

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

Volume 17, 2010

# Meditation and Mental Freedom: A Buddhist Theory of Free Will

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# Meditation and Mental Freedom: A Buddhist Theory of Free Will

Riccardo Repetti<sup>\*</sup>

## Abstract

I argue that central Buddhist tenets and meditation methodology support a view of free will similar to Harry Frankfurt's optimistic view and contrary to Galen Strawson's pessimistic view. For Frankfurt, free will involves a relationship between actions, volitions, and "metavolitions" (volitions about volitions): simplifying greatly, volitional actions are free if the agent approves of them. For Buddhists, mental freedom involves a relationship between mental states and "metamental" states (mental attitudes toward mental states): simplifying greatly, one has mental freedom if one is able to control one's mental states, and to the extent one has mental freedom when choosing, one has free will. Philosophical challenges to free will typically question whether it is compatible with "determinism," the thesis of lawful universal causation. Both Frankfurt's metavolitional approval and the Buddhist's metamental control are consistent with determinism. Strawson has argued, however, that free will is impossible, determinism notwithstanding, because one's choice is always influenced by one's

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mental state. I argue, however, that Buddhist meditation cultivates control over mental states that undermine freedom, whether they are deterministic or not, making both mental freedom and free will possible. The model I develop is only a sketch of a minimally risky theory of free will, but one that highlights the similarities and differences between Buddhist thought on this subject and relevantly-related Western thought and has explanatory promise.

## **Introduction**

Some skeptics of free will argue that if an agent's choices are causally determined in accordance with universal law (determinism), he or she is not really free. Determinism leaves open only one possible outcome for each event in the series of events necessitated by prior conditions in accordance with inviolable laws.<sup>1</sup> If only one event is possible in each moment, an agent cannot bring about anything other than what was already determined. And if an agent can never do otherwise (than what he or she was determined to do), then the agent cannot be correctly considered morally responsible for his or her actions. This is the main problem of free will; most related problems of free will are based on this implication, directly or indirectly. To respond to it, I draw upon the work of the Western analytic philosopher Harry Frankfurt on free will and moral responsibility and the teachings of the Buddha on mental freedom.

Frankfurt calls the moral principle implicit in the above line of reasoning the "principle of alternate possibilities" ("PAP"), according to which a "person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise."<sup>2</sup> Challenging PAP, Frankfurt argued that the mere fact that an agent could not have done otherwise does not entail that the agent did not act freely or morally responsibly. To support this claim, Frankfurt constructed a counterexample to PAP. Suppose a scien-

tist, Black, secretly implants a chip in Jones's brain, so Black can monitor and manipulate Jones's neural/mental states, should Jones attempt to behave in ways that displease Black. As it turns out, of his own accord Jones makes a certain decision that pleases Black (say, he votes Democratic) and Black does not intervene. But because Black has effectively removed Jones's alternatives, Jones could not have done otherwise, even if he had tried. It seems intuitive (to most)<sup>3</sup> that because Black did not intervene, Jones "acted on his own" or "for reasons of his own," as Frankfurt puts it,<sup>4</sup> and so Jones is responsible for his choice and action, though Jones could not have done otherwise.

To support this intuition, Frankfurt states, "Now if someone had no alternative to performing a certain action but did *not* perform it *because* he was unable to do otherwise, then he *would* have performed exactly the same action *even if he could have done otherwise*."<sup>5</sup> That is, because Jones would have made the same choice *even if he could have done otherwise*, the fact that *he could not have done otherwise* does not explain his choice. Likewise, even though *determinism* precludes one's doing otherwise, the fact that one could not do otherwise does not necessarily explain *why* one does what one does. Thus, determinism is technically irrelevant to moral responsibility, and PAP is false.

Having invalidated PAP and cast aside the relevance of determinism, Frankfurt goes on to construct a positive account of freedom and moral responsibility in terms having nothing to do with determinism but that are *consistent* with deterministic causation.<sup>6</sup> To put it as simply as possible for our limited purposes, Frankfurt identified "freedom of action" as *accord* between action and volition (say, when one does what one wants to do), "freedom of the will" as *accord* between volition and metavolition (say, when one approves one's volition), and "weakness of will" as *discord* between action and metavolition (say, when one eats gluttonously, but disapproves of gluttony).<sup>7</sup> Because determinism can be true

in each case, determinism is irrelevant to free will and moral responsibility and certainly is *compatible* with both.

In Buddhism, the cultivation of mental freedom involves a similar relationship between mental states (say, jealousy) and metamental states (say, introspection of jealousy). To decrease mental bondage, characterized by greed, hatred and delusion, and attain full mental freedom or “liberation,” Buddhists cultivate detachment and related liberation-oriented virtues through meditation. Introspection of a mental state, say, jealousy, generates an element of detachment from the mental state, and thus makes it possible to control, rather than be controlled by, the jealousy. Such metamental states enable the agent to regulate the influences of mental states that otherwise overpower the deliberative system and engender mental bondage. This is not to suggest indeterminism, for Buddhism is committed to a deterministic doctrine, the thesis of “dependent origination”: Every event is dependently originated from prior conditions in accordance with universal laws.<sup>8</sup>

The goal of Buddhism is liberation from mental bondage,<sup>9</sup> and meditation is the primary practice that leads to liberation. Because meditators are increasingly able to control volitions through liberation-oriented metavolitions, their practice *increases* their Frankfurt-style (determinism-compatible) autonomy. “Autonomy” is a contentious term in the free will literature. Some reserve its use for a special type of “libertarian” free will thought *incompatible* with determinism,<sup>10</sup> and others treat it as synonymous with “*mere* self-control,” which they demote as on par with the ability to move one’s arm, and thus treat it as not sufficiently robust for the sort of free will that is thought necessary to ground moral responsibility.<sup>11</sup> Although these are important points of dispute, I leave the term “autonomy” relatively undefined, as nothing in my argument hinges on an ambiguity in the term.

For Buddhists, autonomy also matters karmically: a moral agent freely choosing is the architect of his future experiences, according to the law of karma, which ranges not only over free agency but all volitional behavior. Liberation is the cessation of all karma-generating ego-volitions. Ego-volitions are constitutive of agent-status and thus constitutive of what makes free will matter most to Westerners, moral agency—morally responsible agents choosing according to their volitions (reasons for action), expressing those volitions in actions, and becoming the sorts of persons they aspire to become. However, liberated beings are trans-personal, in a sense, and therefore *beyond* autonomy. Thus, Frankfurt-style autonomy constitutes only a segment along a broader Buddhist continuum ranging between bondage and freedom. From that broader perspective, Frankfurt-style autonomy only matters relative to its role in fostering or hindering liberation, which transcends autonomy.

Buddhists might also be uncomfortable with the Western notion of *autonomy*. Buddhism posits a “no-self” view to the effect that there really is no such thing as an independent agent above and apart from the insubstantial volitional and other impermanent mental and physical “aggregates” that compose what we only conventionally designate as “the person.”<sup>12</sup> On this view, “the person” is an impersonal series of contiguous aggregates rather than an enduring, changeless entity. Dependent origination includes the law of karma, the cause and effect law governing everything volitional, as well as more inclusive causal laws governing all phenomena.<sup>13</sup>

In light of this deterministic doctrine and the no-self view, all agency and choice is dependently originated; therefore, “autonomy,” as the word is used by Western philosophers, seems inappropriate. However, by “autonomy” I mean here only the sort of volitional self-regulation engendered by meditation and exhibited in Frankfurt’s metavolitional

model. *This* kind of autonomy is compatible with determinism, dependent origination, and the insubstantial view of agency.

As is already evident, this discussion is complex and involves a variety of contentious philosophical concepts, technical terms, and elements of philosophical doctrine from two relatively divergent conceptual systems. “Autonomy” is problematic, but so are “volition,” “free,” “Buddhist,” “mental bondage,” “liberation,” and so on. For these reasons it is necessary to adopt certain simplifying assumptions to delineate the line of my analysis. However, although all simplifications threaten to distort, mine make no difference to my argument for “Buddhist compatibilism,” the thesis that dependent origination and free will are logically compatible.

