

2018

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Recommended Citation

Repetti, Rick, "It Wasn't Us: Reply to Michael Brent" (2018). *CUNY Academic Works*.

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/179

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It Wasn't Us: Reply to Michael Brent

Rick Repetti¹

Abstract

In “Confessions of a Deluded Westerner,” Michael Brent insists no contributions to *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* (Repetti) even *address* free will because none deploy the criteria for free will that Western (*incompatibilist*) philosophers identify: the ability to do *otherwise* under identical conditions, and the ability to have one’s choices be *up to oneself*. Brent claims the criteria and abilities in that anthology are criteria for *intentional action*, but not all intentional actions are *free*. He also insists that Buddhism, ironically, cannot even accept intentional action, because, on his analysis, intentionality requires an agent, which Buddhism rejects. I have four responses: (i) Brent ignores the other half of the debate, *compatibilism*, in both Western and Buddhist philosophy, represented in the anthology by several contributors; (ii) the autonomy of Buddhist meditation virtuosos is *titanic* compared to Brent’s autonomy criteria, which latter are relatively mundane and facile, rather than

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something Buddhists fail to rise up to; (iii) such titanic Buddhist autonomy challenges, and possibly defeats, all major Western arguments against free will; and (iv) several contributors address the possibility of agentless agency. These responses could have been taken right out of the anthology, not only from my contributions.

Introduction

Coming from a Western analytic philosophical perspective, and bringing a degree of conceptual precision thereby, Michael Brent makes certain interesting claims about, and analyses of, certain conceptions of free will, for which he is to be commended. However, I see no need to remark specifically upon what we agree about, but only to remark about those claims to which I take objection. Brent raises the level of the discussion by bringing a degree of clarity and precision to certain criteria for free will, but not enough, as I hope to show. He also seems unaware that the replies to his critique, which should go without saying, are already quite visible in the anthology that he critiques, so I doubt anything I will say here was not already stated there.

Brent's Objections and My Replies

Brent's main objection against most of the contributions to the anthology is that none of them rise up to the level of addressing free will, which he simply assumes is the sort of free will that *incompatibilists* have in mind, namely, that which satisfies two criteria: (i) in choosing or doing X, the agent could have chosen or done otherwise under identical conditions

(which is typically taken to be impossible in a deterministic world),² and (ii) in choosing or doing X, it was entirely *up to* the agent, such that nothing else caused the agent to do X. These are, respectively, *leeway* and *source* autonomy: the agent had *leeway* to make alternative choices, other than the one she made, and nothing caused her to do so, in which case she is the *source* of her choice. Brent faults most of the contributors to *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* (Repetti), basically, for failing to address these criteria. Instead, he insists, all the criteria they adduce, and all the abilities they appeal to, in what they take to be discussions of free will, are not about free will at all. At most, he claims, they are about intentional action, but intentional actions may or may not be free.

Brent thinks the intentional actions that Buddhists mistakenly appeal to, then, miss the mark: they are not obviously free actions. It is as if, by analogy, Buddhist philosophers were presenting a theory of human beings, but only set forth criteria that do not differentiate human beings from other primates. To keep with this analogy, Brent's response seems to presuppose that there are only male human beings, whereas the better part of the anthology that he critiques is devoted to describing female human beings.

Brent is to be commended for noticing that several of the contributors to *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* (Repetti) do not explicitly address the two leading Western (incompatibilist) conceptions of free will, the ability *to do otherwise* under identical conditions and the ability to have it that one's choices are *up to* one, which conceptions are held by both those who think these criteria are satisfied (libertarians) and those who think

² Cf. Repetti (*Buddhism*), where I argue that there is a causal/counterfactual sense, consistent with determinism, in which agents could have done otherwise under identical conditions, based on an analysis of "could" that does not beg the question; see Repetti (*Counterfactual*) for a more elaborate counterfactual analysis of autonomy as consistent with determinism.

they are not (hard determinists). Both are incompatibilists: they agree that these abilities are incompatible with determinism, but the former insists free will obtains and thus determinism is false, and the latter insists that determinism is true, and thus there is no free will.

