Buddhism (Me), Galen Strawson (Myself), and Moral Responsibility (I)

My brain was made from ramen. This is not a way to state figuratively that I am obsessed with eating ramen or that my intelligence is suffering in some way; my brain was literally made from what used to be ramen. When one is first conceived in their mother’s womb, their brains are one of the first things to develop. Therefore, it is often said that the molecules of whatever food one’s mother craves in pregnancy forms the molecules of the baby’s brain. If that is the case, then, my brain was created from the molecules of ramen. When I first learned of this, I was fascinated by the fact that I am the product of recycled molecules, and in that way connected to the world.

Now, in Buddhist philosophy this instance would be considered an example of how everything in the world is interconnected, and the impossibility of speaking about my intelligence or my thoughts without also referring back to my mother, the store that sold the ramen to her, whomever historically created ramen, as well as the rest of the world. Galen Strawson would also agree with this observation, and based on his Basic Argument would also tack on that because of this very relation to the rest of the world that I myself did not choose, I cannot be held truly morally responsible for anything I do.

Strawson’s argument for the impossibility of moral responsibility, which he calls the Basic Argument, is as follows. Regardless of whether determinism is true, no one could have been the cause of themselves, or *causa sui*, and so the circumstances by which they came about is beyond their control. The premise of moral responsibility lies on the basis that a person can be held responsible for the actions they cause. However, according to Strawson a person’s choices
of action, as well as their constitution, will always be made in relation to such circumstances and past they could not control, thereby resulting in actions that they cannot truly be held morally responsible for (“Real Materialism” 320). For example, if I were to choose to act in such a way as action A, then this choice was made based on who I currently am, which is caused by my previous actions, which were decided upon by my previous self, which was caused by my actions before then, and so on and so forth into an infinite regression. This regression it will ultimately connect back to causes that I could not have been responsible for, such as my brain being made of ramen, thereby making my choice to do action A something I could not be held responsible for.

However, as Michael Istaven argues in his defense of the Basic Argument, this does not necessarily mean that the requirement for such a responsibility is that I would have had to made the entirety of my being, being causa sui. Specifically, the only part that I would simply have had to be responsible for would the part of my mental constitution that allows action A to occur (Istaven 402). This makes the Basic Argument very difficult to contend with, as such a mental constitution could not have been made independent of my being without it being a different person altogether. At the same time, as it comes from the same agent it would have to draw back from my past experiences, actions, etc., which sparks the regression once again back to causes I could not have been responsible for. Arguably, this type of reasoning is circular. As Melvin Chen points out, Strawson’s demand for moral responsibility may be an impossible one (Chen 6). The fact that Strawson’s only requirement for moral responsibility, to be responsible for the part of the mental constitution that allows action A to occur, would thereby then require oneself ultimately to have created oneself by virtue of being responsible for that mental constitution is
also an example of such circular reasoning. However, even disregarding these issues I find that there is a fundamental problem with Strawson’s Basic Argument.

Although Strawson’s argument on the impossibility of moral responsibility is powerful and well-reasoned, it is problematic that his argument concludes with the impossibility of moral responsibility. I find that his argument unconvincing in proving that moral responsibility is impossible; Strawson merely proves that the type of self he presupposes is required for moral responsibility does not exist, not that moral responsibility is impossible. His prerequisite for a self to have moral responsibility is that that self must be one that is independent from the rest of the world, which his argument simply proves cannot exist. In comparison to Buddhist philosophy, which holds its basis in there being no self, anatta, the lack of consideration for human agency in his argument become apparent, as his philosophy contains overlap with said tradition of thought with vastly differing conclusions on moral responsibility.

In Buddhist philosophy, although there is no self, there is no question of responsibility for what one does in the world, which is in direct opposition to Strawson’s conclusion of the impossibility of moral responsibility. In comparing Strawson’s philosophy with Buddhist philosophy, however, I am not arguing that Buddhism is definitively right and Strawson is wrong as a result. Rather, we humans, as agents with choices and undefined, real consequences to our actions, cannot be beings without moral responsibility, and a consideration to a rich tradition of thought established on the idea of no self that is similar to Strawson’s own philosophy is necessary to illustrate this point. But first, to start with the self.

