No Self, No Responsibility?

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Abstract

Buddhism holds a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, all humans are not-self (*anattā*). On the other, humans are said to be responsible for their actions (*kamma*), which seems to evoke a self who can be responsible. This apparent contradiction brings up the question of who is morally responsible if there is no self? I argue that as the Buddhist subscribes to the not-self position, they are by default moral responsibility skeptics. At first blush this appears to be a problem for responsibility in terms of kamma. But this problem is solved once impersonal interdependent causality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is taken into account, where action and responsibility can still be attributed to humans without needing a self. What the Buddhist has is causal, not moral, responsibility. This shows there is no internal tension in the Buddhist position with not-self and kamma when we consider human action and responsibility because of impersonal interdependent causality, but, there is an external tension between the Buddhist position and contemporary philosophical conceptualizations of moral selves and responsibility.

Keywords: Agency, Buddhist, karma, moral responsibility skepticism, not-self

ABBREVIATIONS

AN *Anguttara Nikaya* of The Buddha in Bodhi (trans.) (2012)

DN *Digha Nikaya* of The Buddha in Walshe (trans.) (1995)

MN *Majjhima Nikaya* of The Buddha in Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi (trans.) (1995)

P. Pāli

SN *Samyutta Nikaya* of The Buddha in Bodhi (trans.) (2005)

Skt. Sanskrit

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1. If there is no self, who owns kamma and can be held morally responsible?

To hold people morally responsible requires an agentive self with certain powers of intention and action (Talbert 2023). But Buddhism seems to take a strange stance: that agentive selves do not exist, because humans are *anattā*, or not-self. If there is no *agentive self*–an individual with independent personal agency[1]–that produced an action, then we have nothing to attribute moral responsibility to. The Buddhist seems to be left with two options: either say there is some sort of self so we can have moral responsibility or, bite the bullet and admit that as there is no self, we cannot have moral responsibility. I argue that the Buddhist must take the latter option and acknowledge they have a problem–they must reject that we have moral responsibility.

Where does that leave the Buddhist, as moral nihilists or fatalists? Furthermore, this position seems to be in tension with Buddhism's central doctrine, *kamma* (Skt. Karma). Kamma is commonly assumed to be a moral doctrine where personal intentions are the source of action, and whatever good or bad intentional actions people do, they are the owners or heirs of that kamma and inherit its punishing or rewarding results (Payutto 1995; Bodhi 2010). Kamma is often seen as the Buddhist version of moral responsibility (Finnigan 2022; Kumar and Sethy 2021), as the frequently cited passage states, "I am the owner of my kamma (action), heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related through my kamma, and abide dependent on my kamma. Whatever kamma I do, for good or for evil, to that will I be the heir"(AN 5.57; Buddha 2012).

This seems to reintroduce two things that were just removed: the first is a self who is the owner and heir of their kamma, and the second is a morally responsible self with agentive powers to intentionally chose to do either good or bad actions and who will then inherit punishment or rewards. This seems contradictory to not-self and rejecting moral responsibility. But as we gain a more accurate understanding of kamma, we find it offers us a causal solution to the problem of rejecting moral responsibility. This is the main burden of this paper.

In the first half of this paper, I outline the seeming problem: As the Buddhist rejects any form of self by adhering to a doctrine of anattā, they must also reject moral responsibility, so by default revert to a position of moral responsibility skepticism. I start by setting aside a few issues

[1] For readability, I will use agentive self or personal agent interchangeably throughout when referring to Western versions of an agent, moral or otherwise. In contrast, the Buddhist does not ascribe to this type of agency, but an agency rooted in causality, so I will use "impersonal agent" when referring to the Buddhist version of agency. I must largely refrain from using the term "agent" or "agency" in a singular sense (only using it when citing works by Western philosophers), as typically, this includes action through a type of human intentionality (and identity) that I will argue that the Buddhist does not ascribe to in the not-self position.

beyond the scope of this paper, namely questions of Buddhist free will or how kamma fits into mainstream normative ethics. From there, I describe anattā and the kind of moral responsibility the Buddhist must reject if they take not-self seriously. Then, I explain why the Buddhists are by default moral responsibility skeptics, which takes the position that humans are never ultimately responsible for their actions because they do not create the type of agent they are, nor have the level of control required for desert-based responsibility (Caruso and Pereboom 2022; Caruso 2021).

In the second half of the paper, I offer a solution to the seeming problem. This problem is resolved by understanding kamma as a causal rather than a moral doctrine, driven by impersonal interdependent causality without an agentive self (*paṭiccasamuppāda*: dependent origination). I argue that as not-self entails the absence of an agentive self, and the difference between causal and moral responsibility is the relevant type of agency, the Buddhist can keep causal, but not moral, action and responsibility.

The Buddhist retains causal action and responsibility because kamma and paṭiccasamuppāda are what produce a localized not-self system, i.e., a human acting within its own causal constraints. Not-self systems thus emerge out of, are an expression of, and operate in accordance with the causality of kamma. A not-self system is indistinguishable from the kamma of interdependent causality, rather than being something external–an agentive self–that needs to fit into or align with kamma. This leads to the conclusion that there is no internal (Buddhist) tension between kamma and not-self when considering human action and responsibility because of impersonal interdependent causality; in contrast, there is an external tension between the two with contemporary philosophical stances on moral agents and responsibility.

To explain this, the second half of the paper gives a detailed description of kamma and impersonal interdependent causality without an agentive self, and how from these emerge a human that can be localized as a not-self system. Although this account does not unpack all the reasons why the Buddhist is not a moral fatalist or nihilist, it does give a skill-based account of action and outcome, which in a comprehensive Buddhist account would be what moves a not-self system towards either *nibbāna* (liberation, enlightenment) or *dukkha* (discontent, suffering). Finally, the account presented here does not attempt to explicitly explain the procedural mechanics or social structures of how this kind of selfless responsibility works, so this issue is set aside for future undertakings.