Brent is also to be commended for taking a strong position about what free will requires. This position is important, for many Buddhist scholars entering this discussion are relatively unfamiliar with the incredibly rich taxonomy and dialectical distribution of positions that have evolved in the Western philosophical literature on the subject in the past century or so. Thus, Brent brings an insistence on a level of analytic precision where it is admittedly often lacking. After all, Buddhist philosophy is a distinct philosophical modality, with its own taxonomy and dialectical history. Similarly, Western philosophers entering its fray often need to be pressed from the other side in ways that are analogous to what Brent is doing here for Buddhists. He is thus, again, correct to claim that the two criteria that (roughly, only half of) Western analytic philosophers consider central to free will are the two he presses, namely, *leeway autonomy*, the *ability to do otherwise* under identical conditions, and *source autonomy*, the ability to have it be the case that one's choices and actions are *up to oneself*.

However, roughly only half of the positions in logical space—that is, within the matrix of logical possibilities—for the free will problem are positions defined by those two criteria. That is, those two criteria define the views of *incompatibilists*, those who think free will and determinism are incompatible. The other half of the matrix of positions is occupied by *compatibilists*, those who think free will and determinism are compatible. Almost all compatibilists reject the idea that leeway autonomy or source autonomy are necessary for free will, whether they are Western or Buddhist philosophers. Brent seems not to address the fact that most of the contributors to the anthology are compatibilists, but instead his account

gives the impression that they are simply confused about the criteria they deploy, as if they are trying to talk about free will, but are too conceptually confused to successfully participate intelligently in the discussion (as if the only intelligent discussion here is the incompatibilist one). This interpretive posture borders on the straw man fallacy. On behalf of the majority of compatibilist contributors to the anthology, I can safely reply, *it wasn't us!*

Insofar as Brent represents the Western critique of Buddhist views of free will, he also misrepresents half of the Western view of free will: for the other (compatibilist) half of positions in the Western philosophical matrix of positions on free will is roughly homologous with the (compatibilist) positions in the Buddhist philosophical matrix. Brent gives the misleading impression that (analytically precise) Western philosophers would reject (analytically imprecise) Buddhist views of free will, but that is significantly misleading. For half of the same matrix of logical possibilities (incompatibilist and compatibilist) obtains in both Western and Buddhist logical space, so to speak. Logic is logic, and the question of incompatibilism versus compatibilism is a purely logical question: Is free will logically compatible with determinism? Thus, whereas Brent does raise the level of precision in the debate, by insisting that Buddhists explicitly address the criteria for leeway and source autonomy, he does not raise it sufficiently.

Brent quotes some prefacing remarks that I used in the anthology to sketch some of the features of our intuitions about the problematic nature of our conception of free will, which I made simply as opening remarks about the complexity of the problem, and he apparently dismisses them as failing to uniquely define free will in accordance with his own very specific incompatibilist conception and analysis. Similarly, he does this sort of thing with almost all the other divergent conceptions of free will addressed by the several contributing authors in the anthology.

Again, without really arguing for their validity or necessity, Brent uses those two incompatibilist conceptions of free will that he takes to be definitive of the Western analytic understanding of the subject, namely, leeway and source autonomy, as the gold standards for evaluating the various elements of autonomous agency under consideration among the divergent voices within the Buddhist philosophical discussion, and implicitly rejects them all on the ground that that they are not identical with his standard. In a sense, Brent seems to ignore many elements of (compatibilist) nuance to be found in the variety of perspectives he lumps together as, essentially, failing to be incompatibilist. Again, however, there are Buddhist compatibilists, so pressing incompatibilist claims is not enough to shift the burden of proof onto compatibilists. To shift the burden, more would be needed than simply assuming incompatibilism is correct, from which assumption anything compatibilist would fail automatically. But that would beg the question against compatibilism. It is not an obvious fact that incompatibilism is true.

Brent makes a similar move in interpreting all compatibilist criteria as criteria for intentional action, as opposed to criteria for free will. He takes various remarks that the contributors make regarding certain feature of agency or will and argues that they are not definitive features of his two leading conceptions of free will simply because they (also, I would add) happen to be features of something *more general than* his narrowly-defined incompatibilist conception of autonomy, namely, intentional action. That is, he rejects certain (compatibilist) conceptions of free will addressed by various contributors on the grounds that they are criteria or features of *intentional action* in general, but not constitutive of all and only those intentional actions that are *free*. But it is not at all clear that Buddhist philosophers grappling with the question *whether there is any room in Buddhism for free will* have accepted the Western philosophical task of identifying *necessary and sufficient conditions for incompatibilist free will*, nor that they are taken in by the Western philosophical dialectic or language game

of first trying to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept before considering whether there are general doctrinal reasons in Buddhism to be receptive to the idea at all.

