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Confessions of a Deluded Westerner

Michael Brent

University of Denver

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Michael Brent[1]

Abstract

In this paper, I aim to make two general points. First, I claim that the discussions in Repetti (*Buddhist*) assume different, sometimes conflicting, notions of free will, so the guiding question of the book is not as clear as it could be. Second, according to Buddhist tradition, the path to enlightenment requires rejecting the delusional belief in the existence of a persisting self. I claim that if there is no persisting self, there are no intentional actions; and, if there are no intentional actions, there is no hope for Buddhist enlightenment. Thus, rejecting the allegedly delusional belief in a persisting self has disastrous consequences, both for the existence of intentional action and for Buddhist soteriology.

1 Whither Free Will?

In the Anglophone-analytic philosophical tradition, the concept of free will is rife with controversy and, at times, confusion. Some philosophers believe that the notion of free will concerns a special ability, a capacity

[1] Philosophy Department, University of Denver. Email: michael.brent@du.edu.

typically described in terms of rational choice.[2] Other philosophers believe that the concept of free will is about a unique kind of cause, an allegedly uncaused cause that operates independently of the events and laws of nature that comprise the ongoing history of the universe.[3] Still others claim that the notion of free will deals with alternative possibilities, distinct courses of action that could have been pursued had you acted otherwise than you did.[4] Indeed, there are so many ways of understanding the concept of free will that it might be essentially contested in the sense articulated by Gallie.[5] Given that the concept is understood so variously, it is incumbent upon us to state exactly which notion of free will we intend to use on any given occasion.

Unfortunately, there are multiple, sometimes conflicting, concepts of free will used throughout the discussions collected in Repetti (*Buddhist*). For example, at the outset of the book, when introducing "the free will puzzle," four different ideas are brought into view: The first idea is that free will involves "the feeling that what we do is *up to us*." Second, that "the action we consider free is the one we intended," in the sense that "we *caused* it." Third, that if the laws of nature necessitate what happens, so that what takes place is the inevitable consequence of prior conditions operating in conjunction with those laws of nature, "then the sense that our doings are *up to us* seems illusory." Fourth, that if our actions "result from *purely random* processes . . . how can we think we *authored* them?" (Repetti *Buddhist* xix, original emphases)

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[2] See O'Connor (*Free*).

[3] See Chisholm (*Person*), Clarke, O'Connor (*Persons*), and other defenders of agent-causation.

[4] See van Inwagen, Ginet, Kane (*Significance*), and other incompatibilists.

[5] See also Timpe, and Vargas.

Putting these ideas together, the puzzle seems to be this: assume that free actions must be accompanied by a particular feeling that what we are doing is up to us, and assume that such actions must be caused by us in a way that accords with what we intend to do. If our actions are the inevitable consequence of prior conditions operating in conjunction with the laws of nature, or if they are the chance result of purely random processes operating around or within us, then that feeling is illusory. But, if the feeling that what we are doing is up to us is illusory, the action in question is not free.

There are two related points worth noting here. First, the concept of free will at issue is not yet clear. We are not told whether the feeling in question is a type of bodily sensation, or proprioceptive awareness of the position and movement of our limbs, or non-observational knowledge of what we are doing, or something else. Even if we were provided with further information about this feeling, it is doubtful that acting with free will *requires* that you experience any particular feeling when acting in the relevant way. As a general point about the phenomenology of agency, whether free or otherwise, there are well-known illusions of bodily movement that challenge the reliability of our experiences when acting.[6] Arguably, instead of requiring that you undergo any particular feeling when acting, free will requires that you exert a unique kind of *control* over the relevant action, regardless of what you might be feeling or experiencing at that moment in time.[7]

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[6] See the papers collected in Roessler and Eilan, especially Marcel.

[7] For discussion of the claim that free will requires control, see O'Connor (*Free*), who says: "Our survey of several themes in philosophical accounts of free will suggests that a—perhaps *the*—root issue is that of *control*."