What is the nature of the self that Strawson talks about? In order to better examine Strawson’s assumptions about the nature of the self required for moral responsibility, I would
like to copy and paste Strawson’s “more cumbersome statement of the Basic Argument” below (“Real Materialism” 319):

1. Interested in free action, we are particularly interested in actions that are performed for a reason (as opposed to ‘reflex’ actions or mindlessly habitual actions).

2. When one acts for a reason, what one does is a function of how one is, mentally speaking (It is also a function of one’s height, one’s strength, one’s place and time, and so on. But the mental factors are crucial when moral responsibility is in question.)

3. So if one is to be truly responsible for how one acts, one must be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking – at least in certain aspects.

4. But to be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, one must have brought it about that one is the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects. And it is not merely that one must have caused oneself to be the way one is, mentally speaking. One must have consciously and explicitly chosen to be the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, and one must have succeeded in bringing it about that one is that way.

5. But one cannot really be said to choose, in a conscious, reasoned, fashion, to be the way one is mentally speaking, in any respect at all, unless one already exists, mentally speaking, already equipped with some principles of choice, ‘P1’ – preferences, values, pro-attitudes, ideals – in the light of which one chooses to be.
6. But then to be truly responsible, on account of having chosen to be the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, one must be truly responsible for one’s having the principles of choice P1 in light of which one chose how to be.

7. But for this to be so one must have chosen P1, in a reasoned, conscious, intentional fashion.

8. But for this, i.e. (7), to be so one must already have had some principles of choice P2, in the light of which one chose P1.

9. And so on. Here we are setting out on a regress that we cannot stop. True self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice.

10. So true moral responsibility is impossible, because it requires true self-determination, as noted in (3).

From (4), Strawson’s idea of how “one must have brought about the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects” refers to a self-determination of the self that has to have happened independent of the rest of the world. But in stating that that is the prerequisite for moral responsibility there lies a contradiction, because by the virtue of being born in this world any possibility such a self-determination ceases to exist. Although Strawson continues to build up his argument from there on to prove the impossibility of moral responsibility, the Basic Argument fundamentally relies on the his assumption that ultimately the self-determined self is the only sort that can be considered to have moral responsibility. Following so, since that sort of self does not exist, he concludes that moral responsibility also cannot exist.
I disagree with this reasoning on the grounds that it trivializes the relational nature of the world in which each individual is placed in. It assumes that because the self is brought about through other factors, the self becomes a passive thing incapable of making decisions, and unable to contribute back to the very place it was placed in. By ‘passive thing’, I mean that it becomes unable to change according to its own volition, and so therefore is no better off than a puppet on a string.

Of course, Strawson states that change is possible; it is just “that people cannot be supposed to change themselves in such a way as to be or become truly or ultimately morally responsible for the way they are, and hence for their actions” (“Real Materialism” 320). This strikes me as odd; the nature of the world is one that is relational, and so to require independence from the world as the prerequisite for volitional change is asking for the impossible. Stating that the fact that my brain is made from ramen, which had come about because I was born in Japan to a mother with so and so disposition and all these relational circumstances makes me unable to account for any of my actions in a moral sense would only make sense if the relationally created self could never absolutely volitionally change. I challenge this. I believe that a self-determined self that is created separately from the world is a strange prerequisite for moral responsibility, especially considering that that type of self does not exist. The type of self that remains, the relational self, then, has the prerequisites necessary for moral responsibility, and here is where Buddhist philosophy enters the stage.