To the contrary, Buddhist philosophers are in the very earliest stages of explicitly trying to come to philosophical grips with the Western philosophical conception free will—whether compatibilist, incompatibilist, some blend of both, or neither. The anthology is properly entitled to be precisely about “Buddhist Perspectives” (plural), and the sub-title ends with a question mark, “Agentless Agency?”—indicating the open-ended, exploratory nature of that question. Pertinently, there are no agreed-upon necessary and sufficient conditions for free will in Western philosophy anyway. To the contrary, compatibilists and incompatibilists radically disagree about what constitutes free will, and, crucially, compatibilists accept as criteria for compatibilist free will *precisely* all the Buddhist criteria Brent rejects on the grounds, essentially, that they are not incompatibilist criteria. Within the dialectical conflict between compatibilism and incompatibilism, however, that is circular reasoning: it begs the question against compatibilism.

Western philosophers who specialize in free will frequently, if not typically, speak past each other in defining the concept in ways that are or are not compatible with determinism, or indeterminism, or both, or neither. On analysis, then, Brent’s insistence upon rejecting divergent Buddhist conceptions of features of agency that matter within the *radically different conceptual framework* of Buddhism on the ground that they are not his particularly preferred Western philosophical criteria, when the latter do not constitute an accepted consensus, is unwarranted. It also seems to beg the question against Buddhism, as if to reject Buddhism because it is not identical with Western philosophy.

Brent adds a more serious irony to this line of criticism, after having first tried to establish it. The irony is that, whereas the Buddhists in

question have allegedly failed to even adduce correct criteria for free will, namely, Brent's (incompatibilist) criteria, offering what on his analysis turn out only to be criteria for intentional action, not all of which is free, Brent argues that the Buddhist cannot even have that weaker model of mere intentional action. Pressing his own Western conception of agency, Brent insists that *agents* are necessary for intentional actions, but Buddhism rejects the agent or self. Thus, any Buddhists who think there can be free will must be doubly confused: There can be no free will for Buddhists if the only criteria they offer for free will turn out to be merely criteria for intentional action, and there can be no intentional action without an agent, but there are no Buddhist agents!

To further develop my above analogy with the theory of human beings, it is as if the Buddhist not only offered only criteria that do not distinguish between primates and humans, but it is as if Buddhism also rejects the existence of mammals, in which case there cannot even be Buddhist primates because there cannot be primates if there are no mammals. On Brent's analysis, then, those Buddhists who think there can be free will must be incredibly confused. What is more confusing is how Brent seems not to have noticed the many arguments and analyses throughout the anthology which address the issue of agentless agency, a theme explicit in the anthology's subtitle. Again, the responses I am offering to Brent's criticisms were all in the anthology.

I have noted in prior writings that the very concept of free will is complex and contested, particularly in my first book on the subject (*Counterfactual*)—a primarily Western analytic approach, but significantly informed by Buddhist ideas—where I devoted an introductory chapter to defining *several dozen* conceptions of, and positions on, autonomy, each with many concatenations, and many divergent elements of agency. In that book, I also devoted a chapter to constructing and defending a comprehensive *theory of the will*, which subsumes all other leading theories of

the will and of free will. As noted above, Brent makes a point of differentiating between intentional agency and free will, the latter being a subset of the former, but this differentiation is just an equivalent description of the difference between *the will* (volitional *intentionality*, albeit under a different description) and *free will*. I have described autonomy (*Counterfactual; Buddhist*) as a *control-theoretic* volitional ability spread across the entire spectrum of voluntary behavior, which for enlightened beings, advanced yogis, and other meditation virtuosos includes many things that are not normally considered voluntary, and as admitting of degrees, with those virtuosos possessing the highest degree, analogous to Olympic athletes of autonomy, relative to which Brent's gold standards, mere leeway and source autonomy, are amateur abilities, e.g., the ability to have ordered the tofu, despite having ordered the seitan, and it being up to me that I did so.