A more substantive problem apparently facing a Buddhist theory of freedom comes from Strawson’s “impossibility argument.” Strawson claims, basically, that free will is impossible *under any circumstances* because choice is always conditioned by mental states, regardless of whether those states are produced deterministically or indeterministically. But the central claim of Buddhism is that meditation brings about the right conditions to free oneself from mental state conditioning. Indeed, many Buddhists claim that the mind, in successful meditative states marked by clarity and equanimity,<sup>14</sup> is significantly free of mental bondage, even if that freedom fades when the meditation ends.<sup>15</sup> Enlightenment is construed as the permanent attainment of that state.

Strawson holds that the actions of all beings are influenced by their mental states in ways that bind and thus render universal exculpation plausible, but because enlightened beings enjoy mental freedom, surely their mental freedom cannot influence their actions in a freedom-undermining or responsibility-undermining manner. Thus, if the central notion of Buddhism—mental freedom—is coherent, Strawson’s impossibility argument is unconvincing.

### Frankfurt's Theory and the Buddhist Theory

For Frankfurt,<sup>16</sup> freedom of *action* obtains when action accords with volition. However, beings not normally held responsible for their actions—animals, small children, and mentally-ill adults—exhibit freedom of action. Therefore, what moral responsibility requires is freedom of *will*. Freedom of will is what distinguishes moral agents from other volitional beings. It obtains when volition appropriately accords with metavolition. An animal can act as it pleases, but only a person can approve or disapprove of his wants, permit some to lead to action, and restrain others.

Frankfurt's analysis captures a key link between moral agency and autonomy: the ability to regulate volitions. This ability is at the core of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, which prescribes the cultivation of liberation-oriented volitions and metavolitions. All karma is volitional and thus involves freedom of action, but the key to liberation is metavolitional regulation and thus involves freedom of will. Thus, both Frankfurt and the Buddha attach greater value to freedom of will than to freedom of action.

Consider, for instance, two folds in the Eightfold Path, "Right Intention" and "Right Effort." Here, "Right" means "liberation-oriented," and all eight folds are prefaced by "Right." So, each involves an element of volitional behavior that must be calibrated voluntarily against the metaphorical "magnetic north" of liberation. Right Intention is therefore any liberation-oriented volition, and Right Effort applies this volitional calibration to all the other folds. All eight folds apply back in some way to the others. Thus, the entire Eightfold Path presupposes metavolitional regulation and thus freedom of will.

### Buddhist Meditation and Freedom

In the Eightfold Path, "mindfulness" and "one-pointedness" constitute the key meditation techniques and, with "Right" prefacing them, the last



two folds.<sup>17</sup> Mindfulness may be characterized relative to its opposite, mindlessness, a state in which one is not paying attention; mindfulness is a state in which one is paying attention. Likewise, one-pointedness may be characterized relative to its opposite, scattered inattention; one-pointedness is concentrated attention. There is an awareness continuum ranging from one-pointed mindfulness to scattered mindlessness that applies to the entire field of consciousness.

For instance, while performing brain surgery, a diligent neurosurgeon is closer to the positive end of the spectrum in terms of attention to the surgery, whereas when a driver has the experience of having been so absorbed in a conversation that he doesn't recall any details of driving home, he is closer to the negative end of the spectrum in terms of attention to driving. Whenever we focus on one thing, naturally we foreground it and background everything else. Thus, the driver may be able to recite the conversation, but the surgeon may not be able to recall a message broadcast over the hospital's public announcement system during surgery. Our ability to be mindful of everything we foreground and/or background may be high or low.

The degree of mindfulness and one-pointedness is cultivated by exercising each in meditation. Mindfulness training consists in the meditative practice of being mindful of whatever mental fluctuations arise within the stream of consciousness, first narrowly targeting subsets of consciousness (such as breath or bodily sensations) but ultimately the entire stream of consciousness, without engaging with the elements of the stream in any way that is psychologically determined by the mental fluctuations themselves. Mindfulness becomes increasingly subtle upon practice. One-pointedness is the practice of keeping attention focused on whatever the mindfulness target is. One pointedness and mindfulness may work in tandem. One-pointedness may be compared with a narrowly-focused zoom lens, aiming attention precisely at one target, and

mindfulness may be compared with the quality and breadth of attention to whatever is present at that narrow focal point.

Central to Buddhist philosophy is its theory of mental-freedom-oriented meditative prescriptions. “Right Mindfulness” (hereafter “Mindfulness”) and “Right Concentration” (hereafter “One-pointedness”) together constitute the principal means of mental-freedom training leading to liberation. The Buddha found that the proper combination of these two techniques (hereafter “Meditation”) is sufficient for attaining states of mental freedom that culminate in liberation. The more one meditates the more one’s mental freedom increases, and the greater one’s mental freedom the greater one’s metavolitional regulation (freedom of will). However, the free expression of volitions is not valued for its own sake in Buddhism, and although the path toward liberation presupposes autonomy (metavolitional regulation) and increases it, liberation transcends ego-volition and autonomy altogether.

### **The Problem of Free Will**

From a Western perspective, the free expression of volitions is valued for its own sake, but Western philosophy has traditionally seen free will as involving a possibly irresolvable metaphysical dilemma. That dilemma may be simplified as follows:

1. Determinism is either true or false.
2. If determinism is true, then our choices result inevitably from ancient lawful causes over which we cannot exert control.
3. If determinism is false, then our choices result from random processes over which we cannot claim authorship.
4. Either way, therefore, free will is an illusion.

Science favors determinism at the level at which human behavior occurs (arguably, far above the quantum level), whereas determinism seems to undermine free will. But according to this argument, indeterminism also undermines free will. We may call those who believe in free will “optimists” and the above dilemma the “optimist’s dilemma.”

Complications connected with quantum mechanics bear on the issue of whether determinism or indeterminism is more plausible in light of the latest science, and thus which option in the optimist’s dilemma is most pressing, if any. Some think quantum phenomena only *appear* indeterministic because we are ignorant of hidden determinacy. Some claim that even if there are quantum indeterminacies they are of such a vanishing magnitude as to “cancel out” before reaching the neural level.<sup>18</sup> On that view, micro-indeterminacy is metaphysically real but has no bearing on our mental states, and thus “psychological determinism” governs human behavior. However, because micro-phenomena may be magnified through processes posited by chaos theory, the “cancel out” move is unconvincing.

Another concern from the latest relevant science involves research that suggests that consciousness of a volitional impetus registers many milliseconds *after* neural indications of the volitional impetus.<sup>19</sup> This suggests a “neural determinism” that threatens to render consciousness itself, and thus autonomy as well, moot. A presupposition of autonomy is that we consciously choose what we want to do, rather than becoming aware of what we want to do after the want arrives—as if reason tags along as a mere slave to our passions, and as if consciousness, deliberation, and choice are mere epiphenomena that are completely irrelevant to what moves us. If this research is correct, however, how could the agent plausibly claim to consciously author that volition, even though it is undoubtedly his own?

However, the time it takes to become conscious of a volitional impetus and the time it takes to register one's awareness of that volition must be added in milliseconds. Studies have shown that the neural circuitry involved in recognizing a snake *emotionally* (in terms of the fight-or-flight response) are many milliseconds faster than those involved in recognizing a snake *verbally* (as a "snake"), but both are forms of snake-recognition.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, similar factors may explain the temporal disparities involved in the neural circuitries for awareness of volition and expression of that awareness, thus challenging the conclusion of neural determinism. Thus, the "cancel out" and "neural determinism" challenges do not narrow down any of the options in the optimist's dilemma.

### Going "Meta"

We may simplify some of these issues if we specify autonomy in simple causal terms derived from analysis of ordinary organismic self-regulation. The key to ordinary organismic self-regulation lies in feedback loops that connect cognitive and volitional features of behavior. Cognitive features are sensory-theoretic, and involve what may be analyzed as a *world-to-mind* movement of information (input), such as perception of the environment. Volitional features are motor-theoretic, and involve what may be analyzed as a *mind-to-world* movement of information, such as an impulse to move the organism in some way (to respond to its environment).