One of Buddhist philosophy’s most important tenets is that of anatta, or no-self, as an ultimate truth. To give a brief summary of Buddhist philosophy, all of life, happiness and unhappiness, ultimately is suffering, or dukkha, because of the human condition in which nothing will last forever. The most immediate source of dukkha comes from tanha, which is craving,
unconditional desire, as well as attachment. Buddhists believe in the cycle of birth and rebirth occurring from *karma*, or volitional action, which have effects that carry on even after death and lead to rebirth due to it being the “will to live, to exist, to re-exist, to continue, to become more and more” (Rahula 31). *Karma* and its effects occur as a result of *tanha*, and *dukkha* comes from a false understanding of the self, and so by becoming enlightened to the truth of the nature of the self, one can be free of karmic effects, *tanha*, the cycle of rebirth, and therefore *dukkha*. From a Buddhist standpoint, the being one might see in a mirror and call “I” or “my self”, does not exist. Buddhists reject the idea of a ‘self’, because that fundamentally suggests at a being that exists independently from the rest of the world. As every individual is intertwined with the rest of the world, there is no ‘self’ that is and ever will be independent of the world. A famous observation by Kotzker Rebbe illustrates this point rather well: “If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!” The being that one sees in the mirror and calls “I” or “my self” cannot be separated from the fact that it is something reflected off a mirror, the being that is reflected cannot have existed without a mother and a father, and a set of relational circumstances produced by the world. Put in the context of my ramen brain, because of the fact that the molecules used to create my brain came from ramen, which my mother ate, and this brain is the one that I use to think, my very being cannot be considered independent of the way in which it came about.

I believe this is starting to sound rather familiar. From a Buddhist philosophy standpoint, then, Strawson’s Basic Argument simply proves their point about the nature of the ‘self’ in the conventional sense: it does not exist. However, from Strawson’s other writings it is clear that he believes in the existence of a ‘self’, or at least of a self-experience, which raises a curious state of
affairs: Strawson takes as a given the existence of a self (even as his Basic Argument fundamentally proves such a self can’t exist), whereas Buddhist philosophy rejects it. At the same time, however, there is moral obligation and responsibility in Buddhism, where it is believed there is no self, but Strawson, who holds to be true the existence of a self, maintains the impossibility of such a responsibility. So if both are right, if one has a self, one cannot have any sort of moral responsibility, but if one conceptualizes oneself to have no self, then there is a moral responsibility towards one’s own actions.

By Strawson’s other writings, I am referring to two of his writings on the self and self-experience, Against Narrativity and Episodic Ethics, and I am taking these two writings to be components of Strawson’s philosophy, and so connected with his Basic Argument. In Against Narrativity, Strawson argues against the mainstream notion that the ‘Diachronic Self-experience’ is the only healthy way of conceptualizing the self in a self-conscious way. By ‘self-experience’, Strawson is referring to “one’s experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or ‘self’ of some sort” (“Real Materialism”190). Such a “self”, I take it, is the same sort he speaks about in his introduction for The Self?: it is the “inner subject of experience, a mental presence or locus of consciousness that is not the same thing as the human being considered as a whole” (“The Self?” v). The ‘Diachronic Self-experience’ is one where one might see oneself as the same self as was there in the past, and will be in the future. Strawson argues that there also exists another way of self-experience, called the ‘Episodic Self-experience’, which is a type of self-conscious conceptualization that does not recognize itself to have existed in the past and will not exist in the future. The ‘Episodic Self-experience’ thus sees itself as a being only there in the present based on contingent circumstances, and so from the
perspective of the Episodic individual, their past self is not ‘them’ in the sense that that their past self is not what is there in the moment.

In this way the idea of an ‘Episodic Self-experience’ is very close to anatta, as Buddhist philosophy rejects the idea that the ‘self’ is something independent of change. Every being in the world, including individuals, are constantly changing and in flux, and so there is no such ‘self’ to speak of that remains stable enough to be able to talk about the same entity. Although Buddhists may regard the ‘Diachronic Self-experience’ to be a confused sense of the self, curiously enough Strawson’s ideas on self-experience are also very close to Buddhism, even whilst maintaining the impossibility of moral responsibility. Metaphorically, in a physical sense, although as a fetus my brain may have been created out of ramen molecules, as cells in the body die on a day to day basis and are replaced by cells created from what I eat on a day to day basis, the recycled molecules that helped to make up my brain now would be much different from back then. It is technically the same brain in that it is my brain, originated from ramen molecules, but it cannot be said that it is the same brain in that it is radically different from how it was before. In the same way, the ‘self’ is the same individual, and yet it is not, which is the same type of reasoning that is used to rationalize Strawson’s concept of the Episodic self-experience.