Throughout this piece, I adopt a perspective from the Early Buddhist Texts (EBT) of the Nikāya Suttas in the Pāli canon, so my interpretations of kamma and anattā should be understood

exclusively from those sources.[2] However, my interpretation of moral responsibility is taken from a Western philosophical perspective. I take this approach due to debates regarding the seeming tension between kamma, not-self and contemporary understandings of moral responsibility (e.g., Repetti 2016).

1.1. The necessity of setting aside free will and mainstream normative ethics from a Buddhist perspective

First, an important preliminary issue needs to be addressed and set aside—what is the Buddhist stance on free will? Garfield (2016, 2022) suggests it is anachronistic to even raise the issue of freedom, determinism or compatibilism in the Buddhist context, owing to it not having a notion of "will" that causes events in the Western sense. Instead, he argues that Buddhist agency is a natural hermeneutical phenomenon understood in the light of dependent origination. Garfield contends that the Western perspective depicts a moral agent as an independent and autonomous subjective self that imposes itself on, and in some cases against, the natural world. In contrast, the Buddhist view is that there is no self as a subjective agent, an agent is rather an interconnected causal structure that is part of the natural world.

Regardless of this observation, valid attempts have been made to develop a Buddhist account of free will. Different authors argue that it is either a form of hard determinism (Goodman 2002), compatibilism (Harvey 2000, 2013; Wallace 2011; Bingle 2018), neo-compatibilism (Federman 2010), paleo-compatibilism (Siderits 2008), semi-compatibilism (Repetti 2016), a form of libertarianism that assumes agent causation (Griffiths 1982), libertarianism that assumes perspectivalism (Breyer 2013), or that Buddhists are in fact free will illusionists (Harris 2012). This ecology of stances likely stems from incorporating a broad range of interpretations from various traditions or schools, with the attempt to collapse them into the proposition of "the Buddhist view". For this article, I will put this large question aside and instead focus solely on explanations of not-self and kamma from the EBT, and moral responsibility as it is commonly conceptualized. The hope is that my position will imply that a Western version of free will is not needed to understand the Buddhist position of impersonal agents and actions.

Contemporary Buddhist philosophy has also tried to explain kamma and moral thought in terms of mainstream normative ethics. Garfield (2010) contends again though that attempting to

[2] Interpretation of Buddhist terms comes solely from accounts derived in the Pāli cannon found in the list of texts with their abbreviations above. This account does not rely on Abhidhamma, post-canonical (e.g., the *Milindapañha*), or commentarial material in the Theravada cannon, nor any later secondary material. The aim here is to provide an interpretive analysis of what, in my reading, the Buddha himself taught–not what the Buddhist tradition has or should say about moral responsibility. Occasionally, I may use phrases like "the Buddhist" or "the Buddhist not-self position" for readability, but it should always be understood as the perspective taken solely from early Buddhist texts.

systematize kamma and Buddhist moral thought into Western philosophical categories is inefficacious, because it overlooks what is distinctive about Buddhist thought. He argues that if a Buddhist moral agent is merely one of natural causality, moral responsibility then is merely a hermeneutical account of natural phenomena (Garfield 2022, 51). Despite this, valid attempts have been made by Keown (1996, 346), who argues for viewing kamma in terms of virtue ethics (also see Cooper and James (2005)). Others view it as a form of consequentialism (Goodman 2009, 2016; Siderits 2016, 2003, 2007), while Clayton (2006) suggests a combination of the two into "virtue consequentialism".

In terms of current conceptions of moral responsibility, Finnigan (2022) has suggested kamma offers a "transpersonal retributive" account, because it should be viewed across lifetimes that involve experiencing rewards and punishment. Bingle (2018) also advocates for a retributive account, where moral blameworthiness can be determined by the degree of one's underlying intentional motivation, or "quality of will". Kumar and Sethy (2021) suggest that as persons produce kamma (actions with consequences), the doctrine of kamma can be equated with moral responsibility to persons, a perspective aligned with Siderits' (2008) emphasis on understanding action in terms of the 'Doctrine of Two Truths'.

Equating responsibility and action to "persons" who are viewed as "conventionally" real is a common tactic employed by most contemporary Buddhist philosophers. The Two Truths—conventional and ultimate reality—are used to attribute moral actions and responsibility to "conventionally" real persons or selves as a convenient, useful fiction, while simultaneously holding that in reality "ultimately" such persons or selves do not exist.[3] I will not utilize this tactic here for two reasons. The first is that the Two Truths do not occur in the EBT, and the second reason is that it can be construed as inadvertently smuggling in a self (Chadha 2021). I will put such interesting discussions of broader Buddhist philosophy aside and instead attempt to define this unique account about kamma and moral thought from explanations found in the EBT.

2. The problem of moral responsibility with not-self

Both not-self and moral responsibility are complex topics with inexhaustible literature and debates spanning millennia on their interrelationship. I cannot do full justice here to the magnitude of either topic. Regardless, in this section I provide an outline of each where I give an everyday understanding, a short technical definition, and then offer the definition I use going forward.

[3] With a similar technique used by Dennett (1988;1989) in the intentionality stance.

2.1. What exactly is *anattā*, or not-self?

If you ask the everyday Buddhist what anattā means, the most common answer you will likely get is that there is no "soul", "I" or "me". Pressed further they will say that while there is a body and mind (thinking, memories etc.), the sense of self—the feeling of a subjective "me" at the center of experience—is just a misinterpreted perceptual fabrication. They will say this sense of self, the "thing" I take to be "me", is not what it appears to be (i.e., a continuous subject or being across time), but rather, it is a changing perception of a subject of experience brought about by an impersonal process and flow of phenomena. As it is impermanent, they would say we should not hold onto it, because the more we identify with it, the more we suffer.

