

# **Just Another Word for Nothing Left to Lose: Freedom, Agency and Ethics for Mādhyamikas<sup>\*</sup>**

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## **1. Freedom of the Will and Theodicy**

The problem of the Freedom of the Will appears to the modern Western sensibility as an obvious and natural problem, and is often taken to be one of those perennial philosophical questions that arises simply upon reflection. Nonetheless, the problem as we know it in the Western philosophical and religious tradition is in fact a very specific cultural and religious artifact. For this problem to arise at all, one needs to have a *will*, and a sense of the possibility of uncaused *agent causation*, as well as a thesis of causal determinism. Only with these three ideas in place can one ask the question whether that will is subject to a universal determinism or is capable of causing acts without its own activity being caused.

Of course once one poses that question, one can immediately perform the intellectual rope trick that makes philosophy possible, and ask not only whether the will is free in this sense, but also ascend to the question of whether the freedom of the will is or is not compatible with determinism, if so, how, and if not, whether one opts for the libertarian or determinist view. And of course this set of questions has engendered a massive literature in the West, remaining active topics of philosophical research to the present day. (See Pereboom 2009, Watson 2003, Kane 2005, Campbell et al. 2004 for surveys of these debates, and Meyers 2010 for a superb discussion of this meta-issue.) It is not, however, my purpose to survey that literature or to weigh in on any of these questions in this essay.

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It is important to note that none of these problems have ever been raised in the Buddhist philosophical tradition. (But see Gómez 1975, Harvey 2007 and Rhys Davids 1898 for contrary views.) That is not because Buddhist philosophers were just too dumb to think about it, nor because they had somehow solved it. It is because the presuppositions that raise these questions are not satisfied by the Buddhist tradition. Consideration of that fact may lead us to the kind of hermeneutic distance that will allow us first to see the problem as peculiar, and then to set it aside in favor of more productive lines of inquiry. I hope that this is indeed one of those cases where attention to another philosophical tradition can indeed help us to advance our own. The plan then, is first to show why the problem of the freedom of the will as it is posed in the Christian context, and as it comes to be addressed in much of the Western philosophical tradition cannot arise in the context of Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy, and then to show how concerns related to those that motivate that problem arise and are addressed within that tradition.

Let us begin with the idea of *will*. It is ubiquitous in the West, not only in technical philosophical and religious discourse, but in the law and popular culture. “Did you perform this act of your own free will?,” we might ask when deciding whether to blame or to excuse an apparent wrongdoer, or we might have to answer when having a document notarized. We explain our inability to stop smoking or to lose weight through appeal to weakness of will. (a topic that enjoys its own vast literature. See Hoffman 2008 and Stroud 2008 for surveys.) Even contemporary cognitive science is concerned to locate and understand the will, or at least our conception thereof. (Dennett 1984, 1992, 2003, Libet 1985, 1999, Mele 1995, 2001, 2010)

But what is this thing called ‘will’? We do not come by the idea that we have wills through observation, either of ourselves or of others. Just try introspecting and finding a will. What does it feel like? Nor is it the theoretical posit of any science. Nor has it always been the case in Western intellectual history that persons took themselves to have wills—faculties of action per se. (Despite the infelicitous but perniciously and ubiquitously influential translation of *akrasia* as *weakness of will*, Aristotle never identified a faculty of will.)

The will as we (seem to) know it, is in fact the legacy of St Augustine, and of his struggle to solve the theodicy problem raised by the Fall of Adam and Eve in Eden. If God is indeed the cause of all things, and is indeed omniscient, then the primal fall from grace would appear to have been caused by God, in which case God would not appear to be very nice, particularly since he then punished not only Adam and Eve, but the entire human race, for the affair. The only way to preserve God's omnibenevolence, saw Augustine, was to absolve Him from the causation of Adam's and Eve's disobedience. And that required them to be the original authors of their own actions. Augustine posited a faculty of producing uncaused (free) action in order to show how *that* could be the case, and argued that only action produced by that faculty (free action) is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy; that all other behavior, in virtue of being heteronomously caused, is mere natural event. (See Stump 2001 for an excellent introduction.)<sup>1</sup>

This linkage of morality and indeed even personhood to freedom in this rich sense ramifies through St Thomas and eventually to Kant. It grounds the political and legal theory of the enlightenment to which we are heirs, and infuses our high and popular culture with a presupposition of the reality of the will and its freedom. It also leads us to take for granted the idea that we are only persons in the full sense to the degree that we are free, and that moral responsibility is possible only in the context of this freedom. (See Frankfurt 1969, 1971.)