Second, while it might be true that actions performed with free will are appropriately[8] caused and sustained by the relevant intentions and other rationalizing states of mind, free will requires more than this. Appropriately causing and sustaining your own actions in ways that accord with your intentions is typically assumed to be a minimal requirement on intentional action, but not free will.[9] Since the origin of the relevant intention might be another agent, as in cases of acting under threat or coercion, acting in accordance with an intention does not ensure that you are acting with free will. Again, arguably, free will requires that you wield a particular form of *control* over the relevant action, regardless of whether the action accords with the relevant intentions or other rationalizing states of mind.

Indeed, in the recent Anglophone-analytic philosophical tradition, having free will requires a robust kind of control over the relevant intentional action. This kind of control has been understood in at least one of two ways.[10] On the one hand, control has been described in terms of *alternative possibilities*. On this notion, to act with free will there must exist genuinely open alternative possibilities at the time you perform the action in question, and when you perform that action it must be that you *could have done otherwise* than you in fact did. Here, it is not merely that you brought about your action in such a way that it accords with your intentions, or that its performance is accompanied by the feeling of it being up to you. Satisfying these conditions would suggest that your action is intentional. Given this modal or counterfactual notion of control, satisfying these conditions would not suggest that you could have done

[8] The qualification "appropriately" is used to rule out cases of deviant causation. For a famous case of deviance, see Davidson (*Freedom*).

[9] See Bishop, Brand, Bratman, Davidson (*Action*), Enç, Goldman, and Mele (*Springs*) for such an account of intentional action.

[10] For helpful discussion of these two alternatives, see Timpe.

otherwise than you did, so it would not suggest that you acted with free will.

This notion of control is controversial, in part because the existence of genuinely open alternative possibilities seems to require the assumption that the universe is indeterministic. If the universe is indeterministic, then whatever happens is not determined by antecedent conditions and the laws of nature. If so, it would seem to be a matter of *luck* whether or not you perform any particular intentional action, and this would seem to undermine the sense in which you are controlling its occurrence.[11] In light of such controversy, another robust notion of control has been described in terms of *sourcehood*. Here, to have free will at the time you perform the relevant intentional action you must be the primary source of its occurrence. It is not that you could have done otherwise, or that you brought about your action so that it accords with your intentions, or that its performance is accompanied by the feeling of it being up to you. Rather, being the ultimate source of the relevant action requires that you *cause* its occurrence in a specific way, so that your action originates with and is controlled by *you*, rather than with events or conditions that you do not control. When you are the ultimate source, you play a necessary causal role in the production of your action, a contribution that cannot be traced back to causally sufficient events or conditions that exist independently of you and which you do not control.[12]

Now, if we compare the notion of free will that requires either form of robust control to "the free will puzzle" (Repetti *Buddhist* xix) introduced at the outset of the book and to the various notions of free will used in several of its chapters, we will see that there are different, sometimes conflicting, concepts employed throughout. This is problematic,

[11] See Clarke, Mele (*Autonomous*; *Free*), Pereboom (*Living*), and van Inwagen.

[12] See Pereboom (*Free*).

because it renders ambiguous the question that guides the book, whether there are Buddhist perspectives on free will, and makes the answers dependent upon the particular notion(s) of free will, if any, assumed by each author, rather than something more generally applicable.

For instance, Meyers (182-192) draws a distinction between two concepts. First, what she refers to as empirical freedom of action, "the fact that human beings *appear* to have *some degree* of choice and control with respect to their external actions" (182, her emphasis). Second, what she calls empirical free will, "the fact that human beings *appear* to have *some degree* of choice and control with respect to . . . their internal mental states" (182, her emphasis). Notice that what Meyers describes here is not a feeling that the relevant action is up to you, nor the claim that the action must accord with what you intend to do, so this is not the notion of free will that figures in the puzzle that frames the book. Moreover, having *some degree* of choice and control over your bodily actions and internal mental states is a plausible requirement on performing an action intentionally. But, arguably, in order for an intentional action to be free, the kind of control that you wield over its occurrence must be sufficiently robust in either of the two ways noted above.