Our abilities to coordinate our bodily movements, to release our bladders, and even to use biofeedback devices to regulate our blood pressure are all forms of self-regulation involving such cognitive/volitional (sensorimotor) feedback loops. As Dennett argued,<sup>21</sup> there is an intuitive causal connection between the extent to which the mind can "go meta" on its own input/output processes and self-regulation (autonomy). A "metaphenomenon" is, loosely, any phenomenon that is about itself in some sense. Thus, metacognition is any mental phenome-

non about another mental phenomenon, say, volitions to not act on volitions.

Autonomy may be identified as a function of the mechanics of metamental causation—mental causation that loops within metamental states.<sup>22</sup> Meditation cultivates an increasing awareness of pre-conscious, impersonal cognitive/volitional forces that fuel distractions, engage and direct attention, and trigger actions, and it simultaneously cultivates volitional detachment and liberation-oriented volitions and metavolitions. As the practitioner becomes more aware of behavioral triggers, she becomes more able to refrain from acting on them. Thus, Meditation is a form of metamental training that increases volitional self-regulation (autonomy).

### **Strawson's Impossibility Argument**

However, there are both determinists and indeterminists who are pessimistic about mental freedom and autonomy. “Hard determinists” think determinism rules out free will; “hard indeterminists” think indeterminism rules out free will. “Hard incompatibilism” is the combination of hard determinism and hard indeterminism, as reflected in the optimist’s dilemma.<sup>23</sup> Hard incompatibilism may be defeated by showing that either determinism or indeterminism is logically compatible with autonomy; but because Strawson’s pessimism is *independent of both* it cannot be defeated in these ways. Strawson claims that autonomy is impossible because we are never free of the influences of our mental states, *regardless of whether or not they are determined*. Buddhism accepts an opposite, optimistic view: freedom is possible *regardless of whether or not our mental states are determined*.

Strawson reasons that because choice is always influenced by one’s mental state, one is never free in choosing and thus never “ultimately” responsible for what one does. Analysis of Strawson’s argument

suggests that Strawson is implicitly counting *the ability to choose or act in such a way as not to be influenced by the current or prior state of mind* as a criterion for free will, if not implicitly defining “free will” as the satisfaction of that criterion.<sup>24</sup> For example, if I choose to call a friend, that choice is a function of my mental state of, say, boredom. Because my mental state of boredom influenced my choice to call my friend, Strawson would say that I did not choose freely. I may also be bored because earlier choices led me to prefer certain activities that are presently unavailable, but those choices were also influenced by earlier mental states. To be *ultimately* responsible for choice, I would have to have been in a totally free mental state at some point, but, Strawson argues, no one can be totally mentally free unless they can create themselves from scratch. Presumably, if there were no prior mental state to influence one, as might obtain in the case of a “*causa sui*” (a self-created being), then one could be free, because one’s first mental state would be *unconditioned*. Logically, there cannot be a *causa sui*, for in order to create oneself, one would first have to exist in order to perform the act of self-creation, but if one already existed, then it would already be too late to perform the act of self-creation. Thus, because no one is a *causa sui*, no one is ultimately free or responsible for what they do.<sup>25</sup>

#### *A Buddhist reply to Strawson*

Buddhists agree that everything is dependently originated from prior conditions, but insist that the right conditions actually free the mind. Total freedom from all binding mental states is not achieved until *nirvāṇa* (complete enlightenment), but even prior to that it is possible to attain some freedom from mental state influences through Meditation.<sup>26</sup> As any long-term practitioner can attest, the more one practices the more one may experience mental quiescence, clarity, equilibrium, detachment, and discriminative wisdom—elements of *mental freedom*. Mindfulness leads to mental clarity, unobstructed apprehension, and

discriminative insight, and One-pointedness leads to tranquility, calm abiding, or mental quiescence. Together, Meditation yields the sort of reflective mental composure that is the foundation for mental freedom—the ability to not be influenced in any way by karmic/kinetic (volitional/causal) momentum of passing mental states. It is a practice that brings about just what Strawson thinks is impossible—freedom from the influences of one’s mental states—determinism and indeterminism notwithstanding.

Strawson, or anyone for that matter, might object to this model by asking why this sort of freedom is “a variety of free will worth wanting,” as Dennett might put it, implying that this is not a variety of free will worth wanting. However, to endorse *that* claim is tantamount to rejecting Strawson’s implicit demand that responsibility requires exactly this sort of freedom to choose in a way that is not influenced by one’s mental states. Apart from the self-defeating implications of such an objection, *nirvāṇa* is the *quintessential* variety of mental freedom worth wanting in Buddhism, and the sort of freedom questioned in this objection is *nirvāṇa*-approximating. But for non-Buddhists there are extensions of the values associated with mental freedom that are worth wanting that do not require valuing or even believing in *nirvāṇa*, negative freedoms such as freedom to not be pushed and pulled by the sort of stimuli and response patterns that make us so predictable to wily market researchers and other manipulators and predators, as Dennett notes.<sup>27</sup>

Strawson may argue that anything less than total freedom is not sufficient freedom, but this is contradicted by Buddhist philosophy and the positive reports of practitioners throughout the millennia, beginning with hundreds of enlightened beings in the Buddha’s lifetime and the thousands of monks whose experiences informed the conventions crystallized in the *Abhidharma*, which contains the most extensive canonical

analysis of the stages of meditative practice leading up to liberation.<sup>28</sup> It also draws a dubious inference, similar to the “fallacy of the heap”:

1. If you add a *single* grain of sand to any *non-heap* amount of sand, you cannot *thereby* make a heap.
2. Thus, no matter how many times you repeat the formula, “non-heap plus one grain,” you cannot thereby produce a heap.
3. Thus, there are no such things as heaps.

This fallacy ignores one crucial possibility, among others: there may be two collections of sand, one of which is a heap and the other is not, but there is a large number of sand grains difference between them.<sup>29</sup>

It would be problematic to view mental freedom as *literally* admitting of quantized, measurable gradations, akin to grains of sand. By *analogy*, however, Strawson seems to think that no singular degree of freedom from the influence of one’s mental states can result in total mental freedom. If this is implied by Strawson’s definition of “free,” then apart from committing the heap fallacy, he seems to have loaded up the concept of “freedom” to the point of absurdity. From his perspective, it seems that we aren’t free if we are even *slightly* affected in any way whatsoever by previous states of mind. That’s an extreme standard. Intuition and ubiquitous experience suggest that there are *degrees* of mental freedom and bondage.

Suppose during meditation I often succumb, weak-willed, to passing volitions: I scratch itches, answer the phone, and so on. Suppose, however, I was just in a meditative state characterized by a liberating figure/ground reversal: for the first time, I experienced passing volitions as impersonal, rather than as *mine*—a powerfully-felt shift from a state of volitional bondage toward one of volitional freedom. Just after the medi-



tation, a powerful hunger arose, but my mental state of volitional freedom influenced my choice not to eat. Strawson's argument implies that any mental state influence whatsoever is *freedom-undermining*, but here the influence of my mental state was *freedom-sustaining*. Strawson's point becomes increasingly implausible the more that one's mental states—in and out of meditation—are characterized by volitional detachment, psychological equilibrium, and related attributes of mental freedom.

One might object that this account loses sight of the responsibility-entailing character of freedom as it figures in recent debate. That debate seeks an analysis of action that is genuinely “up to” the agent, but on the determinist hypothesis, any mental state has a causal history that eventually leads *outside* the agent—all such salubrious effects notwithstanding. But this line of reasoning amounts, on analysis, to an indirect objection to Strawson's implicit use of the criterion of mental freedom as a necessary condition on free choice and moral responsibility, as if the attainment of mental freedom would suffice to show that one's choice was sufficiently “up to” one.