Now to be sure, there are many who take the story of Eden and the Fall seriously, and who may be sanguine about the foundation of this aspect of our culture and the nest of philosophical problems to which it gives rise on this curious theological myth. But for those who would prefer a secular ground for culture, and a secular premise for

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<sup>1</sup> While this is not an essay primarily about the views of Augustine, it is useful to introduce a bit of nuance here, as Augustine's views seem to have undergone some evolution, and he has been cited both as the father of libertarianism (Plantinga 1967, Berthold 1981) and as a determinist and compatibilist (Baker 2003). And indeed both attributions are correct. In *On Free Will* Augustine clearly defends a very explicitly libertarian account according to which the will (*voluntas*) is entirely under our control, and that free will (*liberum arbitrium*) is a necessary condition of the justice of Divine reward and punishment. (See Berthold 1981, p. 528-529.) Plantinga (1967) defends the necessity of this libertarian doctrine for the solution of the problem of theodicy. But as Baker (2003) points out, in his refutation of the Pelagians in *On Nature and Grace*, Augustine defends a universal Divine determinism alongside a doctrine of freedom, arguing that freedom in the relevant sense and universal determinism are compatible, and that all of our free choices are in fact also determined. (Further complications arise when we ask whether, even if Adam was completely free, post-fall humans are. But this really takes us too far afield in an essay on Madhyamaka!

philosophical inquiry, this genealogy of metaphysics might suggest that it is time for a reassessment of this way of seeing things. In any case, this much is clear: If there are reasons to worry about the freedom of the will, and in particular, reasons to ask what Mādhyamikas should think about freedom and determinism, Christian theodicy is not the main issue.

## 2. Why Worry about Freedom and Determinism

But why do we worry about freedom and determinism in the first place? Surely not because of a massive cultural obsession with theodicy. The motivations for most modern thought about this network of questions are twofold. The first motivation is metaphysical—a concern to understand the nature of agency and of personhood more broadly, and the distinction between what we as agents *do* and what merely *happens*. The second—closely connected—is ethical and legal. We must draw a distinction between those actions for which we are morally or legally responsible and those events for which, even though we may be causally implicated, we are not responsible. This distinction is often taken to be that between free acts of will and caused behavior. Determinism is taken to be a threat on both fronts. All of this is well-worn territory, and none of my reflections are at all original. It is, however, useful to remind ourselves of what is at stake in this discussion before turning directly to the Madhyamaka tradition.

Let us consider the metaphysical problem first. When we take ourselves to be personal agents, we take ourselves to be capable of choosing and directing our own actions, to make choices between alternative possibilities. We take ourselves to act for *reasons*, and not for our behavior simply to be *caused* by external events.<sup>2</sup> This authority over our actions is what makes us who we are, and what qualifies us in the law to be taken seriously as citizens. But choice, one might think, requires that the alternatives between

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<sup>2</sup> We must be careful about the sense of “external” here. To be external in the relevant sense is to be external to the *self*, or the agent, not necessarily to the *body*. So, for instance, being caused to do something by a device implanted in the brain, or even by mental illness, would count for these purposes as being externally, and hence *heteronomously*, determined. This distinction is often put in terms of the distinction between determined by *reasons* and being determined by *causes*. So, one might think, following Locke and Kant, that an action is free to the degree that we can provide reasons for it, and that it is for those reasons that we undertake it. An action is unfree to the extent that it is merely caused, and that its causes are not reasons that we could give for so acting. We will see this distinction play out in the discussion below, and we will see that—suitably transformed—it re-emerges in the Madhyamaka account of moral responsibility we will develop at the end of this essay.

which we choose are each open to us, and that deliberation is an effective consideration of reasons for each, and not a sham to which we are spectators. (Frankfurt 1971) If, and only if, multiple alternatives are genuine possibilities, can one choose action, instead of performing causally determined behavior. So, this line of reasoning continues, genuine agency requires an exemption from determinism; while acts of will may have effects, they cannot have sufficient causes, as sufficient causes in this sense would place the explanation of behavior outside of the agent him/herself.<sup>3</sup>

Similar considerations are advanced in defense of moral responsibility. The *locus classicus*, of course is Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant argues that freedom is a transcendental condition of moral responsibility, and that in order to think of ourselves and others as morally responsible agents, we must regard ourselves as free. Of course he also argues that we can never *know* that we are free, but that also amounts to the claim that we can never *know*, though we must *assume*, that we are morally responsible, and hence that we must *assume* that we are free. That freedom is again parsed as the determination of the will not by *causes*, but by *reasons*.

This line of argument has proven to be both intuitively plausible and influential. If someone acts in a morally or legally blameworthy way, and we can find no exculpatory external cause for her action, we take her action to have been free, and hold her responsible. If she is successfully able to defend herself by appealing say, to mental illness, or a horrible childhood, and if we agree that those are the *causes* of her behavior, we absolve her of blame, arguing that she was causally compelled, and not free to act. Determination by causes hence undermines moral agency; if ethical assessment is possible, we require that agent causation be exempted from determinism. The Kantian transcendental argument is easily joined with the premise that ethical and legal assessment must be possible to yield the conclusion that the will is free.