Repetti (*Agentless* 193-206) seems to employ yet a different notion of free will. He refers to "a heightened form of self-regulative ability," which he describes as the "ability to detect, discern, and disengage from the volitional impetus of any mental state," and "choose whether or not to act on [that mental state or the relevant component]" (196). The problem, though, is that however heightened this ability might be, unless you control its exercise in either of the robust ways noted above, using this self-regulative ability intentionally does not imply that you could have done otherwise, or that you were the ultimate source of the relevant action. Unless the sort of control that you have when exercising this self-regulative ability satisfies either of these more robust requirements, it

does not matter how sophisticated this ability might be: its exercise will not yet be free. Similarly, for Harvey (158-169) the issue of free will concerns "our ability for self-direction" through which we "have a degree of freedom" that can be cultivated by following the Buddha's teachings (161). Here, too, what Harvey describes in terms of self-direction is not yet a notion of free will. Without ensuring that the kind of control that you wield over your capacity for directing your bodily actions and thoughts is robust in either of the above ways, we do not yet have in view a notion of free will. Likewise, according to Gowans (11-21),

> Buddha thought that human beings were capable of reflecting on and understanding his teaching, accepting it on this basis, forming intentions to carry it out, and acting on these intentions . . . . When it is said that the Buddha accepted a notion of free will, perhaps this is all that is meant. (18)

Perhaps, but this does not yet describe conditions under which an action is performed with free will. The reason is that being capable of reflecting on and understanding the relevant teachings, and accepting and intending to act on those teachings, can occur in the absence of either form of robust control noted above. So, what Meyers, Repetti, Harvey, and Gowans here describe are not notions of free will, but conditions under which an action is performed intentionally.

Compare these notions of free will to Garfield (45-58) and Flanagan (59-71), who assume that free will requires agent causation. As Garfield (45) puts it, free will requires "uncaused *agent causation*," which, as noted below, is not correct. He thinks that:

> motivations for most modern thought on free will are twofold. The first is metaphysical—to understand agency and personhood, and the distinction between what we do

> and what happens. The second—closely connected—is ethical and legal. We distinguish between actions for which we are responsible and events for which, though we may be causally implicated, we are not responsible (46).

Notice that the distinction between what we do and what happens, and between actions for which we are responsible and events for which we are not, are different in kind. The first concerns the difference between actions that we perform intentionally and actions that merely happen, such as the distinction between stepping on my foot on purpose and accidentally doing so because the subway unexpectedly jostled you in my direction. Intuitively, although both are actions that you have performed and things that you have done, only the former is an expression of your agency, because only the former is something you do intentionally.

Crucially, it is a *further* question, addressed by the second distinction, whether you are responsible for your intentional actions. That distinction concerns the difference between intentional actions that are free and those that are not. This distinction arises *within* the category of intentional actions, and is about identifying just those intentional actions that are free. To illustrate, consider a scenario that Garfield mentions, in which he is threatened into jumping out a window to his untimely death. He says, "Plausibly, I jump freely" but "I did not freely commit suicide" (47). This does not seem to be the correct analysis of what is happening. Arguably, because of the threat, there is no sense in which jumping out the window is free. Because of the threat, he could not have done otherwise than he did, and he was not the ultimate source of his action, as someone else made him jump. Thus, Garfield does not control that action in either of the robust ways that seem to be required for free will. Nevertheless, his jumping out the window is *intentional*: he is not pushed out the window, he does not accidentally slip and fall to his

death, and he knows exactly what he is doing. He jumped on purpose, with a specific goal in mind, but, tragically, he was not free in doing so. When assuming that jumping out the window is free and causing his own death is not, it seems that Garfield conflates free action and intentional action.