What then, of moral responsibility? If one does not see itself as not having existed in the past, as per the Episodic self-experience, or does not have a ‘self’, as per Buddhist philosophy, would that not cause problems in regards to moral responsibility? For Episodic self-experience, due to the divide between ‘the self in the present’ and ‘the self in the past’, the problem lies in that ‘the self in the present’ would not be able to be held responsible for things done in the past, by virtue of not identifying with it.
In response to this, Strawson disagrees, as he states “full moral responsibility is in no sort of conflict with an Episodic outlook” (“Real Materialism” 220). In Episodic Ethics, Strawson argues that Episodic individuals can be fully moral in their feeling responsible or obligated to do something, which remains independent of how they see themselves. Insofar as the past self was a necessary prerequisite for the present self, the present self would have “a proper sense of responsibility for [its] past actions” as long as one possesses “an awareness of the fact of obligation, given the fact of obligation” (“Real Materialism” 220-222). For example, if I was an Episodic individual who, a few days ago made some instant ramen and forgot about it, leaving it to start festering with maggots in my family’s kitchen, I could still feel that, upon coming back to the kitchen, that I am responsible for it. I do not have to identify with my past self, whose sanity I may question in choosing to let instant ramen fester, in order to feel that I am ultimately responsible for it.

It almost appears that Strawson has contradicted himself, in that his Basic Argument states that such a full moral responsibility is impossible. However, in Episodic Ethics he was only proving that that the Episodic self-experience can experience full moral responsibility and therefore live a moral life. This possibility of experience is Strawson’s way out of contradiction, for this moral responsibility for an Episodic individual is simply a possibility in regards to ‘self-experience’, which is simply ‘just an experience’ that could be ultimately false. Indeed, in the preface to Freedom and Belief, where he states free will does not exist, Strawson admits that there is a “experience we have of being free agents, and of being truly responsible for what we do in such a way that we can be truly deserving of praise and blame”, and that “this experience is something real, complex, and important, even if free will itself is not real” (“Freedom and Belief” v).
Here I will borrow the American English expression of the ‘Tinkerbell effect’, which is used to describe something that only exists because people believe in it (Wikipedia), to describe Strawson’s idea. Strawson’s idea is essentially that moral responsibility seems to exist because people believe they experience it but in actuality it does not. Put more elaborately, Strawson’s ‘Tinkerbell effect’ is one such that people are all living under the assumption that individuals are agents with choices in action and character with moral responsibility for each choice when in reality there is no such moral responsibility. Even if individuals experience choices and change that they feel responsible for, that is a mistaken experience in that they are in effect choices and changes that they themselves did not bring about and so therefore could not be responsible for.

Other than the fact that this type of reality would be a horrific deception, I reject Strawson’s ‘Tinkerbell effect’ on the grounds of the argument I made at the beginning of this paper; the impossibility of moral responsibility, and so the mistakenness of experience in feeling moral responsibility, only holds true if the type of self that is independent of the rest of the world is the only type of self that has the possibility of moral responsibility. If the relational self holds any basis in having moral responsibility, then Strawson’s ‘Tinkerbell effect’ also becomes invalid, and his Basic Argument will only hold true for the independent sort of self, which is proven by his Basic Argument to not exist. Since the Buddhist sense of no-self is essentially said relational self, let us examine whether or not Buddhist philosophy could actually have moral responsibility.

For Buddhist philosophy, the problem most people have lies with responsibility attributable to the individual itself. For example, “if the individual person does not exist over time, how can it make sense for the person to be subject of karmic justice over so many lives?” (Taliaferro163). Without a self, how might Buddhist philosophy even have moral responsibility?
I have stated before that Buddhist philosophy has moral responsibility and obligation for each being, but no self. In regards to justice, it does seem problematic, as there is at least a ‘self’ that acts in a way that accumulates the effects *karma* from volitional actions, leading into the cycle of rebirth. However, to clarify, the idea of *karma* is not justice; it is the “theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction; it is a natural law, which has nothing to do with the ideas of justice or reward and punishment… If a good action produces good effects and a bad action bad effects, it is not justice…this is in virtue of [karma’s] own nature, its own law” (Rahula 32). Therefore, *karma* and rebirth is not a mechanism by which to punish an individual for what was done in the past life; it is merely the effects from the past life stretching over into the present. Justice does not exist in the Buddhist sense as it does in a Christian sense in that *tanha* includes attachment, even to ideas; therefore, the idea of one moral code of ethics is part of the false sense of self that Buddhists seek to let go of. Even punishing other people in the name of justice would be a karmic action in it of itself (Pandita 8). Buddhist philosophy is interested primarily with truth, termed *Nirvana*; the root of all evils come from ignorance and false views (Rahula 3). More could be said on this, but that is well beyond the scope of this paper; ultimately, however, neither the lack of justice, nor the lack of self, make moral responsibility or obligation impossible in the Buddhist philosophy.