There is, of course, an older strand of analysis of freedom or choice defended by Locke, with ancestry in Aristotle. On this view, for an act to be free (Locke), or chosen (Aristotle) is for the cause of the act to be the intention or desire of the agent, not for the

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<sup>3</sup> So, for instance, Plantinga (*op. cit.* p. 134) writes, "It seems to me altogether paradoxical to say of anyone all of whose action are causally determined that on some occasions he acts freely."

salient cause to be *external* to the agent. This is an analysis of freedom in terms of absence of constraint. The advantage of this approach over Kant's is that instead of exempting the will from causation it ties responsibility and agency to the kinds of causes operative. The idea is that when our actions are determined by our own intentions and desires they are free acts of will; when they are otherwise caused, they are not; the will is not involved.<sup>4</sup> When I consider my prospects and decide that I would be better off dead and jump from the window, I am acting freely; when you lift me bodily and toss me from the window, my defenestration is unfree; the relevant distinction is nicely captured by attention to the most salient proximal cause of my exit.

The Aristo-Lockean view is not unproblematic, however. At least two kinds of considerations cast doubt on its ability to articulate a robust free/unfree distinction sufficient to underwrite the requisite notions of agency and responsibility. First, there is the issue of coercion. Suppose that you don't toss me from the window, but threaten to torture my children if I don't jump. There is a sense in which I then jump freely; I consider living with the knowledge that my children are being tortured or dying in the knowledge that they are safe; I hence freely sacrifice myself for them. But there is an equal pull in the opposite direction. I did not freely commit suicide; I was driven to it by a threat; you, not I, are the cause of my death. There is no need to figure out which of these intuitions is better; the point is only that they are both robust, and a clean distinction may not be forthcoming.

Second, there is the problem of extended causal chains. I worry about the future of the world, what with a bad housing market, global warming, terrorist threats, the unlikelihood of a resurgence of Australian cricket in my lifetime, and I decide to end it all. It sure looks free from here, and if this is a morally wicked decision (after all, I cause

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<sup>4</sup> Such positions are *compatibilist*. Baker (*op. cit.*) sets up the contrast between libertarian and compatibilist positions nicely:

Let us say that an account of free will is *libertarian* if and only if it entails that a condition of a person S's having free will with respect to an action (or choice) A is that A is not ultimately caused by factors outside of S's control. Let us say that an account of free will is *compatibilist* if and only if it entails that a person S's having free will with respect to an action (or choice) A is compatible with the A's being caused ultimately by factors outside of S's control....

On a compatibilist conception of free will, a will can be caused and still be free in the sense required for moral responsibility.

needless grief to my spouse, children and dog) I appear to be responsible precisely because it is free, and neither caused by force nor even coerced. The cause is just my desire to avoid the sufferings I contemplate. But now a dilemma ensues. Either that desire is caused or uncaused. If it is uncaused, then it is a random occurrence for which I can hardly be responsible; in such a case I am not the author of my own action. But if it is caused, then it must be caused by prior events, many of which (global warming, the poor housing market, the failure of Australian cricket selectors, etc...) lie outside of myself. In this case, too, I fail to meet the conditions of free agent causation. I am not the author of my own action. One can see what drives one to a metaphysical causeless will acting purely on reasons, however little sense that really makes.

All of these considerations lead us almost inexorably to the denial that anything that can count as a genuine action—anything for which we are responsible can be subject to causal determination and the distinction between agency the mere causation of behavior seems to vanish. Freedom seems both necessary for these essential categories of personhood, and inconsistent with universal determinism. But hold on. As Schopenhauer argued in what is arguably still the best treatment of this question, his *Essay on the Freedom of the Will* (an argument Dennett rediscovered much later 1984, encapsulating ideas developed with great sophistication by Frankfurt 1969 and Davidson 1980 in different ways), the freedom of the will is not only compatible with, but in fact *demand*s determinism.

After all, Schopenhauer points out, when we say that an action is free, we mean that it is *caused* by our desires and intentions. If it were not, it would not be *our* action, and we would be neither agentively nor morally responsible for it. When we wish for freedom, we don't wish that our bodies and mouths moved randomly; we want to be able to *cause* them to move in the ways we desire. Moreover, we want those desires and intentions to be caused; randomly, spontaneously occurring conative states do not make us *free*; they make us *insane*; not *responsible*, but *excusable* on grounds of that insanity. In short, we want our own desires and intentions—the proximal causes of our actions—to be caused in turn by our own more general standing beliefs, desires, traits, etc., which are also plausibly, and desirably caused, and so on... Freedom is hence not the *absence* of

determination, but *self*-determination. It is not inconsistent with determinism, but entails it.

