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Reconsidering Human Freedom and Moral Responsibility in Contemporary Philosophical Thought

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Abstract

Human freedom and moral responsibility have been among the most controversial in modern philosophy due to their implications in metaphysics, ethics, moral psychology, law, neuroscience and social theory. The question was debated in traditional terms as a struggle between free will and determinism: When all actions are caused by previous actions and natural laws, do agents seem to have no choice but to act as they do, making them not morally responsible for their actions? But today's thinking in philosophy has transcended this dichotomy. The compatibilists would claim that freedom is not a metaphysical independence from cause, but rather the capacity to be affected by one's reason, to act in accord with one's evaluations, and to act from the point of view of one's own evaluation. In compatibilists and free-will skeptics counter that even this may not be enough to make for the basic desert for blame and punishment. Meanwhile, the study of neural processing of unconscious decision preparation and the study of folk intuitions about agency and responsibility, in the experimental philosophy tradition, have changed the interpretation of agency and responsibility. It proposes a non-absolutist self-construction model, and a non-causal model of authorship, instead of simply causal authorship and self-construction, it sees that moral responsibility is a graded and socially embedded model of answerability, which is based on rational capacities, moral understanding, reasons-responsiveness, and interpersonal accountability.

Keywords: Free will, Moral responsibility, Compatibilism, Determinism, Human freedom, Reactive attitudes.

1. Introduction

The issue of human freedom is not just a metaphysical conundrum; it is an important moral issue. Human beings commend, reproach, apologize, forgive, punish, reward, promise and blame others. These kinds of practices appear to imply that people are not empty spaces in which natural, psycho-social or psychological events unfold. They have roles as agents who can grasp reasons, grasp obligations, consider alternatives, and control their actions (P. F. Strawson, UniversePG | www.universepg.com

1962/1963). But this is a serious potential problem when human behaviour is put under a causal ordering. It is not clear whether agents have the kind of freedom to act that is required for them to be morally responsible for what they do (Pereboom, 2001; van Inwagen, 1983) if all their actions are determined in some way by their genes, the environment, their socialization, their unconscious processes, and brain activity and earlier character formation (Nishat *et al.*, 2022).

There are, in modern philosophy, three fundamental questions which address the freedom and responsibility, there are three fundamental questions in modern philosophy about the freedom and responsibility: First, what sort of control does an agent need to exercise to be morally responsible? Secondly, do we have to be able to do differently to be morally responsible? Thirdly, if determinism is correct, what can be the responsibility? Compatibilists accept that freedom from all causes is not necessary for free will; that freedom from all causes is compatible with freedom in the sense of responsibility. Instead, it requires that the agent's values, reasons, intentions and actions (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Frankfurt, 1969; Watson, 1975) are linked in the appropriate way. Not only is the question here 'do actions have causes?', but also 'what kind of causation destroys agency, and what kind of causation does not? Classical incompatibilism is the view that if determinism is true, then no one is in a position to do otherwise and if no one is in a position to do otherwise, then no one is morally responsible (van Inwagen, 1983). Compatibilism rejects the conclusion, and holds that freedom is not the lack of causation, but the proper kind of causal link between the agent's values, reasons, intentions and actions (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Watson, 1975). Libertarian theories include incompatibilism but do not include determinism, and claim that there is a type of indeterministic form of agency that the human agent can have (Kane, 1996). Hard determinists and hard in compatibilists reject compatibilism and libertarianism, they think that human beings do not have the control necessary to be held responsible for their basic-desert moral responsibility (G. Strawson, 1994; Pereboom, 2001, 2014).

The question of determinism is not the only one that is discussed today. A mere shift in the question from whether something could have been done differently to whether it is truly the agent's own will, brought about by Frankfurt's (1969) challenge to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, redirected the focus from whether it could have been done differently to whether it is truly done from the agent's own will. The work by P. F. Strawson, (1962/1963) brought a focus on reactive attitudes rather than metaphysics of the soul, focusing on interpersonal aspects of resentment,

gratitude, forgiveness, blame and moral demand. Rather more recent sources, such as Fischer and Ravizza's (1998) guidance control theory, focus on reasons responsive mechanisms and ownership of action. The approaches demonstrate that it is not always the case that metaphysical openness is the basis of moral responsibility but that it is the expression of the agent's own practical agency. Other new problems have emerged. Libet *et al.* (1983) and Soon *et al.* (2008) conducted neuroscientific experiments that indicate that unconscious brain activity can occur before conscious agency of action. The study of Libet *et al.* (1983) and Soon *et al.* (2008) indicate that the brain activity might occur prior to conscious agency of action. The results of experimental philosophy have also complicated the debate about common-sense beliefs in responsibility and determinism, suggesting that these beliefs are complex, context sensitive and emotionally motivated (Nahmias *et al.*, 2005; Nichols & Knobe, 2007). The issue of freedom can only be tackled with a traditional metaphysical approach to its resolution.