Setting aside the self-stultifying character of this objection, however, it may be replied that determinism cannot invalidate Frankfurt's counterexample, which effectively sets aside deterministic causes *inside or outside* the agent. Nor can it invalidate Aristotle's analogous distinction between continent and incontinent agents, for *both* are determined. Frankfurt's criteria, suitably modified by the sort of volitional self-regulation attributed to the advanced meditator, constitute a kind of *volitional continence*, and suffice to show that the volitionally self-regulating agent controls the release of volitional impulses in the agent's actions, in which case those actions are “up to” the agent whether they “come from within” or not. The mere fact that they have causal antecedents doesn't invalidate *that* any more than the mere fact that one is determined to be self-regulating invalidates the fact that one is self-regulating.

### Hard Determinism

One may argue that because the current mental state is always determined by the prior state, and so on, *ad infinitum*, one can never be totally free. But Strawson cannot make this argument, because he claims his argument is *independent* of determinism.<sup>30</sup> However, the hard determinist can say that everything in the universe at any time is the lawful product of everything in the universe at the previous moment, and so on, *ad infinitum*. It follows that my hunger-restraining choice was inevitable, not “up to” me at all. If a hypothetical God could “rewind” the universe to before I was conceived and let it roll forward like a film, it would repeat itself exactly as it had occurred the first time, including my hunger-restraining choice. If the cosmic film was rerun an infinite number of times, it would produce the exact sequence each time.

Here, I resemble the initially-smart-looking wasp that Dennett nicknames “Sphex.”<sup>31</sup> Sphex carries its paralyzed prey to the edge of its burrow, crawls down to see that the coast is clear inside, climbs up and drags the prey into the burrow. Sphex appears to be intelligent. But when Sphex is in the burrow, checking, if the scientist moves the prey an inch from the burrow, Sphex will drag it back to the edge, again crawl down to check the burrow, and only then come back up to pull the prey into the burrow. If the scientist continues to move the prey, Sphex will repeat the process indefinitely. Although Sphex appears to be smart, it is clear that he is merely acting in the manner he is conditioned. The hard determinist regards us as just more complex versions of Sphex.

The hard determinist would tell me that although I might think my choice was significant and one I likely might not have made, if someone knew me very well and knew all the relevant circumstances, they could predict exactly what I was going to choose. This is consistent with the Buddhist intuition that free agency is *relatively* illusory because everything is dependently originated from everything that has come before.

Because most of us lack volitional freedom, the hard determinist picture significantly applies to most of our seemingly free choices.

But Buddhism is not hard determinist. The Buddhist meditative path gives the practitioner insight into the mechanics of this dependent-ly-originated situation, and thus provides perhaps the only means to cultivate volitional freedom. On this view, without reflection on the volitional springs of action, we have very little autonomy, but with meditative reflection we can increase our volitional freedom.<sup>32</sup>

### Frankfurt-style Soft Determinism

“Soft determinists” think that determinism and free will are compatible. Frankfurt redefined the debate when he devised his PAP-counterexample, described above, involving Black and Jones. Recall that Black wants Jones to vote Democratic, and will manipulate Jones should Jones give any indication that he is about to vote otherwise, but Jones votes Democratic “for reasons of his own.”<sup>33</sup> According to Frankfurt, Jones is responsible for how he voted because Black did not intervene: after all, because Black did not intervene, we may “subtract” Black’s presence in principle,<sup>34</sup> and conclude that Jones would have voted Democratic even if he could have voted otherwise, and that is why it makes sense to think Jones acted of his own accord (or freely). And this conclusion holds even though Jones could not have done otherwise, given that Black would remove that option, if need be. Thus, being able to do otherwise, Frankfurt concludes, is not necessary for the sort of acting of one’s own accord that grounds moral responsibility, and hence, even if determinism is incompatible with *the ability to do otherwise*, it is not incompatible with that sort of freedom or moral responsibility. Jones’s inability to do otherwise is irrelevant to this type of moral-responsibility-grounding freedom; determinism—which implies this inability to do otherwise—is equally irrelevant.

Thus, determinism is compatible with this sort of free will and moral responsibility. An agent's choice need not be indeterministically caused to be free (it may be determined); nor must the agent be able to act otherwise. There is no need for the alternatives that determinism bars. All that is required is that the agent chooses freely and acts of her own accord. If her actions express her volitions and she approves her volitions, it is plausible that she controls her volitions and her actions, whether or not she has alternatives, certain possible defeating conditions aside.<sup>35</sup> She has a form of free will that is sufficient, in outline, for moral responsibility.

*A Buddhist version of Frankfurt-style soft determinism*

A Buddhist can piggyback on Frankfurt's analysis and capitalize on the idea that determinism does not undermine or eliminate control. Because the absence of alternatives under determinism doesn't undermine control and autonomy is a form of control, identical action under cosmic reruns doesn't either. For instance, take simple bodily examples of organismic self-regulation. It doesn't matter that the ambulatory person moves his limb identically in an infinite series of cosmic reruns and that a paralyzed person doesn't, or that a continent person controls her bladder identically in an infinite series of cosmic reruns and that an incontinent person doesn't. The differences remain: in the ambulatory person the locus of limb control is in the agent's will, whereas in the paralyzed person it is not, but in extra-bodily forces that might move the limb, such as gravity, strong winds, and the like. Likewise, in the continent person the locus of bladder control is in the agent's will, whereas in the incontinent person it is not, but in the bladder itself. Determinism doesn't remove control, so while the image of infinitely many identically repeated acts may make us *appear* robotic, technically that image does not negate the *control* exhibited by the agent at issue. Ironically, that image merely presents the *illusion* of non-control.

Similarly, suppose the long-term meditator has learned so much about the causal dynamics of her dependently-originated volitional states—their typical antecedents and patterns of unfolding—that she is literally able to not act on them or otherwise to circumvent their unfolding. For instance, while watching a movie an urge to eat popcorn comes over her, but she realizes that the urge is just an impersonal sensation, like so many she has seen come and go in Meditation without acting on—one she may therefore choose to approve or reject rather than one she just identifies with unreflectively as her own and permits to issue in action. It is something that she need not act on, and she chooses not to, or, alternately, knowing the pattern of hunger, how it unfolds, and how to circumvent it, instead she drinks water.

By contrast, when the otherwise-identical urge to eat popcorn comes over a non-meditator, she might unreflectively identify with the urge as her own and act on it impulsively. We can suppose that in an infinite number of cosmic “reruns” everything would play out the same way for the meditator and the non-meditator. However, for the long-term meditator the locus of volitional control is situated at the metavolitional level, whereas in the non-meditator it is in the base-level volitions themselves. The long-term meditator would be exercising a responsibility-relevant form of free will, for there is an intuitive sense in which the more one is aware of what one is doing and the more one has control over what one does, the more responsible one is for what one does.

Nothing in determinism rules out the possibility of some agents being determined to have a degree of volitional control that others lack, just as there are some agents who have been determined to be ambulatory or continent and others who have been determined to be paralyzed or incontinent. Although equally determined, only the ambulatory and the continent can control the movements of their limbs or the release of their bladders, respectively. In one pair, control over limbs or bladder is

located in the agents' will; in the other, it is located outside the body or in the bladder, respectively.

No doctrine about how one state of the universe causes another can ignore causal differences between the ambulatory and the paralyzed or the continent and the incontinent that amount to causal control in one agent but not the other. Similarly, some agents have control over choices in ways others do not. Buddhist liberation involves extricating oneself from volitional causes that perpetuate mental bondage, causes over which one otherwise typically lacks control; in the process, Buddhist practitioners decrease mental bondage and increase volitional control.

Because continence and incontinence are equally determined, determinism cannot be what differentiates them. The same holds for those suffering mild, chronic, or total weakness of will and those not. Because they are all determined, determinism alone cannot distinguish them. Thus, no matter how many times the cosmic rerun is repeated identically, this does not invalidate the distinctions between ambulatory and paralyzed, continent and incontinent, volitionally self-regulative and volitionally non-self-regulative, weak-willed and strong-willed, and so forth.