But now we seem to be chasing our own tails: freedom requires determinism; determinism entails that our actions are ultimately caused by chains of causation originating outside of us; authority and responsibility require agent-causation through choice among real alternatives (see Plantinga 1967, Pereboom 2009). These three premises seem to entail that freedom in the morally relevant sense is impossible. It is time to recall what we care about here. We care about making sense of our moral lives and of our agency. While it might have appeared that a discourse of freedom and determinism and a metaphysics of will would be the best way to do this, this way of seeing things may be a dead end. And it may be only the relic of a very particular Hebrew myth, a myth of little interest to Buddhists, of course.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it makes sense to look elsewhere in order to find a Buddhist—and in particular a Madhyamaka Buddhist—account of action.

This set of problems, it may also be worth noting, also presupposes another metaphysical doctrine anathema to Buddhists—that of a self or a soul as the center of agency. For a Christian, such as Augustine, the reality of the soul requires no argument, and for many of his more secular successors, such as Kant, while the idea of a transcendental subject or agent may have required argument, that argument was provided (whether it was successful or not is another matter). While these ideas are literally independent (one could imagine an unfree soul, or an soulless free agent), the doctrine of the reality of the soul is connected to the idea that the will is free in the sense we have been scouting in that it is natural in the post-Christian European tradition to imagine the soul as an autonomous entity, capable of initiating its own actions, and so that which is ultimately morally responsible. We can then even draw the distinction between responsible human agents and non-responsible animals, for instance, on the basis of soul-possession, and provide the hope for future reward or punishment in Heaven or Hell on the ground of the

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<sup>5</sup> This is not, however, to say either that the Hebrew myth is the only possible source of theodicy or that theodicy is the only possible root of puzzles about agency. I only want to emphasize that in the Christian West this is the root of this cluster of problems, that this root gives them their particular character, and so that we should not be surprised to find other traditions in which they either do not arise at all, or, if they do arise, arise in very different forms.

soul's responsibility and survival after physical death. Once again, since a distinctive feature of all Buddhist philosophical systems is their *rejection* of the view that there is a metaphysical soul (the doctrine of *anātman*), there is no basis here for formulating the problem of the freedom of the will as it develops in Europe.

### 3. *Prañītyasamutpāda* in Action: Why these Problems Can't Arise for a Mādhyamika

With a clear view of the issues at stake when we ask whether we have free will, and whether this is consistent with determinism, and the theological background of that question as it is posed in the West, let us see why *this* problematic can't arise in a Buddhist context. A fundamental tenet of any Buddhist school is that all phenomena are dependently originated. In Madhyamaka Buddhist thought, following Candrakīrti (1992, 2003), this dependency is glossed in three ways.

(1) All phenomena come to be in dependence on causes and conditions, and cease when those causes and conditions are no longer present.

All things arise in dependence on causes and conditions, and this is the meaning of dependent origination. [*Prasannapadā* 2b]<sup>6</sup>

(2) All wholes are dependent upon their parts, and the parts of wholes are dependent for their existence on the wholes of which they are parts.

Although both from the standpoint of reality and from that of everyday life,  
The sevenfold reasoning shows that a chariot cannot be established,  
In everyday life, without analysis  
It is designated in dependence on its parts. [*Madhyamakāvātāra* VI: 159]

The reciprocal dependence of parts on their wholes is taken up a few verses later:

If the chariot were not to exist,  
Without that which possess parts, there would be no parts either.  
Just as when the chariot is burned, there are no longer any parts,  
When the fire of understanding consumes the chariot, it consumes its parts as well.  
[*Madhyamakāvātāra* VI: 161]

(3) The commentary on VI: 169 nicely connects dependence of wholes on their parts with the third sense of dependent origination, viz., that entities are also dependent for their existence as entities on conceptual imputation a theme taken up in greater detail in

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<sup>6</sup> All translations are my own, from Tibetan.

subsequent verses and comments in this text. (See Garfield 1994 and Cowherds 2010 for more detail.)

...Therefore, although dependent origination is generally maintained to be dependence upon conditions, from our perspective, this is not inconsistent with is also being dependence upon mundane nominal conventions.... In this context, to be recognized in everyday life, the conventional designation is clearly understood without the slightest bit of analysis necessary.” [Madhyamakāvātāra-bhasya, p. 259]

The universality of *pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent co-origination ensures that persons and their mental and physical states and actions also arise in this thoroughgoing interdependence. In fact the emptiness of persons of any more substantial being than this, such as the possession of a unitary soul or self, is a central insight to be achieved in one’s moral and metaphysical development on the bodhisattva path to full awakening.

