may *become* a *sekha* and so on). Thus the Buddha's teachings do in fact suggest that freedom admits of degrees. But they do not imply that human beings are possessed of a will that is metaphysically free, or one that is both metaphysically free and unfree, or even one that is neither. From a Theravada Buddhist perspective it would be more accurate to say that while a person's will may be judged empirically free in one sense or another, it definitely is not possible for anyone to possess a metaphysically free will. But for the Buddhist this presents no problem.

Abbreviations

SN Saṃyutta-Nikāya, ed. L. Feer. 5 vols. London 1884–1898 (Pali Text Society). English translation: see Bodhi (2000).

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