

Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition (Michaelmas 2023): First Prize

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For the sake of the argument, assume that determinism is true. Are you morally responsible for at least some of your actions?

In this essay, I will argue that if determinism is true, it poses a challenge to desert-based moral responsibility. However, it would still be justifiable to hold individuals morally responsible on a forward-looking, non-desert account. To support my argument, I will first introduce desert-based moral responsibility as the prevalent understanding of moral responsibility in our everyday lives and in philosophical debates. Then, I will evaluate two key conceptions of free will and demonstrate how determinism undermines both conceptions, thus challenging desert-based moral responsibility. Finally, I suggest a forward-looking and consequentialist approach to moral responsibility that can be maintained within a deterministic framework.

Typically, our response to someone pushing us with the intention to harm us is distinct from our response to someone accidentally pushing us in a crowded space. In the former situation, we may experience a heightened feeling of anger or resentment that would not be felt in the latter scenario. This commonsense approach to moral responsibility was famously brought to light in 1962 by P.F. Strawson in his paper “Freedom and Resentment.” He posited that our emotional responses and reactive attitudes towards an individual's actions are the foundation of moral responsibility. These emotions are integral to human nature, regardless of the truth of determinism. Therefore, we cannot and should not abandon these reactive attitudes or the practice of holding individuals morally responsible (P.F. Strawson: ‘Freedom and Resentment’, 2022). Furthermore, these reactive attitudes imply that “its target deserves to be the recipient of the expression of such emotions” (Caruso and Pereboom, 2022, p. 8). This kind of moral responsibility, in which an agent *deserves* blame or praise for their actions, is called desert-based moral responsibility. In this essay, however, I will show that this notion of moral responsibility, commonly used in our everyday lives and in philosophical debates, is incompatible with determinism.

Many philosophers agree that moral responsibility requires the existence of free will. This means that for someone to be deserving of blame or praise, they must possess a certain level of control (or free will) over their actions. However, the concept of free will itself has been subject to debate, and there appear to be two fundamental notions of free will. The first is a ‘leeway-based approach,’ which posits that for an individual to possess free will, they must have the ability to do otherwise (Timpe, 2016, p. 1). This idea that “a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise” has also been termed “the principle of alternate possibilities” (Frankfurt, 1969). The second notion of free will is based on the concept of ‘sourcehood’, where an individual has free will if he himself is the source of his actions in a specific way (Timpe, 2016, p. 2, 7). Philosophers often debate moral responsibility by considering these two notions of free will, with some arguing that one notion is more significant than the other. In this essay, I will illustrate how neither of these notions of free will can be compatible with determinism, thereby challenging desert-based moral responsibility.

Determinism posits that all events, including human deliberations, choices, and actions, are causally determined by prior events and the laws of nature. According to van Inwagen (1983, cited in Caruso and Pereboom, 2022, p. 21), this implies that only one future is physically possible at any given time, with no room for alternate possibilities. By definition, this contradicts

the principle of alternate possibilities and, therefore, makes determinism incompatible with the leeway-based conception of free will.

However, John Martin Fischer, a prominent semicompatibilist philosopher, makes a compelling argument that the presence of alternate possibilities is irrelevant to the grounding of moral responsibility. To support this claim, Fischer presents a Frankfurt-type case:

Jones is in a voting booth deliberating about whether to vote for the Democrat or the Republican. After weighing reasons and deliberating in the “normal” way, he chooses to vote for the Democrat. Unbeknownst to him, Black, a neurosurgeon with Democratic sympathies, has implanted a device in Jones's brain that monitors Jones's brain activities. If he is about to choose to vote Democratic, the device does not intervene. If, however, Jones were about to choose to vote Republican, the device would trigger an intervention that would involve electronic stimulation of the brain sufficient to produce a choice to vote for the Democrat and an actual vote for the Democrat (Fischer, 2007, p. 335).