In what is the most agreed-upon version from the EBT, all phenomena—including humans—are anattā. But importantly for the alleviation of suffering, what constitutes a human is an aggregation of psychophysical phenomena: the five conditioned factors (the five *khandhās* of material form, feeling, perception, mental activity, and consciousness). Typically, we identify them as an "I" or "mine," with the conceit "I am". But, as they are impermanent natural phenomena beyond personal control, they cannot be rightly regarded as belonging to oneself. They are "ownerless" and "impersonal". Here is how this process is said to unfold:

> "… and is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?" "No, venerable."
>
> "Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every form is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'"
>
> "Any feeling whatsoever… Any perception whatsoever… Any fabrications whatsoever… Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every consciousness is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'" (MN 109; Buddha 1995)
>
> "There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person … assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He is seized with the idea that 'I am form' or 'form is mine.' As he is seized with these ideas, his form changes and alters, and he falls into sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair over its

change and alteration. (Similarly with feeling, perception, mental activity, and consciousness).” (SN 22:1; Buddha 2005)

This EBT version differs somewhat from the everyday view that the subject of experience is a misrepresented perceptual fabrication. Instead, the not-self position here is understood as the constitutive parts that make up a human are constantly undergoing perpetual entropic change, which is a source of suffering. So, there is little use of regarding them as I or mine. Moreover, they are impersonal phenomena that possess no unchanging “self” or personal agent within them that controls how they operate. The Buddha indicates here that none of the psychophysical aggregates can be identified with the self because none are subject to control. Under this EBT interpretation of anattā, the meaning of not-self is that all the psychophysical factors—by default including the subject of experience—that make up a human, do not have an unchanging entity or essence within them, nor do they have an agent that influences control over them.

Adam (2016) outlines how the Buddha makes a conceptual connection between self and control. The five aggregates are all that constitute a human person (there is no dualistic entity there). Yet, we lack control over any of the aggregates. If a self existed, it would be the aspect of a person one could control. Again, a human person is nothing more than the aggregates over which we have no control whatsoever. If there were a self, we as a self would be able to control its states. Therefore, there is no self.

I will settle on a definition of anattā as the psychophysical combination that we usually identify as being “me” as nothing more than an impersonal process that is not under any self-agentive control. This includes even that which we take to be our deeply subjective “true or real self” which is experienced as the center of our being or existence. I will use the term ‘not-self’ with the understanding that it also refers to no-self, non-self or selflessness.[4] And, at times, I use the term ‘not-self system’[5] instead of anattā when referring to the psychophysical khandhās that constitute a human person.

2.2. The relevant conception of moral responsibility brought into question

In commonsense terms, moral responsibility can seem quite simple. If you did it, you are responsible. And the more you meant it, the more responsible you are. This goes for things we feel

[4] Whether not-or-no self is the most parsimonious explanation of anattā I believe to be a moot point; if *all* phenomena are not-or-non self, then by extension, there can be no self. As such, I use the terms interchangeably. This distinction will be important when we discuss moral agents and deep-self accounts of responsibility.

[5] With the system understood in the sense of complex, dynamic systems laid out by authors such as Alicia Juarrero (2000; 2002; 2023).

are either right or wrong. However, an extensive literature has provided a more systematic understanding.

Moral responsibility involves attributing certain capacities or powers to an agent, in that their behavior arises from the fact that the agent has exercised said powers and capacities (Talbert 2023). Importantly for our purpose here, those actions in question must also be considered moral, not simply causal, acts. For acts to be considered morally right or wrong, they must in some way support or violate our basic humanity. Furthermore, they must also be performed by someone who, of their own volitional free will, uses their judgement and conscience to deliberately choose to perform the action (Adobor 2022).

Further, for an agent to be morally responsible for their actions, they must fulfil two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: a control and an epistemic condition (Rudy-Hiller 2022). In the first condition, control or freedom, an agent must have possessed an adequate degree of control in performing an action. So, we need to know if the person was acting freely when they did something. In the second epistemic (sometimes called the knowledge, mental or cognitive state) condition, the agent's epistemic or mental state must be such that they can be properly held accountable for their actions and its consequences. When these conditions are jointly met, we can justifiably judge the degree of responsibility that should be ascribed to personal agents.

The primary kind of moral responsibility many are concerned with is when and under what conditions we can say that someone is praise or blameworthy for an action or inaction. This is typically described as 'basic desert' responsibility, where people are thought to possesses the kind of control over their choices and actions in such a way that they can be truly deserving of praise or blame, punishment and reward (Caruso and Pereboom 2022). Desert-based responsibility is considered to be a backward-looking or retributive, as it focuses on reactive attitudes (e.g., anger, resentment, gratitude, forgiveness) or judgements that can be deemed appropriate responses to agents who have already committed morally right or wrong actions (Wallace 1994; van de Poel 2011).

Forward-looking, or 'consequentialist-based' accounts of moral responsibility focus on the outcomes of engaging in certain choices and behaviors. Consequentialist accounts can include accountability, answerability and attributability (Shoemaker 2011). Accountability involves holding personal agents responsible for an act or omission, and they become accountable when they are responsible for the event happening (Bivins 2006). Answerability involves the agent's evaluative judgements that they took to justify an action (Shoemaker 2011, 2015b). Shoemaker (2011, 630) suggests that agents must be able to justify why they engaged in an act, and the level of reasoned

justification will determine how responsible and answerable they are. Finally, attributability is concerned with actions or omissions that reflect the agent's character, or moral personality (Hieronymi 2008). This personality attribution enables agents to make an evaluative judgement on whether to engage in a moral act or not. Agents are praised or blamed for acts or omissions when there is a perceived failing or success on behalf of the agent's character.

Importantly for our case here, attributability concerns actions or attitudes being properly attributable to, or reflective of, an agent's self (Caruso 2021). We are responsible for acts in the attributability sense when those acts reflect something of our identity as moral agents, or our real or deep self. A common thread throughout desert and consequentialist-based responsibility is that there must be someone there, a personal agent or self, who is the locus of responsibility.

Although the above hopefully presents a relatively uncontroversial and standard view of moral responsibility from Western philosophy, how representative is it of the Buddhist view? As outlined above, the EBT version of moral responsibility is often taken to correspond with the doctrine of kamma (Finnigan 2022; Kumar and Sethy 2021). But this is a complex relationship that can sometimes be misunderstood, so I will return to it in much greater detail in Section 4. For now, I will stick with the relatively standard Western understanding of moral responsibility and settle on it being understood here as an agentive self who has certain powers and capacities where they know and can control what they do, and, they can be attributed desert or consequence-based responsibility attributions because of these capacities.