### **Hard Indeterminism**

Anyone still troubled by determinism might entertain indeterminism, but as the optimist's dilemma suggests, indeterminism also generates "hard" implications. Hard indeterminists allege that if random events enter the choice equation, agents can no more claim authorship of choices than they can of the outcome of a coin toss. That is because random occurrences are not "up to" us in the way choices must be if they are to be "authored" by us. For example, if a random event in my brain generates a choice that I say I make, presumably because I "felt like it,"

that choice was not really authored by me, but just happened in my brain, akin to a seizure—no different from something random outside my brain, like a coin toss.

*A Buddhist reply to hard indeterminism*

Because the doctrine of dependent origination appears deterministic, most Buddhists avoid indeterminism.<sup>36</sup> “Soft indeterminists” (a.k.a. libertarians) embrace both indeterminism and free will. They insist we have free will, among other reasons, *because* quantum indeterminacies *can* affect neural events that play a role in our choices.<sup>37</sup> On this model, we would *not* behave identically under cosmic rerun scenarios, so we would not resemble Spheeris. But, just as Strawson thinks the impossibility of mental freedom is independent of whether causation is deterministic or not, so too the Buddhist conceives the possibility of mental freedom to be independent of the metaphysics of causation (or at least consistent with it).

**Buddhist Autonomy Optimism**

For the Buddhist meditator, it doesn't matter whether volitional impulses originate deterministically or indeterministically—or spontaneously or as a result of covert manipulation, for that matter—for she can detach from them. She possesses an ability, analogous to continence, to control whether volitional impulses issue in action. Detachment strengthens through meditative discipline, and not only supports control over volitional impulses, but supports control over which perceptual stimuli to focus upon, control over which affective impulses (emotions) may be allowed to manifest, and, broadly speaking, control over which mental state impulses may be allowed to unfold.

This is not a paranormal or contracausal power, but a natural ability akin to Black's *counterfactual* control over Jones's mental states, only over one's own mental states,<sup>38</sup> a “mental continence” that is con-

sistent with determinism or indeterminism. This is a key element in the Buddhist conception of mental freedom.

### Frankfurt's Hierarchical Theory

In explicating his positive, “hierarchical” (metavolitional) theory, Frankfurt considers two heroin addicts, one troubled about being addicted and one not. Frankfurt thinks only the unhappy addict has a conflicted will—a “first-order” desire for the drug in conflict with a “second-order” disapproval of his first-order desire. The objects of first-order desires are experiences, but the objects of second-order desires are desires. Frankfurt stipulates that “first-order volitions” are desires that lead to action, and “second-order volitions” are desires that approve of first-order volitions.

We often have passing first-order desires that don't lead to actions, such as the desire to go inside a store that we see as we pass by on a bus. We also sometimes have second-order desires that are not second-order volitions in Frankfurt's stipulated sense. For instance, an addiction counselor wants to feel what it is like to crave heroin, but doesn't want that desire to lead to action. With these ideas and stipulations in place, Frankfurt identifies freedom of the will as a certain, suitably modified form of volitional and metavolitional accord.<sup>39</sup>

It would help if we instantiated the abstract features of this model with some concrete examples. For instance, I might have a desire to eat French Fries and a competing desire to look thin:

1. I want to eat Fries.
2. I want to look thin.

It may be the case that (2) influences another desire:

3. I want my desire to eat Fries not to lead to action.



The objects of (1)-(2) are not other desires, so (1)-(2) are first-order desires. Because the object of (3) is another desire, (3) is a metadesire. Clearly, (3) is in conflict with (1) but in accord with (2). If I ate the Fries, I would lack accord between (1) and (3), exhibiting weakness of will. However, meditative reflection on the impersonal genesis of volition may influence another desire:

4. I disapprove of my vain desire to look thin.

And (4) may influence another desire:

5. I approve of my desire to eat Fries.

Both (3) and (5) are metadesires and they conflict with each other. This illustrates just one of the complications that Frankfurt's initial, undeveloped model engenders. But most such complications can be handled with minor modifications or additions to the main account without transmogrifying its basic intuitions.

To handle such cases, Frankfurt adds to his initial metavolitional *accord* criterion the requirement that the agent must identify wholeheartedly with the relevant volition.<sup>40</sup> Whether I exhibit free will depends not simply on whether I eat the Fries, or even just on whether I approve of my eating them, but also on *why* I choose to eat them. If I identify more with (4)-(5), truly believing that (2) is more freedom-undermining than (1), and therefore eat the Fries just to counterbalance my vanity, then my choice is in accord with (5), is sufficiently wholehearted, and involves freedom of will. If I identify more with (3) but am overpowered by (1), I am suffering from a lack of wholeheartedness, or weakness of will.

If one's metavolitions against a certain desire repeatedly fail (or worse, if *most* of them *typically* fail), then one feels the loss at a much greater level, namely, at the level of agency or personhood itself. That is, one feels that one has no will power whatsoever. Frankfurt's analysis ex-

plicates many of our intuitions in these matters, such as our reluctance to hold fully responsible those with dysfunctional wills, as in addiction, compulsion, and other disorders: they lack volitional and metavolitional accord. This analysis is consistent with determinism and its implication of a repeating cosmic rerun.

### *The infinite regress objection*

As noted earlier, objections may be made to Frankfurt's account, but I will address only the one considered the most powerful: an agent's first-order desires are free if she approves of them at the second-order, but for her second-order desires to be free, she must approve of those at the third-order, and so on, generating an infinite regress.

For example, when the above agent acts on first-order desire (1) in accord with second-order desire (5), (5) renders (1) free; but for (5) to be free there must be a *third-order* desire that it accords with:

6. I approve of (5).

This is because, it may be recalled, there may be competing desires at any level, and for one of them to count somehow as freedom-conferring one must identify with it wholeheartedly. But for third-order desire (6) to be free there must be a fourth-order desire with which it is in accord:

7. I approve of (6).

And so on. The mere fact that there may be a highest-level desire without opposition at its level does not seem to constitute a sufficiently principled reason to stop the regress, for at that level it is just another desire.

### *A causal reply to the infinite regress objection*

Instead of defending Frankfurt against this objection, I add a causal control component that makes the objection irrelevant: an agent whose relevant, highest-level metavolition causes, causally controls, or

counterfactually controls her volitional action exhibits free will. There is no causal regress problem, for causal control does not require a level of causation above the actual metavolitional structure.

Consider continence. The agent's highest-order approval of her own volition to release her bladder may be what *causes* her doing so, or she may prevent it, thereby exerting causal control, or she may allow it but be able to prevent it counterfactually. Likewise, if the relevant meta-desire *causes* the volitional action (or allows or prevents it), this suffices to establish her volitional control over her behavior, without any need for higher-order approvals.

Critics object that a top-level desire can be brought about by manipulation, and that there is no difference between that and metadesires brought about by determinism. This is called the "Manipulation Argument."<sup>41</sup> In other words, an agent can satisfy Frankfurt's criteria and exhibit metavolitional/volitional accord, but the volitions and/or even the metavolitions may have come about by the sort of secret manipulations employed by the likes of Black upon Jones.

It is for this reason that I have argued above, and argue further below, that the *cause* or *source* of one's volitions and other mental states does not matter as much as whether or not the agent is able to control those volitions and/or other mental states. My argument, informed by both Frankfurt's model and the Buddhist notion of mental freedom, goes a step beyond Frankfurt's.