Fischer suggests that in the actual sequence, i.e., when Jones chooses to vote for the Democrat based on his own deliberation, Jones is *choosing freely* and can be held morally responsible for his choice and action. According to Fischer, this demonstrates that despite not having alternate possibilities due to Black's device, Jones has the necessary freedom for moral responsibility (Fischer, 2007, p. 336). However, objections to this example have been raised by philosophers such as Stewart Goetz and Derek Pereboom (Fischer, 2007, p. 340). The main objection raised against these Frankfurt-type examples is that the factor which eliminates alternate possibilities exists outside of the actual sequence, while in causal determinism, the factor is inherent to the actual sequence. In other words, Jones' deliberative process, which Fischer regards as *choosing freely*, is itself part of the causal chain. Fischer acknowledges this weakness and concedes that Frankfurt-type examples do not conclusively establish moral responsibility in a causally deterministic world (Fischer, 2007, p. 341). Therefore, I maintain my position that, the leeway-based approach to free will is incompatible with determinism.

In considering the sourcehood conception of free will, I turn to the Basic Argument presented by Galen Strawson in “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility” (1994). The fundamental argument can be summarised as follows:

1. You do what you do because of the way you are.
2. To be *truly morally responsible* for what you do, you must be *truly responsible* for the way you are – at least in certain crucial mental respects.
3. You can't be *truly responsible* for the way you are.
4. Hence, you can't be *truly morally responsible* for what you do.

One may wish to argue against premise 3, but doing so would result in a regress, indicating that true self-determination is impossible for finite human beings like us. Although many philosophers have criticised Strawson's idea of *ultimate responsibility* and *self-determination* as too stringent, I find Strawson's argument a thorough and compelling explanation for the incompatibility of sourcehood and determinism.

Thus far, I have demonstrated the incompatibility between different conceptions of free will and determinism, which implies that desert-based moral responsibility must also be incompatible with determinism. In other words, if a person cannot be the true source of their actions and if a

person has no choice to do other than what they do, then it follows that they cannot be fully morally responsible or deserving of blame or praise for their actions.

The above incompatibilist conclusion is often rejected by most people largely because they are concerned about its potential consequences on society. However, like other moral responsibility sceptics, I believe that even if determinism is true, it will not undermine our sense of freedom and moral responsibility in any significant way. This is primarily because a lack of metaphysical possibilities does not deprive us of ‘epistemic possibilities’ (Fischer, 2007, p. 348). The sense of freedom and agency we feel in our everyday lives is because of our ability to deliberate and reason. Even if determinism is true, the mere fact that we cannot know *what* is determined would compel us to engage in deliberation and reasoning. As Strawson explains, regardless of the true nature of our freedom and moral responsibility, our *experience* of freedom and moral responsibility is an “inescapable” part of being human (Strawson, 1994). Therefore, even if we intellectually believe in causal determinism or its incompatibility with free will and moral responsibility, we cannot escape our *sense* of agency and accountability.

In addition, despite my rejection of free will and desert-based moral responsibility in a causally deterministic world, I contend that it is still beneficial for us to adopt a forward-looking, non-desert-based approach to moral responsibility as proposed by Derek Pereboom (2015). This approach focuses on the “protection of potential victims, reconciliation in personal relationships and with the moral community, and formation of moral character” (Pereboom, 2015, p. 285). Certain forward-looking accounts of moral responsibility have been criticised for potentially attributing blame to innocent individuals in pursuit of beneficial societal outcomes, while Pereboom argues that only those agents who have genuinely acted immorally should be subject to forward-aiming blaming practices (Smart, 1973, cited in Talbert, 2023; Pereboom, 2017, cited in Talbert, 2023). It is not possible to discuss Pereboom’s account in further detail due to the limited scope of this essay. However, I believe that his forward-looking account is highly practical and justified. By adopting this perspective, we can effectively address concerns related to moral behaviour and navigate our interpersonal relationships in a causally deterministic world (Caruso and Pereboom, 2022, p. 61).

In conclusion, the traditional notion of free will and desert-based moral responsibility faces significant challenges in the face of determinism. However, this does not mean that our sense of freedom and moral agency is completely undermined. The ability to deliberate and reason, even if our choices are ultimately determined, still gives us a sense of agency and accountability in our everyday lives. Furthermore, adopting a forward-looking, non-desert-based approach to moral responsibility can still provide valuable guidance for our moral behaviour and interpersonal relationships.

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