Flanagan (59-71) also assumes that the notion of free will "requires agent causation," which itself is "a bad idea that never stops giving" (60). This is not correct. There are accounts of free will that do not require agent causation. For instance, some libertarians and compatibilists alike affirm the existence of free will *without* assuming any notion of agent causation.[13] Moreover, there are accounts of agent causation that do not require the existence of what Chisholm notoriously called "a prime mover unmoved," or an uncaused cause (*Human* 12).[14] Indeed, the notion of agent causation concerns only the *relata* of the causal relation. By itself, it requires only that agents, understood as particular kinds of objects, are capable of causing effects. I return to the notion of agent causation below.

Last, but not least, when introducing two notions of free will that philosophers working in the Anglophone-analytic tradition have discussed, Friquegnon first says that "actions to be free must be intentional and avoidable," where avoidable means "that if one chose to do X at time T1, if one then 'rolled back the clock' one could, all things being the same, choose to do Y at T1 instead, X and Y being two different courses of action" (107). This is one way of stating the modal or counterfactual

[13] For the former, see Wiggins, Ekstrom (*Free*; *Toward*), and Kane (*Significance*; *Free*). For the latter, see Fischer, Fischer and Ravizza, Frankfurt, Haji, Mele (*Autonomous*), and Wallace.

[14] Historically, defenders of agent causation have assumed that when the agent acts with free will they are an "uncaused cause" of the relevant action, but this is not a necessary feature of the view. See Brent, Markosian, and Nelkin for alternatives.

notion of control required for free will. Next, she provides another notion of free will, which drops the modal notion of control and instead says that "a free act is an action that is caused by a rational intention" (107). As Friquegnon correctly recognizes, this second notion is problematic because without the modal or counterfactual requirement, "it implies that no events, strictly speaking, could have turned out differently" (107). Curiously, when discussing the notion of free will as it figures in the Buddhist tradition, Friquegnon says that on "the most basic level, free action is conceived of as the absence of external constraint" (109). Unfortunately, an absence of external constraint does not ensure that at the moment in time when you acted, you could have done otherwise, or were the ultimate source of your action. That is, while an absence of external constraint might ensure that your action is intentional, it does not guarantee that you controlled your action in either of the robust ways that, arguably, are required for free will. If so, then whatever the Buddhist tradition might be said to threaten, it is not yet clear that it threatens a notion of free will.

2. No Self? No Action

In this second section, I argue that a core aspect of the Buddhist tradition does threaten something that is valued quite dearly, and this is the second general point that I would like to make. I suggest that the no-self theory found in Buddhist texts does not threaten the possibility of free will. It threatens more than free will. Worse, if there is no persisting self, this would undermine the possibility of intentional action *per se*. For without a persisting self who initiates, sustains, and controls the action in question, there is no intentional action in the first place. Thus, we

might say that in the absence of a persisting self, there is no agency at all, free or otherwise.[15]

Before elaborating this claim, we should make two preliminary clarifications. First, it is worth noting that philosophers working in the Anglophone-analytic tradition use the terms "agent," "self," "person," and "soul" in a variety of different ways. Here, I assume that "self" and "agent" are synonymous, and refer to you as the kind of entity that you fundamentally are. I do not use "person" because of its connection to legal contexts, e.g., questions of rights and protections, and I do not use "soul" because of its connection to the beliefs and practices of particular faith groups, e.g., Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

Second, we should say something about the Buddhist no-self theory as it is articulated in the various chapters of Repetti (*Buddhist*). In particular, we should identify the ostensibly problematic notion of self that Buddhists claim is delusional, and we should distinguish the Buddhist notion of self that is offered in its place. Historically, the Buddhist no-self theory can be understood as a response to the Brahmanical postulation of an eternal, unchanging, and non-physical self.[16] On Gowans's way of describing the allegedly problematic notion, the key to Buddhist enlightenment is the realization that there "is no distinct and unchanging self over and above [your mental events], or somehow at the center holding all of [your mental events] together" (19). Likewise, as Strawson describes it, for the Buddhist, "there's no such thing as the persisting individual self" (81). As Abelson puts it, "there is no persisting essence of

[15] For a similar claim about conditions under which agency is impossible, see Steward.