2.3. Why moral agency and deep selves do not suffice for responsibility with not-self

As described above, the common thread of responsibility is that someone must be there, a personal agent or self, who is the locus of responsibility. Connected to the heart of what moral responsibility is, then, is "who" is responsible. In other words, what constitutes and qualifies someone as a moral agent. Kane (1996, 97) suggests that "the possession of independent selfhood … is a precondition for moral agency in the fullest sense". Behdadi (2021, 226) offers a succinct description, where "a moral agent is an entity considered to be able to do wrong (or right) and typically taken to be morally responsible for actions, omissions, beliefs, and/or character traits".

Behdadi outlines two main approaches in moral agency: practice and capacity-focused approaches. Practice-focused approaches rely on moral behavioral patterns and social interactions, such that a moral agent is one who has understood and developed certain behavioral patterns that aligns with social expectations based on a shared moral norm within a particular time and place. Capacity-focused approaches involve someone becoming a moral agent if they can morally

understand, reflect on, and evaluate potential or actual actions, omissions, or character traits of themselves and others. A moral agent in this sense has possession of an independent selfhood with certain mental and personal powers or capacities that enable them to understand the moral import their action brings.

But who is this moral agent? This is where deep, or real-self accounts of moral responsibility come in.[6] Deep-self accounts of moral responsibility hold that there are a fundamental subset of attitudes, values or cares within a person's psychology that are a core part of their identity or self. The focus is on intentionally internal, rather than externally causal, sources of control and action. As they appeal to internal sourcehood for action, they speak to the intuitive sense of phenomenological agency in our mental lives. These deep-self values and attitudes "belong" to a person in a distinct way that carries weighted significance for personal agency and moral responsibility.

In a deep-self responsibility account, people are morally responsible for actions that can be attributed to, or are reflective of, this deep-self. When agentive selves *identify* with the mental states that lead to an action, this represents something of their deeper character (e.g., kindness stemming from being a charitable person), so responsibility can be attributed to those actions. However, if there is a failure to identify with the motivations or mental states that lead to an action (e.g., my Tourette's made me scream at her), then responsibility cannot be attributed to that action.

The unifying thread of all deep-self theories is that people are morally responsible for actions only if those actions represent or are an expression of their deep-self identity (Shoemaker 2015a; Taylor 1976; Sripada 2016; Frankfurt 1971; Watson 1975, 1996; Wolf 1990, 1987; Gorman 2022, 2019; Velleman 1992). Deep-self theories of responsibility can then be summarized as responsibility being attributed to agentive selves because, in some meaningful way, desires or motivational mental states that lead to action are identified with. This identification is congruent with what the agentive self identifies with, values, plans, cares about, endorses or approves of in some minimal way.

My intention here is not to comprehensively outline what a responsible deep-self is.[7] This overview is provided simply to explain whom or what many people believe is producing actions they are responsible for, and whom or what they feel should be held morally responsible. My purpose here is to question whether the Buddhist doctrine of not-self can be seen as consistent with

[6] These views are loosely referred to as deep self, real self, true self, self disclosure, identificationist or attributionist views. Here, I use deep self for no other reason than convenience.

[7] For more thorough outlines of what the deep self is conceptualized as, see Shoemaker (2015), Sripada (2016) & Gorman (2022).

accounts of moral agency and responsibility under this conception. And as signposted in the introduction, it is not an outlandish statement that having a deep or "real" self is impossible if there is no self.[8]

3. Buddhists who reject the self must also reject moral responsibility

Briefly outlining deep-self accounts has been important here, because along with those factors that seem external to an agentive self's control (e.g., genetics, biology, intelligence, education, parenting, environment), internal psychological factors deeply connected to our sense of phenomenological agency (e.g., intentionality, virtues, reasoning, values) that could be classed as responsible dissolve in the not-self perspective. On a deep-self responsibility account, agentive selves *identify* with states or values that reflect themselves. This is incompatible with the Buddhist not-self position, as it *does not identify* with any and all mental phenomena, but rather see them as ownerless, transient mental fabrications.

From the Buddhist perspective, our deepest sets of mental states, values, virtues and cares aligned with the true and good are formed within the mental aggregates (*namakhandhās*). And as the not-self position states, there is no abiding self or personal agent within any of the khandhās, nor is there a self who controls them. Recall, the khandhās are just impersonal aggregations of psychophysical phenomena without essence or identity and operating from the not-self position entails not identifying with them.

If those psychological factors of phenomenological agency—and identification with them—are what is considered responsible from the deep-self perspective, the not-self position asserts that these factors are nothing more than impersonal and transient machinations of mental khandhās. As such, they are ownerless and are not reflective of any identity whatsoever; therefore, they should not be identified with at all. Consequently, the internal factors that could be considered personally agentive in deep-self accounts cannot be considered agentive in a not-self account. The criteria for (internal) personal agency that would fulfil an attribution of moral responsibility are therefore not met.

Consider *cetanā,* or intention (sometimes translated as will; Harvey (2007, 47)). Both in the Buddhist and everyday sense, intention is a primary requirement in being held morally responsible (Adam 2016, 254). However, I will argue below it is not a necessary condition for kamma. Cetanā, as a mental phenomenon, must correspond to an aspect of the khandhās, namely, the

[8] Although Gorman notes that we need not be committed to sort of strong metaphysical version of the self that is a central fundamental core of who a person is to utilize deep self theories of moral responsibility (2022).

namakhandhās, and specifically, to *saṅkhāra* (mental activity, but also often translated as volitional formations).

We must recall, however, that all of the khandhās are not-self, and this extends to saṅkhāra, which is the namakhandhā that produces cetanā. Therefore, even that aggregate that includes intention is not subject to control, not to be identified with, and is an impersonal process as it has no self. This implies that even those psychological factors determining how we act, and the morality of actions are themselves not-self, and are not under any kind of control. There is no intention that is subject to control because, simply, there is no one over and above the shifting configuration of mental factors to do the controlling.