In the sort of manipulation cases to which I have referred, *the manipulator* is the hidden cause rather than the agent's metawill. Thus, contrary to Pereboom's Manipulation Argument, hidden manipulative causation is not equivalent with determinism, because determinism is consistent with *both* cases of hidden manipulation and cases where the agent controls his own mental states. (By analogy, determinism cannot

be equivalent with incontinence, because it is consistent with *both* continence and incontinence.) Thus, unless there is a conflict of approvals at the metalevel or a hidden manipulator, either of which would defeat the agent's volitional self-regulation, metalevel volitional *control* suffices.<sup>42</sup>

### A Buddhist Theory of Free Will

I argue that the above Frankfurt-style model is implicit in the Buddhist path. The meditator makes a second-order approval of any first-order volitional state when she identifies it as "Right Intention" or "Right Action." Progress along the Buddhist path increasingly generates liberation-oriented volitions and metavolitions, and the more the meditator brings her behavior in accord with them, the closer she gets to liberation and the more she gains autonomy. That is, Mindfulness of volitions fosters both liberation and Frankfurt-style autonomy.

According to the *Abhidharma*, the basis of these valuations of mental states is meditative insight into their experiential phenomenology insofar as each volition, thought, and action promotes or prevents meditative quiescence and clarity.<sup>43</sup> I referred earlier to the example of a meditator who experienced the distractions of an itch and a ringing telephone while meditating. He experienced a figure/ground shift regarding his volitions to act on the distractions, first identifying with and then detaching from them. Meditative insight into their impersonal character led to meditative quiescence and he became impervious to them.

The basis of the formation of liberation-oriented metavolitions is in the practitioner's meditative experience, but these are also supported by philosophical analysis: the authoritative *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification* amplifies the meditative teaching in the *Abhidharma*, further detailing how the stages of Mindfulness of mental states and physical states gets progressively finer, to the point where one directly experiences and fully grasps the same three penetrating insights that led to the Buddha's

enlightenment—*unsatisfactoriness* (suffering), *impermanence*, and *insubstantiality* (no-self)—and attains liberation.<sup>44</sup>

The main idea is that sustained Meditation leads to direct perception of ultimate reality, a penetrating insight to the effect that everything is insubstantial and impermanent, particularly ego-consciousness. This experience leads to the insight that ego-volitional grasping at anything is unsatisfactory. And this generates the deepest detachment from all phenomena, including mental and physical states. Finally, this process of meditative insight leads to liberation, the extinction of all ego-volition. Although this analysis is sophisticated, it is contained essentially in the Buddha's basic teachings as reflected in the Four Noble Truths (which includes the Eightfold Path).

In Meditation, certain things occur.<sup>45</sup> These are not “all in the mind,” so to speak, as critics might suspect, but also “in the brain.” Depending on one's object of Meditation, one may actually reconfigure different parts of the brain. Long-term practitioners of *metta* (“loving-kindness”) meditation whose brains have been scanned have empathy centers significantly larger than those of non-meditators and these centers are significantly more active during *metta* than those without such long experience.<sup>46</sup> Similar results involving the neural circuitry of attention were obtained for long-term practitioners of Mindfulness.<sup>47</sup> These empirically-verified correlations of meditators' mental/neural states support the idea that the meditative mind is capable of disconnecting from the sort of mental-state stimuli that normally govern the ordinary person's volitional behavior, *contra* Strawson.<sup>48</sup>

Long-term Meditation practice cultivates a variety of meditative virtues, such as centeredness, detachment, and mindfulness,<sup>49</sup> which in turn increases autonomous functioning.<sup>50</sup> The Buddhist theory of freedom therefore resembles Frankfurt's, but is more inclusive. Frankfurt's theory narrowly identifies freedom as volitional and metavolitional ac-

cord (in outline, but plus wholeheartedness and certain other features in full), but the Buddhist theory broadly identifies freedom with metamental detachment and self-regulation: increased Mindfulness (metamental consciousness of mental states) increases detachment and self-regulation.

### *An objection and some replies*

One may object that, on an interventionist theory of observation, the mere act of observation affects the nature of the thing observed. This was one reason Gilbert Ryle thought introspection was impossible: one cannot observe rage without interfering with it.<sup>51</sup> Buddhism does not deny this; the claim that meditative observation interferes with mental states is at the heart of Buddhism, and is consistent with the quantum mechanics tenet to the effect that the observer can never be separated from the phenomenon observed. Indeed, by generating detachment from and control over mental states, Meditation radically alters them. *Nirvāṇa*, moreover, dissolves even the illusory *impression* of an observing self, *separate* from the observed.

Mindfulness of the stream of consciousness is a pre-condition for mental freedom and volitional control, for without knowing one's mental fluctuations intimately one cannot help but be pushed or pulled by them. Mindfulness extricates awareness from the first-order stream of thoughts, emotions, sensations, and volitions simply by observing them, but it simultaneously generates metamental control over these levers that otherwise quasi-consciously direct our actions. Mindful observation *tames* first-order mental states, removes their causal control, and transfers it to the metamental level. This is the essence of the Buddhist theory: *mind seeing mind* generates mental freedom.

Mindfulness tracks whatever is present wherever attention is directed, and One-pointedness trains it to remain focused on a chosen foc-

al point. Mindfulness also tracks how volitional impulses direct attention, and One-pointedness trains attention not to be directed by volition, but to direct volitional energies. Mindfulness of the push and pull of first-order mental contents and Right Effort to refocus develop metawill power to control what objects of attention one will entertain and what volitions will be allowed to bear fruit.

The shift from being led about by whichever first-order mental contents arise to using metamental volition to direct mental contents is like the shift from incontinence to continence *writ large*. Such attention and volition tracking and training contributes to the formation of liberation-oriented metamental states, for one may attach any pro or con second-order label, such as “Right,” to any spontaneously-arising first-order state. Thus, Meditation leads to Right Intention, increases volitional control, and generates a liberation-oriented Frankfurt-style volitional hierarchy that makes possible what Strawson says is impossible—mental freedom.

### Conclusion

In Meditation, one practices freedom while being pushed or pulled by first-order mental fluctuations and volitions and pushing or pulling back against their currents. Meditation is a practice behavior, like weight lifting, that gradually enhances mental freedom the more one meditates *in action*—when “chopping wood and carrying water,” as a Buddhist adage has it. Each Meditation adds a metaphorical “quantum of mental freedom” to the increasingly-free meditative mind, akin to a grain of sand added to others in the construction of a heap.

For example, recall the above-described meditator’s increment of mental freedom attendant upon his figure/ground volitional identification/detachment shift, followed by his ability to ignore an itch, ringing telephone, or hunger impulse. As meditative skill increases, many such

“quanta” are generated by each Meditation. Finally, if the Buddha was right, *nirvāṇa*—total mental freedom—results, just as, if logic is right, after a while a heap results. There are partial heaps and partially-free minds before there are full heaps or enlightened beings, respectively.

Frankfurt and Buddhism are in relative agreement about free will as involving metavolitional control, although the Buddhist view is more inclusive and places primary emphasis elsewhere, on liberation. Buddhism suggests that, given our significantly entrenched (if not beginningless) identification with our first-order, non-liberation-oriented volitional streams, most of us have very little free will in actual practice. However, Buddhism also suggests that we can reverse the conditions for volitional bondage, increase volitional regulation, and attain full volitional freedom in liberation, *contra* Strawson.

For most Westerners, free will is valued because we wish to exercise volitions for the enjoyment thereof; for Frankfurt, free will is also valued as an expression of our personal identity.<sup>52</sup> From the Buddhist perspective, however, the unregulated exercise of volitions is more often a hindrance to liberation, and liberation is a state in which there is no ego-volitional being. Nonetheless, as Buddhists approach liberation, they become increasingly autonomous, even if upon reaching enlightenment they transcend separate-ego agency altogether—and with it, autonomy.