[16] Nearly every Hindu system of belief and practice is committed to the existence of a self, typically understood to be non-physical, unchanging, and eternally existing. However, as Ram-Prasad illustrates, the situation is more complex than this. Different Hindu systems adhere to different accounts of the self, some of which (e.g., classical Advaita Vedānta) do not assume it is a non-physical substance.

any individual, no substantial 'I' standing beneath or behind an individual's constantly arising and perishing parts and properties" (148). And, according to Siderits, the belief that mental events, such as perceptions, desires, intentions, etc., "must have an owner arises from the fact that we have conceptually constructed a substance, the mind, which holds a bundle of such tropes together" (137).[17]

It is not obvious that these remarks describe a single notion of an agent. The metaphorical language makes it challenging to interpret philosophically, but two ideas seem to be at issue. First, to say that as an agent you exist "beneath," "behind," "over and above," or "at the center" of your perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, and other mental events is a way of saying that you are *not identical* with those mental events, either individually or collectively.[18] The idea seems to be that while your perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, and other mental events come and go, changing over time, as an agent you exist in a way that differs from your fluctuating mental events. A useful metaphor could be that while the roof and gutters of your house are replaced and hence change over time, your house continues to exist throughout this process. Your house is numerically one and the same entity throughout, in the sense that although some of its material parts have changed, the house itself has not.[19] Before, during, and after the change in such parts,

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[17] Tropes are particularized, i.e., non-repeatable, features of objects, such as the specific shade of red had by my particular hockey jersey. See Heil for useful discussion.

[18] Although I will not here phrase it in terms of your body and its parts, the point about non-identity is applicable to both the mental and the physical domains.

[19] It does not follow that the house itself cannot be changed. Rather, what is denied is that the relation between the house and its parts must be one of material constitution, where constitution is identity and the house *just is* (identical to) the parts of which it is composed. See Paul and Varzi for helpful discussion.

the formal features or relations that make your house the specific kind of object that it is remain unmodified.[20] Call this the claim of *Non-Identity*.

The second underlying idea seems to be this. To say that as an agent you are a "persisting individual," that is, a "substantial" "essence" that "holds together" and "owns" your mental events, is a way of saying that you are numerically one entity whose existence provides the *constitutive conditions* for your perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, and other mental events.[21] The idea seems to be that those mental events are *yours* rather than mine because they are features of *you* rather than me. Here, a helpful metaphor could be that this specific roof and gutter are located precisely where they are rather than atop another structure, and have the unique appearance, texture, layout, etc., that they do, because they are part of *your house* rather than mine. Your house provides the constitutive conditions for this roof and gutter being what they are, making them the particular roof and gutters that they are, i.e., features of your house.[22] Call this the claim of *Constitution*.

Now, neither *Non-Identity* nor *Constitution* require controversial metaphysical assumptions. Thinking of the agent in these ways emphatically does not require that we accept an Abrahamic notion of the agent as an eternally existing, non-physical soul, or a Brahmanical notion of an eternal, unchanging, and non-physical self, or Cartesian mind-body interactionist dualism. One can reject such assumptions while accepting

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[20] For present purposes, I remain neutral about the precise status of the relevant formal features and relations, so long as they are not material (i.e., composed of matter). For useful discussion in the context of Medieval philosophy, see Cross.

[21] See note 18 above: the point about constitutive conditions is applicable to the mental and physical domains.

[22] Again, for present purposes, I remain neutral about the precise status of the relevant constitutive conditions, so long as they are not material (i.e., composed of matter). For useful discussion of related issues in the context of Medieval philosophy, see Cross.

that as an agent, you are not identical with any of your mental events, and that you provide the constitutive conditions for your mental events, making them yours rather than someone else's. To accept *Non-Identity* is to claim that you persist through time in a manner that differs from your mental events. Such persistence does not require that you exist eternally, permanently, or unchangingly. Likewise, *Constitution* claims that your mental events are attributes of your mental life, not mine. Providing these constitutive conditions does not require that you exist as a simple, indivisible, eternal substance. Rather, I suggest that you persist as a particular kind of living animal, viz., as a human being.[23] As such, you undergo the relevant mental events as conscious subject, have numerous physical parts and properties, exist for a finite duration of time, endure numerous kinds of change without annihilation, stand in a variety of relations with other objects, and initiate, sustain, and control your intentional actions.[24] I return to this below.