Further, not-self is incompatible with the kind of moral responsibility outlined above, as it does not satisfy the control condition for moral responsibility. The not-self position has no self or independent personal agent that can control the psychophysical aggregates, nor is there any self within the aggregates to begin with. To explain further, there is not a self who exerts control over the external operation or nature of the khandhās—which are a product of external factors like biology or neurodiversity—to be any other way than the way they are. Meaning, independent personal agents are constrained by and with the khandhās they have now, and they did not choose them to be this way.

One can only operate within the constraints of the khandhās one is lumped with. They have become the way they are, and operate the way they do, due to past conditioning—or, in other words, prior kamma. Nor was there a personal agent or self at any other time point along the karmic causal chain who caused the khandhās to be this way. So, impersonal agents have no control at all over the way the khandhās currently are now or operate the way they do. Therefore, agentive control conditions required for moral responsibility—were an agentive self with certain powers and capacities possess an adequate degree of control in performing an action— are not met, because how the khandhās are and operate is beyond the purview of anyone's control, agentive self, not-self or otherwise.

In summary, what would be considered an agentive self under the moral responsibility account outlined above is not compatible with Buddhist view of anattā, which supposes no such selfhood, personal agency or identity are there to begin with. This is because in the Buddhist account, what would be considered a moral, agentive self is nothing more than impersonal process operating out of an aggregation of psychophysical properties with no owner. Nor would the Buddhist suppose there is sufficient control over action for moral responsibility. Therefore,

Buddhists who adhere to the not-self doctrine must reject moral responsibility of the above kind. This, by extension and default, makes not-self adherents moral responsibility skeptics.

The first main position here is: (1) *As the Buddhist rejects any form of self by strictly adhering to a doctrine of anattā, they must also reject moral responsibility, so by default revert to a position of moral responsibility skepticism.*

3.1. Moral responsibility skepticism as the default for not-self

Moral responsibility skepticism takes the position that humans are never ultimately morally responsible for their actions.[9] They argue that what we do and the way we are is due to an indefinite number of causally interdependent factors beyond the scale of conditions that we can individually control, like biology and neurodiversity, causal influence, chance, or luck (Caruso 2021; Caruso and Pereboom 2022; Strawson 1994, 1986; Sapolsky 2017, 2023; Levy 2011; Strawson 2011). Skeptics argue that when we act, we do what we do in the situation we find ourselves in because of the way we are. But to be truly responsible for what we do, we would need to be responsible for the way we are (in some mental respect). Since we do not have the freedom to cause ourselves to be other than the way we are, we cannot be held truly responsible (Strawson 2011).

While many cling to the idea that an agentive self can exercise the kind of control over their thoughts and behaviors necessary to be held truly responsible, moral responsibility skeptics point out that our best scientific and philosophical theories about how humans operate suggest strong reason to doubt we can exhibit this kind of control (Sapolsky 2017, 2023). Skeptics share a common belief that the justification needed to ground basic-desert moral responsibility and the practices associated with it—such as backward-looking praise and blame, punishment and reward (including retributive punishment), and the reactive attitudes of resentment and indignation—is not met (Caruso 2021). Doing so would be unfair or unjust, as it involves holding people ultimately morally responsible for things far beyond their purview of control.

Skeptics argue that true moral responsibility is impossible because it requires true self-determination. Extending this to the Buddhist perspective, true moral responsibility is utterly and absolutely impossible because it requires true self-determination without a self. Strawson (1986, 2016) has suggested in passing that the Buddhist not-self view dovetails with this version of moral responsibility skepticism. The argument presented in detail here is that these two positions are aligned. The Buddhist has no agentive self nor any control over the khandhās that constitute a

[9] For more thorough treatments of the moral responsibility skepticism position, see Caruso, 2021, or Caruso & Pereboom, 2022. For oppositions to moral responsibility skepticism, see Bernstein, 2005; Clarke, 2005a, 2005b; McKenna, 2008; Mele, 1995, 2005; Nichols, 2015; Roskies, 2012; Vargas, 2005, 2009.

human, and skeptics argue that we do not create ourselves nor possess the level of control required for desert-based responsibility.

If Buddhist not-self adherents must be moral responsibility skeptics, where does this leave them in terms of human action and responsibility? As not-self equals no agentive self, they cannot have moral responsibility of the above kind because it requires an independent personal agent. When we take personal agency out of action, the action becomes a causal, not a moral, event. It seems that Buddhist not-self adherents therefore are stuck with causal, not moral, action and responsibility.

4. How kamma and interdependent causality is the solution to rejecting moral responsibility

In this section, I outline that while the Buddhist seems to face a problem where they must reject moral responsibility of a certain kind, once it is understood how they attribute responsibility through causal kamma—which is accomplished without appealing to an agentive self—the problem dissolves. The Buddhist sees paṭiccasamuppāda, otherwise known as impersonal interdependent causality, as the solution to the problem of who experiences the results of action if there is no self. But first, we must clarify the differences between moral and causal responsibility.

4.1. Moral responsibility versus causal responsibility: Buddhists can only keep causal

While from a Western ethics standpoint, we typically attribute moral responsibility to an agentive self for intentions and actions they produce, we can now see that the Buddhist not-self position would suppose this is a mistake. This is because they assert no such moral agents exist, even at the deepest psychological level. Instead, they would argue that only causal agency or responsibility can be attributed to actions produced by not-self systems.

Causality is a notoriously complex subject far beyond the scope of this piece, but in commonsense terms its often pretty clear what causal agency and responsibility is.[10] If something or someone played a part in something happening, that something or someone helped cause it. That is, if an entity caused an event, it was the, or a, cause of an outcome. This is known as ‘event-causal agency’, where actions themselves (including mental states) are events, and an event is an action when it has the right event-causal history (Schlosser 2019). Or, that the action is the relevant causal process, rather than the causal effect or outcome of the process (Mele 2003, 1992; Dretske 1991). In this understanding, action is causally determined in a natural way. Causal agency can be understood here as a particular natural entity that can produce events.