Candrakīrti puts the points this way in the next few verses:

In the same way, although in everyday life, the self is maintained to be  
The appropriator of the aggregates, it is designated on the basis of  
The aggregates, the sensory domains and the six sense faculties.  
The appropriated taken as the object and the self as the agent. [VI: 162]

Since it does not exist, it is neither continuous  
Nor discontinuous, neither arisen nor ceased;  
It has no properties such as permanence,  
Existence, nonexistence, identity or difference. [VI: 163]

The self is simply whatever it is towards which  
Beings constantly develop the attitude of ego-grasping.  
The self arises out of the attitude that something is *mine*.  
Since it becomes manifest unreflectively, it arises from confusion. [VI: 164]

So long as one takes oneself to be a substantial center of subjectivity or agency, as opposed to a causally connected stream of momentary psycho-physical phenomena, one is mired in primal confusion that makes the cultivation of compassion and the liberation from suffering impossible. Only by recognizing that our identities arise only from our own imposition of a unity and coherence on a complex, multifaceted stream of events and processes can we escape that confusion. (Siderits 2005, Garfield in press).

This philosophical position entails that all actions, all thoughts, all intentions, all character traits are causally dependent, and that any unity we ascribe to ourselves over time is merely imputed. This in turn entails that any ethical assessment in which we engage is the assessment of caused events or of merely conventionally designated persons.

Agent causation in the sense imagined by the will-libertarian, is simply inconceivable in this framework. Moreover, Buddhist psychology, not surprisingly, does not posit a general faculty for action—a will.<sup>7</sup> (Siderits 1987, 2008) There is no need to posit anything like this, for there is no theodicy problem for it to solve. Actions, according to Buddhist psychologists, are caused by intentions, but this causation does not require mediation by any special conative faculty. So without a truly existent personal agent, without a category of uncaused events, and without a faculty of will, the “problem of the freedom of the will,” let alone the question of whether a free will is compatible or not with determinism can’t be formulated. The problem seems just as weird from the perspective of a Mādhyamika as would the problem of explaining the Buddha’s omniscience be to a Catholic.

Despite the weirdness of the metaphysical problem as it is formulated in the Christian tradition and taken up in supposedly more secular Western philosophy, however, Mādhyamikas such as Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Śāntideva and others are committed to the view that as agents we are responsible for our own situations and destinies (after all, this the heart of the doctrine of *karma*. Moreover Buddhist moral texts such as *Ratnavālī*, *Catuhṣatakatikka*, *Bodhicāryāvātāra* and others are replete with admonitions to perform certain actions and to refrain from others, and accounts of mental episodes as the primary causes of actions. Reconciliation of this position in the context of *pratītyasamutpāda* is hence of real concern to any Mādhyamika.

#### **4. Some Bad Arguments for Supposed Buddhist Doctrines of Freedom of the Will**

The fact that it is impossible to formulate the thesis of the freedom of the will in a Buddhist framework, or to pose the question of whether free actions are independent of the causal nexus, authored by independent agents has not stopped recent Buddhist philosophers from doing so, or from arguing that Buddhist philosophy entails a doctrine of the freedom of the will. Each of these attempts is motivated by the desire to present Buddhism as a “modern” and hence Western doctrine, one that somehow comes to many

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<sup>7</sup> Or anything that would correspond to an Augustinian notion of *voluntas* at any stage of his philosophical development, or, for that matter, to a Kantian *Wille*.

of the same conclusions to which Western thinkers have arrived. Here is a brief sampler. See Meyers (2010) for a more extensive survey and a more detailed critique.

Bikkhu Bodhi (1995), Potter (1963), and Rhys Davids (1898) each argue in somewhat different ways that *pratītyasamutpāda* is consistent with the freedom of the will because dependent origination is not deterministic. The idea is that dependent origination specifies only that conditions *occasion* events, but not that they *cause* them, where this is supposed to mean that they somehow *give rise to* events, but do not *necessitate* them. Given that there is no necessitation, there is room for freedom to choose. This argument actually looks best in the context of Madhyamaka given Nāgārjuna's critique of causal powers. (Garfield 1994, 1995) But it is still a terrible argument. All Buddhist philosophers, Mādhyamikas included, give universal scope to the thesis that "when this arises, so does that; when this fails to arise, so does that," *viz.*, that any event can be completely explained by reference to prior and simultaneous causes and conditions. Nāgārjuna himself in the famous first verse of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* rejects arising from nothing at all.

A cousin to this argument is Griffiths' (1986) claim that the formula of dependent origination entails only that causes or conditions are necessary for the arising of events, but not that they are sufficient. So, this argument goes, initiation of an action may require the presence of a number of conditions. But these are not sufficient. An act of free will is also required. This is also a terrible argument. First of all, there is no textual evidence whatsoever of a Buddhist doctrine of necessary but insufficient conditions, or of the necessity of an uncaused act to potentiate action. But second, even if this view were accepted as a rational reconstruction of Buddhist action theory, it would be incoherent. For if we are operating even within this novel understanding of the doctrine of dependent origination, the posited act of free will would itself require conditions, and those would be insufficient, resulting in an embarrassing regress.