In place of the allegedly delusional notion of the persisting self, the Buddhist account of the self suggests that we are, as Gowans describes us, merely an "ensemble of ever-changing and causally dependent processes" (19). We are, as Abelson depicts us, "only a series of distinct, momentary collections of psychophysical constituents" (148), that is, a bundle of the five aggregates of physical form, feeling or sensation, cognition or perception, mental formations or volition, and consciousness that figure in Buddhist ontology. According to Siderits, the claim that human beings are enduring substances is a merely conventional truth that depends on the beliefs and practices of human beings, which are ultimately tropes, i.e., "particular momentary occurrences" (137). Harvey argues that for Buddhists, when we hold another agent responsi-

[23] For a similar claim about our status as human beings, see Ismael.

[24] Note that the control at issue here is not the robust kind of control required for free will. See Shepherd for an account of control over intentional action.

ble for performing an action, this does "not imply that such a past action was done by a substantial, still-existent Self, but only that it was done by an earlier portion of the stream-of-states that the person now is, rather than any other stream-of-states" (159). That is,

> actions are done by the kind-of-person-one-has-been-so far, but this is 'permanent' only in an approximate sense, as a cluster of mental and physical process-events with a reasonably consistent, but still changeable, pattern to it. This is the only kind of 'thing' that can be an agent of action. (Harvey 160)

Again, the metaphorical language makes it challenging to interpret philosophically, but the underlying idea seems to be this. For the Buddhist, as an agent you are a "stream," "series," "ensemble," "bundle," or "cluster" of physical form, feeling or sensation, cognition or perception, mental formations or volition, and consciousness, i.e., the five aggregates of Buddhist ontology. At any given moment in time and location in space, you are an aggregate-involving event. Across space and time, you exist as a succession of such events that stand in the appropriate relations to each other.[25] But, herein lies a problem, which is the second general point that I would like to make. Within a Buddhist ontology that assumes that successions of aggregate-involving events comprise you as an agent, the cause of your intentional actions would have to be

[25] Though I will not pursue the point here, I want to register a potential worry about the claim that you are nothing but a succession of aggregate-involving events extended over time, e.g., a "stream-of-states." If so, in virtue of what fact is *this* stream-of-states identical to you, and *that* stream-of-states identical to me? And, in virtue of what fact is this stream-of-states identical to you *now*, and that stream-of-states identical to you at a *different* moment in time? It is not obvious that we can answer these questions while remaining faithful to a Buddhist ontology comprised of all and only aggregate-involving events.

one or more of these aggregate-involving events. Assume that among the five aggregates the cause of your intentional actions is a particular volition, such as an intention to perform the relevant action. Volitions are mental events the occurrence of which appropriately causes and sustains the corresponding movement of your body, which is yet another event. Crucially, your volitional formations and other mental events are not something the occurrence of which you, or anything else, are controlling. Your mental events are the effect of the occurrence of prior events over which you equally exert no control. If that is the case, then all that exists are sequences of events taking place as the consequence of prior sequences of events, *ad infinitum*, and nothing is controlling what is happening. But, if nothing is controlling what is happening, then there can be no intentional actions, for intentional actions are precisely those episodes in your life that you control. Hence, intentional action is impossible where only aggregate-involving events exist and causally interact with other such events, and nothing is controlling what takes place.[26]

Goodman comes close to recognizing this point, when he says that because "there is no basic, irreducible self," it follows that "we are not responsible [for our actions] in any way that would generate basic desert" (36). Instead, he says, for Buddhists, "there is no sense of being a person who acts; rather, *actions emerge through spontaneous responsiveness*" (38, emphasis added). The point about the absence of moral responsibility can be made without assuming that as an agent you are "basic" and "irreducible." Rather, so long as there exists all and only aggregate-involving events causing other such events, *pace* Goodman, what emerges though spontaneous responsiveness cannot be intentional action.