[10] For much more thorough explanations of causality see Halpern, 2016; Pearl, 2009; Woodward, 2006

Causal responsibility, by extension then, is the attribution of responsibility–through backtracking the causal chain of events or conditions–onto that natural entity for all or part of a particular event. The degree of causal responsibility that is attributed to an entity increases with the robustness of the action-outcome causal chain (Grinfeld et al. 2020). Causal responsibility can also be attributed to dynamical systems via the degree to which an entity's action caused the system state at a later point in time, and to the degree to which the action was necessary and sufficient for this state (Stecher and Baumgärtner 2024). It is widely noted, however, that moral agency and responsibility does not follow explicitly from causal agency and responsibility.

Being part of the causal chain of events is seen as a necessary condition of moral responsibility, and to some, the most important element (Engelmann and Waldmann 2022; Cushman and Young 2011). But causality alone is not enough for the agentive powers required for moral responsibility. It is only when someone is viewed as a *moral* agent that we confer some form of moral responsibility onto them. If they do not fit the criteria for moral agency mentioned above, we can only attribute causal agency, and therefore causal responsibility, onto them.

Distinguishing moral and causal responsibility then becomes crucial because there are events where it seems more appropriate to ascribe causal but not moral responsibility (e.g., a child accidentally lets off a loaded gun and injures a sibling), or more appropriate to ascribe moral but not direct causal responsibility (e.g., a police officer is responsible by omission for a woman's abuse after he ignored her plea to restrain a violent partner). Nonetheless, all events stem from a causal process, so before an event is attributed a moral valence through assigning personal agency to it, it is fundamentally a causal event. Also, the desert-based account described above is tied to whom we attribute moral responsibility to, but causal responsibility requires no such desert-infused attributions to a personal agent.

There is a great variety of events, many including human actions, which we classify as emanating from causal agents but not moral agents. Likewise, there are actions or events for which we can only attribute causal responsibility but not moral responsibility, even though they might have moral valence. Many humans fit this bill (e.g., young children, intellectually impaired, those experiencing intense psychosis, individuals under extreme duress, or individuals acting unknowingly) as do non-humans (malaria-carrying mosquitoes, poisonous snakes) and natural phenomena (hurricanes, floods, or fires). Causal responsibility can be attributed to hurricanes destroying houses, dogs chewing up shoes, or little kids drawing on walls. But attributing moral responsibility onto them seems inappropriate. Change the type of agency, and the type of responsibility changes. If a terrorist blows up a house, a jealous lover slashes their ex's shoes, or a

teenager graffitis a wall, then these agents are not only causally, but now also morally responsible. The action and outcome are the same, but the attribution is different.

The key distinction between causal and moral responsibility is the type of agent and their individual power and capacities. Insert personal agency into an event, and it becomes potentially moral; take that agency out, and it remains a mere causal event.

What we are primarily wrestling with here however is whether not-self fits into moral responsibility. If personal agents are the crucial ingredient that turns causal into moral responsibility, the not-self position has no such individual agents, so it does not fulfil the agentive conditions for moral responsibility. There is no use tying ourselves in unnecessary knots; without an agentive self, one can only be causally responsible, but not morally responsible. The Buddhist is stuck with moral responsibility skepticism, but now has an extra dilemma: they do not even have any type of self that can be attributed causality.

Additionally, some have suggested that while moral responsibility skepticism doubts basic dessert responsibility, it is consistent with attributability responsibility (Caruso 2021; Caruso and Pereboom 2022). Like the deep-self position described above, attributability responsibility involves actions being reflective of, or attributable to, an agent's self or identity (Watson 1996; Hieronymi 2008). The argument is that, as attributability makes no appeal to basic desert or backwards-looking praise and blame, it is distinct from desert-based accountability and is therefore consistent with moral responsibility skepticism (see Shoemaker (2011, 2015b) for examples of personal agents not being responsible in a desert but in an attributability sense, like those in the grips of mental illness). The not-self account contests this position though. As there is no agentive self driving the causal process, we cannot attribute actions to a personal agent. While the not-self position would support the notion that desert-based responsibility is incoherent, it goes further to suggest that the attributability to a deep-self responsibility is also incoherent. And as such, the only kind of attributability that moral responsibility skeptics, and now by this extension, Buddhist not-self adherents, should adhere to is one of causal attributability.

If we have taken selves and moral responsibility off the table, and everything is simply impersonal causality, there is now a seemingly morally nihilistic or fatalistic dilemma. Furthermore, as the not-self position is void of personal agents, this also brings in the "disappearing agent" problem (Mele 2003, Ch. 10; Lowe 2008, 159-161). This problem claims that reducing action to natural causes undermines our conviction that we as free agents can influence the world in useful ways, as our sense of independent personal agency "disappears". Are the Buddhists covert moral

fatalists? Not at all. While the disappearing agent is a problem for Western conceptions of agency, it is not a problem at all for Buddhist impersonal agency, as they have a solution.

Once we gain a better grasp at how not-self systems originate *out of* kamma, which operates according to interdependent causality (not the other way around, where not-self has to *fit in* to kamma), we can start to gain an understanding of how causality can be modulated in certain ways, even without selves there to do it. In the following subsections, we see how this process operates by first outlining the nuanced picture of kamma found in the EBT, and then how the Buddhist attributes responsibility to action.

4.2. How Buddhists attribute responsibility without a self: Kamma as a causal, not moral, doctrine of action and outcome

Many people think of kamma as some form of universal justice. Do bad stuff and it comes back to bite you, do good stuff and it comes back to reward you. The average Buddhist might go a step further and assert that it is a "moral law" (Payutto 1995). Quizzed further, they will explain that whatever wholesome or unwholesome thought, speech or action is produced, this shapes our future experience. Present experience, they say, is almost entirely due to the kamma produced in the past, either from this or previous lives. Although this everyday view of kamma is widespread, a more nuanced understanding can be found in the EBT.