Jayateilleke (1963) argues that the doctrine of karma necessitates a doctrine of free will. Karma (in the sense of *karmaphala*), this argument continues, is the reward or punishment for action, and reward or punishment would be inappropriate and unjust if

action were simply caused behavior.<sup>8</sup> So, since the doctrine of karmic consequence is central to Buddhist action theory and ethics (it is) and since it is a doctrine of reward and punishment, Buddhist ethics and action theory would be unacceptable if actions are not freely chosen. This argument from justice, however, substantially mistakes both the Buddhist account of karma and the structure of Buddhist ethics more generally. This is a consensus among even those who disagree dramatically among themselves about what the structure of Buddhist ethics is. See Goodman ((2009), Garfield (in press) and Keown (2001) that karmic consequence is *not* reward or punishment; it is causal consequence, pure and simple. As such, there is no question of justice or injustice, just as there is no question of the justice or injustice of a billiard ball moving in response to being struck by a cue ball. And so there is no argument in this quarter for a doctrine of free will, either.

Payutto (1990) argues that since all Buddhist schools accept the claim that action is caused by *cetanā*, and since *cetanā* can be translated as *choice*, it is essential to Buddhist action theory that choice is involved in action. Since choice involves the freedom to opt for any of the open alternatives, Buddhists, this line of argument continues, are committed to free will. This argument relies on a tendentious translation, and a tendentious account of choice. *Cetanā* is indeed a difficult word to translate (see Meyers 2010 on this), but there is a broad consensus that its central meaning is captured by *intent*, *intention*, *intending*, *volition*, etc, none of which implicate the idea of *choice*. Even if one were to translate *cetanā* as choice, though, it would be a further task to argue that a Buddhist, as opposed to a libertarian, doctrine of choice would require our choices to be causeless, a hard row to hoe, as noted above. While this is no an exhaustive survey of arguments to this conclusion, I hope that it makes the case that it is hard to get a discourse of freedom in the (libertarian) Augustinian sense or in the Kantian sense going in this tradition. If we are after an account of agency and responsibility in Madhyamaka thought, we will have to look elsewhere.

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine makes an argument of exactly this sort in *On Free Choice of the Will*.

## 5. Madhyamaka and Persons: The Two Truths

Central to Madhyamaka philosophy is the doctrine of the two truths.<sup>9</sup> (Newland 1992, 2009, Cowherds 2010) Now many Buddhist philosophical schools distinguish between two truths, and they do so in different ways and even for different purposes. Sautrantikas and Vaibhāṣikas, for instance, argue that conventional reality (or truth) is erroneous in that it comprises (refers to) composite entities, which are regarded by adherents to these philosophical schools as illusory, or fabricated. So, one might argue, forests aren't real; their trees are; trees aren't real; leaves and trunks are; and so on... On the other hand, Sautrantikas and Vaibhāṣikas argue, these illusory conventional entities reduce to ultimately real, simple, momentary, causally interacting constituents of reality called *dharmas*. Things that might be conventionally true about wholes (the persistence of the person, for instance) are shown to be literally false, but to reduce to claims that are literally true about dharmas (the momentariness but causal connectedness of the constituents of persons).

While from a Sautrantika or a Vaibhāṣika point of view, we might wonder whether an account of action involving some measure of freedom and responsibility for persons at the conventional level might reduce to an impersonal account of causal processes at the ultimate level (for an excellent articulation of such a position, see Siderits 1987, 2008), this option is not open for the Mādhyamika, for the Madhyamaka account of the two truths neither exempts the conventional from dependent origination nor leaves us with an ultimate truth comprising fundamental constituents. For Madhyamaka is not reductionist at all. (Garfield 2006) For a Madhyamaka, *nothing* exists ultimately, and to say truly that anything exists is to say that it exists conventionally. As Nāgārjuna puts it,

That which is dependent origination  
Is explained to be emptiness.  
That, being a dependent designation  
Is itself the middle way.

There does not exist anything  
That is not dependently arisen.  
Therefore there does not exist anything  
That is not empty. (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV: 18, 19)

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<sup>9</sup> It is important in this context to remember that the Sanskrit *satya* is ambiguous between the English *truth* and *reality*, an ambiguity not salient in Sanskrit philosophy, where this distinction is not really drawn.

(See Garfield 1995, Cowherds 2010 for more on this topic.) . If we are interested in an account of agency and responsibility in Madhyamaka, then, it is important to be clear that we can only be addressing the realm of dependent origination, that is, the realm of conventional truth.