Other contributors to the collection, e.g., Meyers, Wallace, McRae, etc., have made similar observations. Thus, there seems to be a straightforward sense in which the descriptions of free will offered by the contributors and the descriptions attributed to them and critiqued by Brent are not the same. Contrary to the impression Brent gives to the effect that our criteria fail to meet his standard, we have offered criteria of free will that are stronger than Brent's criteria, not weaker. Again, the positions he seems to critique are not the ones we offered in the anthology. Who was it that offered those positions? *It wasn't us!*

Returning to the issue of agentless agency, Brent seems to miss the subtleties of the overall Buddhist framework as reflected, for example, in the paradox of control (implicit in the subtitle of the collection, *Agentless Agency?*), to the effect that the more control contemplative agents possess, the less substantive their agency appears to them. Plenty was said in the anthology to differentiate between various different senses of the self, as well as different senses in which the self may be thought to be illusory,

e.g., not necessarily non-existent, but only existing in a way that differs from the way it appears to exist to the unenlightened. Recall, for example, Abelson's careful analysis of Siderits's "shifting coalitions" model of the self, Harvey's model of the "empirical" self, Aronson's "psychological" versus "metaphysical" conceptions of the self, and, among others, my own description of the inverse relationship between an increasing autonomy and a decreasing self-sense attendant upon progress along the Buddhist path.

This latter example—that of the inverse relationship between increased agency and a decreased sense of a substantive agent—is admittedly somewhat paradoxical, which is one of the reasons I ended the subtitle of the anthology with interrogatory punctuation (*Agentless Agency?*), but the idea is not incoherent. From the vantage of Brent's paradigm for incompatibilist free will, the Buddhist paradigm reverses things, for on his Western view, the stronger the sense of self, the more autonomy. Although the Buddhist paradigm is problematic from Brent's perspective, according to which latter an agent is required for agency, the same sort of inverse idea was made by a number of the other contributors to the anthology. It was also made fairly perspicuously in Federman and Ergas (in this Special Issue), in their analysis of the phases of meditative progress, according to which there is a cyclical shifting between efforts at control and efforts at non-control, with the latter paradoxically enhancing the former. Gold's analysis (in this Special Issue) also arguably adds a level of nuance to the paradox of control to be found in the Buddhist understanding of agency. In fairness to Brent, Federman and Ergas did not appear in the original collection, nor did Gold. However, again, enough was articulated along similar lines throughout the edited collection that Brent is critiquing.

Although it also did not come out until after Brent's article had been submitted, my monograph, *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will*, goes

into the paradox of control in great detail, and emphasizes the extent to which libertarian-type, allegedly “strong” Western philosophical conceptions of free will pale in comparison with the sort of agency exhibited by Buddhist meditation virtuosos. However, I argued for that claim in detail in the anthology (*Buddhist*) and in previous writings (*Meditation; Possibility*). I also argued in both the anthology (*Buddhist*) and (in greater detail) in the monograph (*Buddhism*) that the abilities Brent thinks are *insufficient* for free will, according to his allegedly “strong” criteria, are *sufficient* to challenge and possibly defeat all the most powerful Western philosophical arguments against free will, including the Consequence Argument, the Manipulation Argument, the Randomness Argument, the Luck Argument, and the Impossibility Argument.³ How such an effective model of free will could be weaker than Brent’s criteria for free will escapes me.

Buddhist meditation virtuosos, the mental equivalent of Olympic athletes, can have the state of mind they want to have and not have the state of mind they want not to have, and so on for the volitions they want to have or lack, the emotions they want to have or lack, the attention they want to have or lack, etc., which is something I also emphasized in the edited collection which Brent thinks makes no mention of criteria sufficient for autonomy. These titans of autonomy possess the maximal sort of autonomy that is biologically possible, so to speak, for human beings, namely, mental freedom, freedom of the mind, or mental autonomy. Whereas Harry Frankfurt differentiated between *freedom of action* as being able to act on one’s desires (what Brent treats as intentional action) and *freedom of the will* as being able to have the sort of will one wants to have

³ The gist of that set of arguments is that the mental freedom possessed by the advanced meditation practitioner is secured regardless of whether the conditions feeding into the practitioner’s mental states are, respectively, deterministic, manipulated, indeterministic, a matter of luck, or influenced by conditioning. A concise version of these arguments is presented in the anthology (*Buddhist*), but they are spelled out in increasingly greater detail in Repetti (*Meditation; Possibility*; and *Buddhism*), in that order.