While the EBT descriptions of kamma are vast and complex, as an axiomatic position, kamma is action (Bodhi 2010; AN 6.63; Buddha 2012). At this axiomatic level, a particular action produces a causally dependent result (*vipāka*). Moving up to a categorical level, there is kamma that produces vipāka that move one closer to nibbāna and kamma that produces vipāka that lead one further into dukkha. Or, kamma that leads to the end of kamma (nibbāna), or kamma that produces perpetual kamma (dukkha) (Bodhi 2010; AN 4.235; Buddha 2012). Actions that lead in either of these directions are categorically classified as either skillful (*kusalākamma*) or unskillful (*akusalākamma*) respectively. Their results are also accordingly classed as skillful or unskillful outcomes (*vipākakamma*).

An important element in the production of skillful and unskillful kamma is intention (cetanā). Intention is thought to be so instrumental in the process that it is occasionally stated that it *is* kamma (AN 6.63; Buddha 2012). Intention assists in producing various kinds of bodily (*kāya*), speech (*vācā*), and mental (*mano*) actions that can be thereafter classified as either skillful or unskillful. Intention is an important ingredient for kamma because, without it, determining whether an action is skillful or unskillful becomes dubious. But while intention is necessary to determine

whether an action is skillful or unskillful (rather than merely neutral), it is not necessarily sufficient for kamma in general.

For instance, a skillful intention of goodwill towards an aggressor without an overt action is an event that is sufficient to produce kamma (mental; mano-kamma), as is an intention to hurt someone without ever taking any physical or verbal action on it. However, in some events that still produce skillful or unskillful kamma, intention is not necessary. Some examples include an unskillful bodily act (kaya-kamma) of taking an item from someone thinking it was free when it was not, or a skillful speech act (vācā-kamma) of not responding angrily to criticism when one does not know it is criticism. Likewise, neutral kamma that is neither classed as skillful nor unskillful (neutral in the sense it does not move towards either dukkha or nibbāna but still causes a result, like opening a window to let the breeze in) still produces causal kamma, as does neutral kamma from unintended actions, such as accidentally bumping into someone and causing them to fall.[11] Therefore, intention is not a necessary condition for kamma; so the claim that intention *is* kamma is overinflated.

Reiterating from above, intention is a product of mental action (saṅkhāra) within the khandhās. The khandhās are all not-self, as they are not subject to control. This implies that intention is not-self, or not subject to control. Rather, intention operates according to, and only within, the bounds of its causally conditioned constraints of the khandhās. The causal constraints of intention are the present result of prior skillful or unskillful kamma, and there was no agentive self or controller along the causal pathway leading to the current instantiation of intention. There is no control or controller over the way the khandhās are now or how they function. Intention then is merely another causal event (albeit one that still modifies an outcome), as the current intention is one-and-the-same as the result of prior kamma. Therefore, there is no intention (cetanā) that is subject to control, or can operate beyond its causal constraints, as all is not-self.

One might think that skillful intentions and actions yield skillful outcomes (similarly with unskillful), and therefore what is skillful or unskillful is just a misnomer for what is normally labelled moral or immoral. However, weighing something as moral or immoral from a perspective of kamma is not as straightforward as it might immediately seem, due to the axiomatic understanding of kamma. A crucial observation here is that vipākakamma and what is considered kusalā or akusalā are not moral in a sense as is associated with the Western perspective on normative ethics; instead, they are causal actions that lead us closer to nibbāna or further into

[11] Later Buddhist sources identify further types of kamma (*niyāma*) for things like natural phenomena or inanimate objects (Payutto, 1995, p.312; Stede, 1931. P.432)

dukkha. It is a mistake that kamma is classed by most as a moral doctrine (Payutto 1995). Rather, kamma is a causal doctrine.

While meritorious or "good" (*puñña*) and detrimental or "bad" (*pāpa*) results might be considered kamma's moral component, these are normative only in the sense of leading closer to or further from nibbāna. Similarly, actions considered right and wrong (*sammā* and *micchā*) are steps in either direction along a path. Therefore, kamma is not morally normative in a contemporary sense, but rather normative in relation to all forms of dukkha and progression towards nibbāna.

For example, Buddhist monastics have rules forbidding them from gardening via digging soil and pruning plants. The act of digging or pruning would be considered *akusalā-kamma* (unskillful activity) that has produced *micchā-kammanta* (wrong action), because this is *micchā-ājīva* (wrong livelihood) for a Buddhist monastic (Bhikkhu 2013, 272-276). Taking up horticulture is not on the list of the Buddha's hobbies that take them closer to nibbāna, and the vipākakamma for the monastic would be that they are perpetuating dukkha. However, the monastery gardener, being a layperson, can dig and prune as he pleases without worrying about being "immoral", as this is a kusalā act that fulfills his right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*). Similarly for using money, for a Buddhist monastic every act of pursuing, keeping, and using money is akusalā-kamma that is considered pāpa (evil or bad) (Bhikkhu 2013, 202-212). Yet, for every other layperson, Buddhist or not, money is totally fine, and can even be considered puñña (wholesome and good) if the intention is to do kusalā acts with it.

From an EBT perspective then, actions and intentions have no universalist moral weight in the contemporary sense. As an axiomatic principle, kamma is action and its result devoid of moral normativity. The kamma produced is relationally dependent on the one performing it, and is subsequently categorically classified as either skillful, unskillful, good, bad, right, or wrong dependent on whether the action leads them closer to nibbāna or out of dukkha. Kamma therefore is not a "moral law" as some would have it (Payutto 1995), but rather a causal law for overcoming suffering. This causality also does not need a self.

4.3. Impersonal interdependent causality solves the problem of responsibility: How we can still attribute action and responsibility to not-self systems

What though, of the main burden and the lingering problem of this paper: Without a self, can the Buddhist still be responsible for their actions, or do they get off the hook? Doesn't kamma need someone to experience the results of action? Does the Buddhist have a solution where no self is needed to experience the results of causality and kamma? Recall the EBT description of kamma

containing the problem of agentive ownership. “I am the owner of my actions (kamma), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and abide dependent on my actions. Whatever action that I do, for good or for evil, to that I will be the heir”(AN 5.57; Buddha 2012). This repeatedly invokes the existence some form of agentive self to be the owner and heir. An understandable assumption here is that whatever I do, I am the one who reaps its results, as I am the owner of my kamma.