Of course, this applies to persons, and it is into the freedom, responsibility and agency of persons that we inquire. So what can we say about the person? Candrakīrti, in *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya*, (1992, see also Huntington and Wangchen 1989) argues that the person is neither identical to the psychophysical aggregates, not different from them, not a single one of them, nor the collection of them, nor even the owner, controller or possessor of them. None of these alternatives, he argues, can be made intelligible. Instead, he argues, the person is a conceptual imputation, a convenient designation, with no reality apart from that designation. Candrakīrti puts it this way in *Madhyamakāvatāra*:

The self is not the aggregates; and the aggregates  
Are not the self. If there were any difference  
Between them, such ideas would make sense.  
But since there is no such difference, these are just ideas. [VI:142]

The self cannot be maintained to be the possessor of the body;  
Because the self does not exist, it cannot be the possessor of anything.  
Only where there is difference can there be possession, as when one has a cow.  
Or without difference, as in the possession of the body; but the self is neither different nor non-  
different from the body. [143]

The self is not the body; the self does not possess the body;  
The self is not in the body; the body is not in the self;  
All four aggregates are to be understood in this fourfold way. [144]

Therefore, the basis of self-grasping is not an entity.  
It is neither different from the aggregates nor the essence of the aggregates.  
It is neither the basis of the aggregates nor their possessor.  
Instead, it is posited in dependence on the aggregates. [150]

The self can thus be said to be no different from a chariot.  
It, in the same sense, is neither different from, nor identical with its parts.  
Nor does it possess its parts; it does not contain them, and they do not contain it.  
Nor is it the mere structure or mereological sum of its parts. [151]

We are, as Dennett (1992) felicitously put it, “centers of narrative gravity.” That is not to say that persons or their actions do not exist, but rather to say that our mode of existence is merely conventional, merely imputed. (For more on this see Garfield 2006 and Newland 2009.)

If we are to ascribe agency and responsibility, or to engage in moral evaluation in a Madhyamaka framework, then, we will be ascribing agency and responsibility to these nominal entities, and evaluating actions without ultimately existent agents. This may seem a tall order, and one might despair of any discourse of ethics and agency in such a framework. But that would be to give up too soon. After all, even Mahāyāna Buddhism—perhaps especially Mahāyāna Buddhism Madhyamaka Buddhism, has the cultivation of the path to liberation at its core, and that cultivation involves the cultivation of moral qualities, and a commitment to action on behalf of the welfare of all sentient beings so eloquently expounded by Śāntideva in *Bodhicāryāvataṛa*. But how is this possible?

### **6. Agency and Responsibility in Madhyamaka**

For a Mādhyamika, we have noted, our selves are *constructed*. They are constructed through the appropriation of aggregates, through recognizing a body as mine, thoughts as mine, values, dispositions, and intentions as mine. In turn, those physical and cognitive processes are also constructed in relation to that self, and it is appropriated by them. That appropriation and narration of a life is, moreover, not a solo affair. We narrate and construct each other constantly in the hermeneutical ensemble act that is social life. (See Hutto 2008 and Bogdan 2011 for more recent Western developments of this idea, but of course as Nehamas (1985) points out, this idea goes at least back to Nietzsche.) None of us is innocent in our own creation; but at the same time none of us is *autonomous* in that creative activity. Our identities are negotiated, fluid and complex in virtue of being marked by the three universal characteristics of impermanence, interdependence and the absence of any self. It is this frame of context-governed interpretive appropriation, instead of the frame of autonomous, substantial selfhood that sets the metaphysical questions regarding agency, and the moral questions regarding responsibility in Madhyamaka.

What is it to act? As we noted above, it is for our behavior to be determined by reasons, by motives we and/or others, regard as our own. On a Madhyamaka understanding, it is therefore for the causes of our behavior to be part of the narrative that makes sense of our lives, as opposed to being simply part of the vast uninterpreted milieu in which our lives are led, or bits of the narratives that more properly constitute the lives of others. This

distinction is not a *metaphysical* but a *literary* distinction, and so a matter of choice, and sensitive to explanatory purposes. That sensitivity, on the other hand, means that the choice is not *arbitrary*. We can follow Nietzsche here. For what do we take responsibility and for what are we assigned responsibility? Those acts we interpret—or which others interpret for us—as our own, as constituting part of the basis of imputation of our own identities.

Let us return to the three cases of defenestration considered earlier. When I propose to jump in order avoid living through global warming and the decline of Australian cricket, the conditions that motivate my act are cognitive and emotional states I take to be my own, and which others who know me would regard as mine. The narrative that constructs the conventional self that is the basis of my individuation includes them, simply in virtue of our psychology and social practices. This, then, is, uncontroversially, an action.