[26] Note that this claim does not require that causation is deterministic. Rather, if all that exists are events standing in causal relation with other events and nobody (i.e., no agent) is controlling anything, the claim is that there can be no intentional actions, which are paradigmatic instances of things we control.

Spontaneous responses are no doubt things that we do, like jolting in reaction to an unexpected loud noise. But, importantly, such responses are not intentional actions: they are not things that we control on purpose, with a goal in mind, for a reason, knowingly as such, etc. As a result, given the Buddhist ontology, there is no intentional action.

I suggest that intentional action requires the existence of a particular agent that persists through time in a way that differs from their mental and bodily events, and that initiates, sustains, and controls the relevant actions. This is not a suggestion that can be fully defended here, but the core idea can be stated rather simply.[27] The idea is that intentional action *requires* agent causation. Crucially, this does not imply that particular agents are non-physical, eternal, changeless substances, something that could exist entirely independently of their various bodily parts, physical attributes, and mental events. Equally as crucial, this does not imply that when an agent is performing the relevant action, she must act as an uncaused cause, distinct from the events and laws of nature that comprise the ongoing history of the universe, nor that causation is indeterministic. This requires only that agents are persisting kinds of *objects* that are not identical with any of their mental or bodily events, considered individually or collectively, and that initiate, sustain, and control the intentional actions that they perform.

On a Buddhist ontology where agents exist as nothing but collections of the five aggregates, nobody is doing anything, intentionally or otherwise. Mental and bodily events are taking place and causally interacting in appropriate ways, but because there are no *persisting objects*, there are no agents moving their bodies and controlling their states of mind intentionally, i.e., on purpose, with a goal in mind, knowingly as such, etc. Thus, before we are in a position to decide whether Buddhism

[27] See Brent for elaboration and defence.

threatens free will, we must explain *how it is* that agents are capable of performing such intentional actions in the first place, given this ontology. If the claim made above is correct, a Buddhist ontology renders this explanatory task unlikely to succeed. Worse, if this ontology undermines the existence of intentional action, then intentionally embarking upon the path to enlightenment with the aim of achieving the soteriological goals of Buddhist practice is not possible. To many Buddhists, this should be quite troubling.

3. Concluding Remarks

Arguably, our world would be drastically improved if human suffering were reduced or altogether eliminated. Buddhism offers a path towards the elimination of suffering. An essential step along that path is the rejection of a deeply held belief that many people find habitual and even inescapable. The belief in question concerns the existence of oneself as a particular, enduring agent. More specifically, it concerns the existence of a persisting agent that is distinct from its physical body and its continuously changing states of mind. As part of the path towards the eradication of suffering, Buddhism rejects this belief as delusional. By discarding this delusional belief, the thought is, we can learn how to let go of various forms of attachment that lead to suffering, and thus improve our well-being.

Using the texts collected in Repetti (*Buddhist*) as my foil, I have claimed that accepting a Buddhist ontology in place of the belief in a persisting agent undermines the possibility of intentional action. In an ontology where all that exists are aggregate-involving events standing in the relevant causal relations to each other, there is no place for intentional action. Events happen, but nothing controls what takes place. This is especially worrisome given the pivotal role of intentional mental ac-

tion within Buddhist practices. For such practices involve learning how to control your conscious mental life in order to cultivate peace and tranquility. By learning how to control your reactions to external stimuli and developing introspective awareness, you learn to regulate your own cognitive processes and become more focused and concentrated. Arguably, such practices are, or constitutively involve, intentional mental actions that you perform with a specific goal in mind.[28] Thus, those who endorse a Buddhist ontology must provide an account of intentional action that coheres with their austere ontological commitments, and that explains how such practices are possible in the first place. Only then can we inquire whether Buddhism might threaten free will.

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[28] See Upton and Brent for discussion of meditative practices and mental action.

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