From the Buddhist perspective though, what is the owner or heir is just the later instantiation of a causally conditioned and interdependent process. Thinking that the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences is seen as one extreme, and the other extreme is thinking that the one who acts is someone other than the one who experiences (SN 12.46; Buddha 2005). The Buddhist rejects both these extremes. Instead, the EBT suggest that *experience itself* is just the machinations of the causally conditioned process of dependent origination, or impersonal interdependent causality (paṭiccasamuppāda). Its most simple summary is, “When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that.” (AN 10.92; Buddha 2012).[12] This is entirely parallel to the definition of kamma, where particular action (kamma) produces a causally dependent result (vipāka).

There is no personal agent or self that drives this dependently originated karmic processes or experiences the result of the process. Instead, the process unfolds impersonally for a not-self system through interdependent causality. Depending on the preexisting conditions of a localized not-self system, impersonal interdependent causality produces “experience” (*viññāṇa*) for that particular not-self system. There is not an “owner” or “heir” in a self-agentive sense; rather, if prior causal conditions remain, there will be the perpetuation of further experience—including action and its results—for the not-self system. Hence, kamma and its results are an impersonal process that requires no agentive self driving it; rather, they operate in accordance with interdependent causality, where events are conditioned by prior causes and can be connected via the chain of interdependence.

Now, to finally summarize and deal with the main burden of this paper. No personal agent or self is necessary for interdependent causality to function, but experience still unfolds for a not-

[12] A more detailed account of impersonal interdependent causality that produces kamma—and the human that is viewed as the not-self system that experiences the results of kamma— can be described through the multiple links in its causal chain. Specifically, if fundamental misrepresentation of the nature of existence (*avijjā*; oftentimes translated as ignorance or delusion) still persists, this will give rise to fabrications or formations (*saṅkhāra*), which then produce consciousness (*viññāṇa*), followed by mentality and materiality (*nāmarūpa*), then the six senses (*saḷāyatana*), which then produce contact *(phassa*), that gives rise to sensations (*vedanā*), which results in craving (*taṇhā*), and then clinging or attachment (*upādāna*), which produces further “becoming” or existence (*bhava*), giving rise to future births (*jāti*), and a whole mass of suffering of ageing, decay and death *(jarāmaraṇa*) which further perpetuates *avijjā* ad infinitum. As long as this process keeps going, one’s kamma keeps accumulating and dukkha remains. When *avijjā* is uprooted, the process ceases and the end of kamma is complete.

self system as long as the requisite causal conditions are in place. Impersonal agency of interdependent causality can be regarded as one-and-the-same thing as kamma (action and result), which, in itself, is the process that produces a not-self system (anattā). A not-self system emerges out of, is an expression of, and operates in accordance with the causality of kamma. This leads to the conclusion: A not-self system itself can be regarded as an externalized expression of interdependent causality and kamma.

Not-self systems are embedded within kamma and arise dependent on it. And as not-self systems are a part of this interdependent causality that produces kamma, they can continue to produce kamma and will be connected to its outcome. Therefore, a not-self system *arises out* of the kamma of interdependent causality, not the other way around where not-self needs to *fit into* or *align with* kamma. While moral responsibility relies on personal agency (which the Buddhists do not have), causal responsibility can be attributed to not-self systems without an agentive self, because the system itself is the expression of kamma through interdependent causality.

What we have as a result is not a tension between not-self and kamma, but rather, the understanding that not-self systems *arise out of* kamma through dependent origination. There is no need to force not-self into a conceptualization of kamma that has an "owner" understood in a Western agentive sense. With this understanding, a more accurate way to interpret the statement "I am the owner of my kamma…" could be, "Not-self systems are its actions, experience the effects of its actions, emerge from its action, connected through its actions, and are conditioned by its prior actions. Whatever the not-self system does, whether it is classified as skillful or unskillful, it will experience those results."

This leads us to the second main argument:(2) *There is no internal tension between kamma and not-self when considering human action and responsibility because of impersonal interdependent causality, but there is an external tension between the two with contemporary philosophical stances on moral agency and responsibility.*

5. Conclusion

If we are all just not-self systems operating according to impersonal interdependent causality, how is this supposed to work in everyday moral concerns and complex social structures? Is this a practical stance, and can we live this way? And if we can, how do we go about living in this manner? I think that yes, we can live this way and there is already a long Buddhist history of cohesive social structures suggesting we can (Berryman, Chadha, and Nichols 2024). This operates through a revisionist ethics centered on a type of selfless responsibility. However, because of the

amount of unpacking this position requires, the procedural mechanics of how selfless responsibility works and the social structures around it must be set aside for now. Additionally, unpacking the position requires an explication of the process rather than an extraction from the EBT, so it falls outside the scope of this piece.

In summary, because the Early Buddhist Text (EBT) stance of not-self (anattā) asserts that there is no self-agentive controller over or in the psychophysiological structure (khandhās) that produce human action, and moral responsibility requires such a self-agentive controller, I argued that the Buddhist must reject this kind of moral responsibility. This makes them moral responsibility skeptics. Although it might first appear that the Buddhist doctrine of kamma (action and result) should be compatible with moral responsibility, I have also argued that kamma, and by extension not-self, is incompatible with current conceptions of moral agents and responsibility. Kamma is a causal, not moral, doctrine.

Rejecting this kind of moral responsibility is not viewed as a problem by the Buddhist though, as they suggest causal responsibility can do a better job without associated desert-based problems. This is because they posit that causal responsibility can be attributed to not-self dynamic systems (human persons that are anattā), as the system itself is the expression of kamma through impersonal interdependent causality without an agent (paṭiccasamuppāda). As causal responsibility can be attributed, the Buddhist has a kind of selfless responsibility towards human action.

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