(that is, one is able to act only on the desires one wants to act on and to not act on the desires one wants to act on), the Buddhist's *freedom of the mind* is being able to have the sort of mental state one wants to have, and to not have the sort of mental state one wants not to have. This broader category of *mental autonomy* includes not only freedom of action and freedom of the will, but freedom of attention, freedom of emotion, and freedom of perception, among other freedoms ranging over anything voluntary and even potentially voluntary. (Recall, advanced yogis can control functions not normally accessible to will in the autonomic nervous system.) These claims are fully developed and defended in my recently published monograph (*Buddhism*).

As many contributors to the anthology (*Buddhist*) make these claims, and in light of my claims in this article, it is unclear how Brent could maintain that the contributions in the anthology fail to rise to the level of his allegedly strong criteria for free will. The opposite seems more obvious.

Recall that Brent claimed that there cannot even be intentional action without a self. I disagree, but not only on Buddhist grounds. On Frankfurt's analysis, mentioned above, intentional action is analyzed as freedom of action, being able to act on one's desires, or to perform actions that one wants or intends to perform. For Frankfurt, importantly, intentional action is insufficient for free will because young children, animals, and mentally ill adults—all of whom are beings we do not normally hold morally responsible—are able to act on their intentions: the horse, toddler, or elderly person suffering severe dementia is able to run to the left upon the desire or intention to do so. It is highly doubtful that any of them have a sense of self, much less an actual self, but acting on volitional impulse does not require a self. For Frankfurt, freedom of the will, rather, requires being able to have the sort of intentions or will that one wants to have. Some have objected to Frankfurt that higher-order desires (wanting

these intentions to be effective, as opposed to those intentions) can arise deterministically. Thus, they can also arise in the absence of a self. Arguably, the rat, seeing food to its left and a cat to its right, might be able to form a higher-order intention not to act on its first-order desire for the food. Whether rats have selves, however, is questionable enough to ground the idea that it is not incoherent or contradictory to think agentless actions are possible.

Importantly, and ironically, the Buddhist, in seeing through the constructed nature of the self, is able to have the sort of self he wants to have: he has *freedom of the self*. Although the general goal of Buddhism may be described as *freedom from the self*, this latter freedom can be interpreted coherently as freedom from the faulty interpretation of the self that gives the illusory, suffering-causing impression that the self is an unchanging, immaterial, executive homunculus riding above and apart from the psychophysiological collection of our parts, which does not necessarily entail the obliteration of subjectivity, experiential or phenomenological perspectivalism, the ability to act on appropriate volitions (like compassion), the ability to appropriate one's parts and experiences in narrative memory, and/or a host of other abilities and elements that may be able to play a causal/functional role in the embodied mental life of an enlightened or spiritually advanced being, a being who obviously can speak, walk, eat, and perform intentional actions in a highly disciplined and orderly, if not elegant, manner. This claim arguably applies not only to the Buddha, but also to those titanic bodhisattvas who intend to continue being reborn until all sentient beings attain *nirvana*.

In order to attain freedom *from* the self, one might add, one must first cultivate freedom *of* the self, the ability to deconstruct the self, detach from its entrenched volitional and related dispositions, and reconstruct a more enlightened, liberated, malleable, but functional self in accordance with one's higher-order (Buddhist) values. I see no reason why

beings in possession of such a variety of mental freedoms cannot engage in intentional actions that are free. Surely, they are such that they not only could choose the seitan (otherwise) when they actually chose the tofu—a fairly mundane, facile ability, but they can have a mental state, a sense of self, volitions, and emotions, among other things, that are entirely *up to* them, and that can be *otherwise*.

Conclusion

It strikes me as reasonable to think that if anyone is autonomous in Brent's sense, then surely so are Buddhist titans of mental autonomy.

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