This account of what a Frankfurt-style Buddhist model of free will might look like, and of what sort of explanatory purchase it might have, is only a sketch. Although I have defended it against a variety of objections, no doubt there are others, and I do not mean to give the impression that it is fool-proof, to imply that alternative models might not equally or better capture what Buddhism has to say about free will, or even to endorse it wholeheartedly *as is*. I do endorse a more complex version of what is sketched here, but only so much can be addressed in an article. Rather, I have constructed it in its present form because it



outlines a minimally risky model that captures the essential similarities and differences between Buddhist thought on the subject and relevantly-related Western thought. Some Buddhists may be inclined to reject determinism, and embrace the more risky position of indeterminism. If so, they may adopt most of what I have said here, as the present model has been shown to be sufficiently independent of the metaphysics of causation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The research for this paper was supported by a grant from the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, PSCREG-39-253, "Mindfulness Meditation and Autonomy: A Buddhist Theory of Free Will." Some aspects of my argument in this paper were presented in an invited lecture, sponsored by the Asian American / Asian Research Institute, at its Evening Lecture Series, April 3, 2009; a webcast of that talk is available at <http://www.aaari.info/09-04-03Repetti.htm>. A more complex version of the account of free will adumbrated here appears in monograph form (Repetti 2010). I wish to acknowledge commentary on some of the arguments presented here from Harry Frankfurt, Galen Strawson, Michael Barnhart, Andrew Wengraf, Jay Mancini, Brij Singh, Kim Helmer, Laureen Park, Alex D'Erizans, Keith Montieth, Elizabeth Smith, Claudia Case, and Jordan Hall, as well as from two anonymous editors at this journal and very generous editorial assistance from Daniel Cozort.

<sup>2</sup> Frankfurt (1969), 828.

<sup>3</sup> Fischer (2002) argues that it is as intuitive as it gets, and one either gets it or doesn't, like jazz, but there have been many challenges to this counterexample in the literature.

<sup>4</sup> Frankfurt (1969), 838.

<sup>5</sup> Frankfurt (1969), 837; emphases added.

<sup>6</sup> Frankfurt (1971).

<sup>7</sup> Frankfurt (1971). As noted in the text, this is a simplification. Frankfurt's account was subjected to criticisms to which Frankfurt responded in subsequent articles, thereby adding various provisos and auxiliary claims to the basic idea summarized here, but we cannot devote space to these developments, most of which are collected in Frankfurt's book (1988). The outline of Frankfurt's account provided here suffices for purposes of the arguments adumbrated below, but below I also entertain some of the major complications with Frankfurt's model and how Frankfurt's model may be modified to respond to them. A full defense of Frankfurt's account, suitably modified by Buddhist ideas so as to avoid all such objections and various others that I adduce, may be found in Repetti (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Most Buddhists writing on free will think it is compatible with determinism, e.g., Rāhula (1959), Gómez (1975), Story (1976), Kalupahana (1976, 1992, 1995), Siderits (1987, 2008), Watson (2001), Gier and Kjellberg (2004), Harvey (2007), and Federman (2010). Some don't, e.g., Goodman (2002) and Wallace (2008). But arguments on both sides are highly complex, and it is disputed whether dependent origination is deterministic.

<sup>9</sup> For Mahāyāna Buddhists, the goal is, more specifically, the liberation of all sentient beings, and the practitioner's liberation is subservient to that greater goal.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Wolf (1990).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Mele (1995).

<sup>12</sup> The idea of no-self (*anātman*) is part of a more comprehensive denial of any *independently existing* metaphysical substance, and does not entail that there is no *dependently existing* phenomenon that constitutes the personality. Rather, a better interpretation is that the personality or “person-series” is simply an impersonal process dependent on and not separate from the cluster of psychophysical phenomena from which it is constituted. For an explication of this view relative to the free will question, see Gier and Kjellberg (2004) and Siderits (1987, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Some Buddhists resist the idea that the doctrine of dependent origination constitutes a “rigid” determinism, e.g., Rāhula (1959), Gómez (1975), Story (1976), Kalupahana (1976, 1992, 1995), and Gier and Kjellberg (2004). On analysis, however, their arguments are inconclusive for the simple reason that there seems to be no mid-point between determinism and indeterminism. Wallace seems to think the Mahāyāna view, “inter-dependent origination,” is indeterministic (2008).

<sup>14</sup> The term for “meditative absorption,” which signifies *successful attainment* of the meditative state, is technical: In Pāli, it is “*jhāna*”; in Sanskrit, “*dhyāna*.” Sometimes “*dhyāna*” is used simply to denote “meditation.”

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Kasulis (1981). H.H. the Dalai Lama also made this claim (Gyatso 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Frankfurt (1971).

<sup>17</sup> These terms have technical meanings in Buddhism that are sometimes conflated in English. “Mindfulness” is the translation for “*sati*” (Pāli; Sanskrit: *smṛti*); mindfulness is thought to lead to insight. “Insight” is the translation for “*vipassanā*” (Pāli; Sanskrit: *vipaśyanā*), although popular Anglophone usage of “*vipassanā*” loosely translates it as “mindfulness.” “One-pointedness” is the translation for “*samādhi*,” which is thought to

lead to tranquility, calm abiding, or mental quiescence (*śamatha*). Meditative “discipline” is also the translation for “*samādhī*,” which includes mindfulness and one-pointedness as well as effort. Some technical Buddhist terms are more often cited in Pāli than in Sanskrit, such as those above, while others, such as “karma” (Pāli: *kamma*) and “Dharma” (Pāli: *Dhamma*), are more often cited in (Anglicized) Sanskrit.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Honderich (1993) for an attempt at this “cancel out” maneuver.

<sup>19</sup> Libet (2000).

<sup>20</sup> LeDoux (1997).

<sup>21</sup> Dennett (1984).

<sup>22</sup> I call this “metacausation” and develop a thoroughly metacausal account of autonomy in Repetti (2010).

<sup>23</sup> See Pereboom (2002) for a representative argument for hard incompatibilism.

<sup>24</sup> Strawson (2002).

<sup>25</sup> The notion of a *causa sui* also entails that there was a time before one existed, but in Buddhism it is claimed that rebirth is beginningless. For Buddhists that might not be persuaded by deductive logical type arguments, this provides a Buddhist doxographical guarantee that nobody can be a *causa sui*.

<sup>26</sup> Buddhism distinguishes degrees of *nirvāṇa* or enlightenment: the “stream winner” has had the first taste, the “once returner” is almost there, but has at most one more lifetime before attaining the final goal,

and the “never returner” is closer still, and will attain the goal in the present lifetime. All these have experienced partial *nirvāṇa*.

<sup>27</sup> It is open to an indeterminist to add to this reasoning and say that in attaining the unconditioned state of *nirvāṇa* the meditator breaks the deterministic chain and then is free from the necessity from the past that fuels the threat posed by hard determinism, but Buddhist scholars generally avoid equating *nirvāṇa* with a literal break with determinism.

<sup>28</sup> Dhamma and Bodhi (2009).

<sup>29</sup> Arguably, *either* there must be an exact number of grains of sand that constitutes a heap *or* there are indeterminate objects, but there are powerful arguments against each option, so this constitutes a logical puzzle. But clearly *there are heaps*, however indefinite the grain count, just as there are *tall* trees, even if no exact number demarcates where “tall” begins. Nobody doubts that the fallacy of the heap is a *fallacy* or that there are heaps. The challenge, which we will leave to the logician, is to wiggle out of the above puzzle in a principled way that explains away the puzzle.

<sup>30</sup> Strawson’s impossibility argument comes close to the hard incompatibilist’s argument. However, whereas hard incompatibilists directly base the claim that free will is impossible on the implications of determinism and/or indeterminism, arguing that either way free will is impossible, Strawson explicitly avoids resting the impossibility claim on the determinist or the indeterminist lemma, insisting that the impossibility of free will rests directly on the impossibility of mental freedom (the claim that unless one is a *causa sui*, one cannot escape mental state influences). Thus, whereas *Strawson* cannot make the claim that determinism will gobble up anything the meditator does, others may; and whereas Strawson cannot make the claim that—if the determinist lemma fails—there’s

an indeterminist lemma that must be dealt with (to the effect that if actions are random, they also are not “up to” us), the standard hard incompatibilist such as Pereboom (2002) can make that claim. I only *note* the major alternatives here; to address every possibility is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>31</sup> Dennett (1984), 10-23.

<sup>32</sup> Goodman (2002) disagrees, but for unrelated reasons.