When you toss me from the window against my will, the causes of my trajectory lie in what we would instead, and uncontroversially, but again, on conventional, hermeneutical grounds, interpret as parts of *your* biography. This is no action of *mine*. The agency lies with *you*, not on metaphysical grounds, but on conventional grounds, not on the discovery of agent causation in your will, not in mine, but based upon the plausible narrative we tell of the event and of each other's lives as interpretable characters.<sup>10</sup>

The interesting questions arise concerning the intermediate case of coercion. We have seen that there are two ways to take this case, and this is as it should be. For there are many ways we might construct a narrative of this case. In one story, I am the passive victim of your blackmail; seen in that way, what we read as the causes of my jumping are your actions not mine. Reading the case this way, agency is assigned to you, and not to

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to remember that not all narratives are equally good. Some makes good sense of our lives, or those of others; some are incoherent; some are facile and self-serving; some are profound and revealing. It is possible for people to disagree about whether a particular event is an action or not, or about the attribution of responsibility. It is possible for us to wonder about whether we should feel remorse for a particular situation or not. These questions are in the end, on this account, questions about which narratives make the most sense. While these questions may not always be easy (or even possible to settle), the fact that they arise saves this view from the facile relativism that would issue from the observation that we can always tell *some* story on which this is an action of mine, and *some* story on which it is not, and so that there is simply no fact of the matter, and perhaps no importance to the question.

me. In another narrative, I make the noble sacrifice in the face of circumstances beyond my control. Here we explain the jumping on the grounds of my own character and desires, locating the agency in my person, not yours. And of course there is a richer, more nuanced story in which we say that while I may not be responsible for the circumstances that forced me to make the ultimate sacrifice, when faced with the hard choice I made it, nonetheless, assigning responsibility according to the assignment of causes to bases of personal imputation. How to choose between narratives in particular legal or moral discourses is, as it should be, an interesting and difficult question. But the important point from a Madhyamaka perspective is this: In asking how best to tell this story, and so in asking where to assign agency, we are never forced to look to a will, to its freedom, or to a metaphysics of agent causation.

On this Madhyamaka understanding of personal identity established through imputation—a view with important affinities to those of Hume and Nietzsche in the West—we *do* make choices, often hard choices; we do perform acts that merit moral assessment; we do assign responsibility to agents for their actions, and absolve others; and we assess acts morally. But none of this requires us to talk about freedom or about a faculty of will. All of these moral practices can be better understood in the framework of *pratītyasamutpāda*. From this perspective, a choice occurs when we experience competing motives, consider alternative reasons, some of which could, if dominant, occasion alternative actions, and one set of reasons dominates, *causing* the action, and *caused to cause the action* by our background psychological dispositions and other cognitive and conative states. Some actions are expressive of and conducive to virtue, happiness, liberation and the welfare of others and merit praise; others are not. But there need be no more to moral assessment than that.<sup>11</sup> Everything that the post-Augustinian libertarian West buys with the gold coin of the freedom of the will along with all of the metaphysical problems it raises, are bought by the Mādhyamika much more cheaply with the paper currency of mere imputation.

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<sup>11</sup> This also indicates why, on a Madhyamaka view, persons can be held responsible for actions even when they involve no explicit choice, as in Frankfurt-style cases. Choice is not necessary to the kind of interpretation and authorship at issue in this account of action.

## 7. Freedom on the Path; Freedom from *Samsāra*

Mādhyamikas do talk about freedom however—they pursue liberation from suffering, and so from cyclic existence; freedom from the *kleśas*, or maladaptive psychological processes. And this, to be sure, is a kind of freedom. It is the freedom of our actions—mental, verbal and physical—from determination by those aspects of our personality we wish to write out of the narrative. At present, many of my actions are driven by fear, anger, despair, greed, and so forth, states that I appropriate or that others assign to me as part of my biography. As a consequence, I interpret a great deal of the events in which I participate as occasioned by the acts of others—those who threaten or annoy me, or with whom I see myself in competition, and react to them on that basis. This is the basis of vice. (See Garfield in press.)

But the path to liberation, seen in the context of a self that is but a conceptual imputation, is a path to the authorship of a narrative in which a better self is the protagonist, a self whose actions are conditioned by compassion, sympathetic joy, generosity and confidence, by responsiveness as opposed to reaction. The self I imagine at the higher stages of the path is free in ways that the self I construct now is not. More of its acts are actions it claims to author, and the conditions of those actions are morally salutary rather than counterproductive. But the freedom achieved through the cultivation of this path, understood in the Madhyamaka framework of Candrakīrti and Śāntideva, is not a freedom of the *will*, but *authority*—a freedom of a conceptually imputed person from the bars of a self-constructed prison, a freedom that in no way demands any causal indeterminism. And when that freedom is complete, there is simply nothing left to lose.

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