The moral responsibility of Buddhist philosophy lies in the interdependent, relational nature of the world. With the very fact that one cannot speak of the self without referring to the rest of the world, by existing as a being interdependent with all different aspects of the world, one is influenced by the world. However, at the same time, as a part of said world, one also takes part in influencing and changing the world. *Karma*, or volitional actions, brings about consequences that cannot all be understood or controlled (Pandita 21). A fair critique of this may
be that since the world constitutes and influences such a relational self, whatever happens due to such a self’s actions, good or bad, cannot fully be attributable to such a self. Even with the different Buddhist ideas on justice and being unable to understand the full consequences of *karma*, this is a fair point. By stating that a relational self cannot be held accountable for what they do due to influence from the world, this relationship it holds with the world would then be an endless loop without any change. There is, however, the possibility of change, and due to this possibility where one could “be or become truly or ultimately responsible for the way they are, and hence for their actions” (“Real Materialism” 320), there is moral responsibility in Buddhism.

Such possibility of change comes from the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, which is also called meditation. In this practice one examines one’s own mind and so thereby learns to live in the moment. Through such practice, one can come to understand oneself in relation to the rest of the world, and how one may have been conditioned to act in certain ways by the world. Mindfulness is helpful to “examine [a sensation’s] nature, how it arises, and how it disappears” (Rahula 74), and in doing so develop an objective approach to it. In understanding how one acts as a result or in relation to other things in the world, one can begin to start actively taking initiative in changing the tendencies and habits one has created without thought. The idea of no self, *anatta*, is especially helpful here, because although there is still a continuity between the relational self reflecting on itself, the self that it is looking at conceptually is a different self, due to the constantly changing nature of both the world and self. For example, if I have a tendency to get angry and I realize this, I can self-reflect on why and may come to realize that this tendency comes from having parents who had tendencies to get angry. Within this self-reflection, in order to objectively uncover the reason for which why I feel or did a certain thing, I would have to see my own self as a different entity. As a being engaged in self-reflecting, by the
concept of no-self I am currently not the self I am analyzing; I have already changed, and that is freeing because I do not have to identify with, or be chained to the past and am able to start anew. By understanding the reasons for which someone I used to be did certain things, I can now make choices to change my future actions. In self-reflecting and analyzing the self in this manner as a different self, the infinite regression back to causes beyond one’s control as dictated in (9) of Strawson’s Basic Argument does not occur.

This way of looking at a past self as different self is possible because it is a relational self; an independent self, in being completely separated from the world, would have to be static to remain separated from an ever-changing world in flux, but as a relational self it participates in the flux. It is the same as an Episodic individual from Strawson’s philosophy; to look at one’s past self is in essence to see it as a different person. If one can understand the reasons for which that past self acted and learn off of that, then there is no regression in the sense that the being one is right now is not choosing from the same mental constitution created when the past self acted. The relational self may be interdependent on the world, but is still able to reflect on the self. Insofar as it is able to change through this self-reflection in a volitional way and change the world by being part of it, it therefore holds the possibility for moral responsibility in everything it does.

As there is the possibility for moral responsibility in such a relational self, Strawson’s Basic Argument cannot conclude that moral responsibility is impossible. The Basic Argument simply becomes a proof for the fact that a self that is independent from the rest of the world cannot exist. Moral responsibility is very possible, especially since the actions individuals take hold very real consequences, both for themselves and the world around them. Regardless of the
fact that my brain was made from the molecules of what once used to be ramen, that cannot be
the basis for which I have no moral responsibility.