<sup>33</sup> Frankfurt (1969), 838.

<sup>34</sup> Frankfurt (1969), 837.

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that even though Frankfurt claimed that his PAP counterexample showed that Jones “acted for reasons of his own,” which supports the idea that he acted *freely*, an idea that he develops more explicitly in his subsequent article (1971), Frankfurt’s overall argument in the first article (1969) more dramatically emphasized the claim of the independence of *moral responsibility* from determinism than it emphasized the claim of the independence of *free will* from determinism, simply because PAP itself explicitly identifies *moral responsibility* (but not *free will*) and thus Frankfurt’s PAP counterexample explicitly targets PAP’s claim that moral responsibility requires an ability that itself requires that determinism be false (namely, the ability to do otherwise). The ability to do otherwise had been deeply associated with free will prior to Frankfurt’s PAP counterexample, and although Frankfurt’s counterexample rejects the idea that moral responsibility requires that ability, it also supports the idea that a kind of free will that consists of *acting freely or of one’s own accord* suffices for moral responsibility, and thus that a responsibility-relevant kind of free will does not require the ability to do otherwise. Again, Frankfurt went on (1971) to give an account of that kind of free

will in terms of some sort of a *mesh* or *accord* relationship between actions, volitions, and metavolitions, which I only summarize here, but Frankfurt's PAP counterexample has received much more coverage in subsequent literature. The most interesting development from that literature is a position that precisely capitalizes on the greater clarity of the responsibility element in Frankfurt's counterexample, but insists that true free will really would require the ability to do otherwise, rather than mere volitional accord, in which case determinism is compatible with responsibility but incompatible with free will in this stronger sense that requires ability to do otherwise. This view is called "semi-compatibilism" and is best represented by Fischer (2002). It is open to Buddhists to adopt this "middle-way" position between compatibilism and incompatibilism, which seems to claim less, and thus to be more immune to objections. To the extent that "autonomy" has connotations that conjure both the ability to do otherwise that the semi-compatibilists insist that it does and for which Buddhists are likely to resist the use of that term to describe agents that ultimately lack a self, Buddhists might have independent reasons to favor semi-compatibilism over full-on compatibilism. Other Buddhists, however, might prefer an all-out incompatibilism between determinism and both free will and responsibility, and thus to opt for a form of indeterminism that is compatible with both, such as Wallace (2008).

<sup>36</sup> See, however, Wallace (2008).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Kane (2002) for a plausible form of indeterminism generated at the macro-level of the neural/mental interface by moral dilemmas; see Balaguer (2010) for a similar model, but one that more inclusively identifies the category as "torn decisions": All moral dilemmas involve torn decisions, but not all torn decisions involve moral dilemmas (for instance, one can be torn looking at a dinner menu). It should be

noted that I am not describing *traditional* libertarianism here, but rather more recent versions that have purchase in the contemporary literature. Traditional libertarian accounts involve the notion of “agent causation,” but that notion implies either contracausality (the ability to act contrary to causes feeding into one’s decisional system) or acausality (the ability to act on reasons, where reasons are construed as metaphysically distinct from causes). However, both contracausality and acausality imply and/or require that determinism be false, and thus that indeterminism be true. I chose recent versions of libertarianism, therefore, because all forms of libertarianism imply indeterminism, and also because, upon considering hard determinism, contemporary thinkers typically remark that the latest science embraces quantum indeterminacy, as if threats from determinism are outdated in our current context. Thus, by selecting quantum-physics-involving versions of libertarianism, I am killing two birds with one stone. Other forms of libertarianism are beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>38</sup> Recall that Black’s ability to intervene in Jones’s mental life, should Jones begin to deviate from Black’s preferences for Jones’s behavior, is not actually exercised, because Jones happens to behave as Black wants him to behave. Although this ability is unexercised in Frankfurt’s PAP counterexample, the ability remains *counterfactually*: *had* Jones begun to entertain the volition to vote Republican, Black *would* have intervened. In the text, I am claiming that self-regulating agents have this sort of counterfactual control over their own volitional systems. Unlike contracausal or acausal forms of control, which require indeterminism, counterfactual control is consistent with determinism, and arguably entailed by it. For the full argument in support of this line of reasoning, see Repetti (2010).



<sup>39</sup> Recall that there are complications to Frankfurt's model that I cannot go into here. For the full argument, see Repetti (2010).

<sup>40</sup> Frankfurt (1988). Consequently, wholehearted identification with a particular volition implies a higher-order volition that is unopposed.

<sup>41</sup> See Pereboom (2002) for the most powerful version of this argument; see Haji (2009) for a critical discussion.

<sup>42</sup> A more pressing question for the Buddhist, who denies the reality of the self, is how to identify what makes the metadesire "mine," particularly if "I" am the product of beginningless ignorance. The problem of what is "mine" is far too complex for any Buddhist model of anything to be addressed with completeness and confidence in any article not primarily about that specific subject. Nonetheless, the meditation-based model actually makes it the case that the agent in question need not author any volitions or metavolitions whatsoever (they could all be implanted by a Black-like manipulator), but he still has a meta-level power to accept or reject them. The Buddhist perspective is, in a sense, more powerful than this, in that all volitions are ultimately alien or not one's own, delusional, disguised as one's own, and bearing the karmic weight of beginningless time. Indeed, the Buddhist practitioner identifies less and less with those whose dispositional momentum—karma—stretches back through beginningless time the further he evolves. The less he does, the more he cultivates liberation-oriented volitions, and vice versa, identifies with these, approximates mental freedom, and increases his ability to regulate his volitions regardless of their origin. Thus, the issue of identifying volitions as one's own becomes less and less of a problem for Buddhist practitioners.

<sup>43</sup> Dhamma and Bodhi (2009).

<sup>44</sup> Buddhaghosa and Nanamoli (2003).

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Begley (2007) and Wallace (2006).

<sup>46</sup> Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone and Davidson (2008).

<sup>47</sup> Lutz, Slagter, Dunne and Davidson (2008).

<sup>48</sup> One might object that this seems gratuitous and unfair to Strawson, for presumably he would hardly deny the findings of these studies. The question he might press is rather whether the Buddhist practitioner can take credit for having brought about these phenomena. But “credit” is ambiguous, and these studies do seem to count against the main claim of his impossibility argument to the effect that mental freedom is impossible. It does not seem to matter for purposes of the Buddhist theory of free will being developed here whether the practitioner can claim full “credit,” full *autonomous authorship* of the sort of mind/brain alterations that meditation practice arguably engenders or of mental freedom, because the Buddhist is not interested in accrediting the self with authoring anything anyway, but only in attaining mental freedom. If mental freedom could be attained by praying to a Vedic god, eating soma, or entering an experience machine, none of that would undermine the fact that one had attained mental freedom. Nonetheless, the Buddha thinks that our volitional actions—our voluntarily-engaged meditation practices—are what cultivate the mental states that these brain studies reveal are rewiring the brain, so that sort of “credit” is sufficient for purposes of the argument. As far as *ultimate* credit goes, well, *ultimately* there is no self to bear the sort of “credit” that we typically attribute to an agent when we applaud that agent, even though there is sufficient “person-series continuity” to bear *karmic* credit (Siderits 1987, 2008), and there is a sense in which full mental freedom only comes when the self is fully dis-credited, but this raises a deeper set of problems the answers to

which can only be sketched in any article not devoted entirely to that issue.

<sup>49</sup> Empirical findings support these platitudes. See notes 37-39; see also Goleman (2003), Jha (2007), Lau (2006), Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard and Davidson (2004), and Valentine and Sweet (1999).

<sup>50</sup> In view of the research referenced in the previous note and Libet's research (2001), referenced in note 19 (which suggests, recall, that neural volition precedes mental volition), I conjecture that future research that combines both sorts of studies will reveal that meditators' scores on the temporal disparity between neural volitions and mental volitions will be significant less than those of non-meditators.

<sup>51</sup> Ryle (1949).

<sup>52</sup> Frankfurt (1971).

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