This is a paper which proposes that the notion of human freedom must be reconsidered as a practical and relational as opposed to absolute metaphysical capacity to be free of causal influence. Moral responsibility should not be an impossible self-creation, or complete control of one's character. However, responsibility isn't solely with the behavior that stems from internal causes either. A plausible contemporary account should maintain the importance of rational agency, moral understanding, reasons-responsiveness, and social answerability, and account for how causal history, manipulation, psychological disorder, social oppression and neurobiological limitation can limit or complicate responsibility.

Methodological Approach

This paper is a conceptual and critical research work within the analytic philosophy and interdisciplinary moral theory. Does not employ empirical fieldwork. Instead, it reviews the key arguments in current philosophical discourse on free will and moral responsibility, assisted by some select results from neuroscience and experimental philosophy. The method is interpretative, comparative and argumen-

tative. It is fitting that this approach is used because the free-will debate is about conceptual analysis and practical moral judgment (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2012; Pereboom, 2014).

The paper contains three steps. First, it provides a reconstruction of the key theoretical positions, incompatibilism, libertarianism, compatibilism, semi compatibilism, and moral responsibility skepticism. Second, it reviews some important arguments which have influenced the contemporary debate: the consequence argument, Frankfurt-style counterexamples (Frankfurt, 1969), P. F. Strawson's reactive-attitude approach (1962/1963), reasons-responsive compatibilism (van Inwagen, 1983), and manipulation arguments. Third, it establishes a moderate stand: moral responsibility is not ultimate self-authorship but the gradable moral answerability based on rational and interpersonal capacities. This methodical approach is required as the free will debate is not concluded by a single empirical finding or by a single conceptual definition. While neuroscience may reveal unconscious preparation of some decisions, it cannot itself identify what sort of moral freedom is relevant (Libet *et al.*, 1983; Mele, 2014; Soon *et al.*, 2008).

Likewise, metaphysics can have a say in the issue of determinism but it cannot be the only determinant of the full meaning of human culpability, forgiveness, apology and repair (McKenna, 2012; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). All these should be brought together in a full account in the metaphysical, ethical, psychological and social dimensions.

The Traditional Problem: Determinism and the Ability to Do Otherwise

The classic free will problem starts by the apparent incompatibility of causal determinism and alternatives. Determinism is the idea that in the presence of the past and the laws of nature, there is one and only one physically possible future. If determinism is indeed correct, then all human actions are the necessary results of previous conditions and natural laws (van Inwagen, 1983). The incompatibilism concern is that no one has any control over the past or the laws of nature, and, thus, no one has any control over the results of the past or the laws of nature. The consequence argument, often in the form of Van

Inwagen's, (1983) problem, is one of the most important recent statements of the issue. In the basic concept if it is true that determinism is valid, then the agent's current action is a result of past facts and laws of nature which are beyond the agent's control. If the conditions are not up to the agent, then the action that follows is not up to the agent. According to this perspective, real freedom is the capacity to do otherwise in the same situation. If there were no such alternatives, there would be no way for the agent to act, and the agent would not act freely as is necessary for moral responsibility.

This is a strong argument as it links freedom to control. Moral responsibility appears questionable if there is no real option for the agent to avoid the action. This is how excuses function in normal life. When someone is compelled, threatened, unconscious, or otherwise incapable due to physical condition, the blame is diminished or eliminated (Fischer, 1982; Fischer and Ravizza 1998). The incompatibilism extends this pattern: if everyone's actions are inevitable then determinism is like the universal excuse. But compatibilists say this leap to generality is hasty. It is not enough that there are causes for an action for ordinary excuses to occur. They occur when certain types of reasons evade, deform or incapacitate the rational faculties of a rational agent (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Frankfurt, 1969). Compassion is the motive for giving money to charity and such a motive is not obviously counter to freedom. A person that signs a contract under a threat is under a different kind of cause, which one that is not voluntary. The central question therefore is not one of causation, but one of how the action is caused: does it express the agent's own practical point of view? The Principle of Alternative Possibilities says that an agent can only be held morally responsible for what he or she has done if the agent could have done otherwise (Frankfurt 1969).

This is an intuitively forceful principle because it seems to be linked to the concept of avoid ability and responsibility. However, Frankfurt, (1969) disputed this idea by maintaining that there may be cases of responsibility in which alternative possibilities are not present. This challenge did not put an end to the debate, but it did redirect the focus of the current

debate from the other options to the actual-sequence control.

Frankfurt-Style Cases and the Shift to Actual-Sequence Control

Among the most significant papers in the moral philosophy of the twentieth century is Frankfurt's 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', (1969). Frankfurt maintains that it is not morally necessary to be able to do otherwise. His argument is based on the examples where the agent doesn't have the capacity to really do otherwise because there is a counterfactual intervener present, but the intervener is never actually stepping in because it is the agent's decision. It is not clear whether or not the agent would have been able to avoid this action, but the series of events would seem to have been carried out as a result of the agent's own volition. The Frankfurt-style cases are important because they differentiate two questions: Did the agent have other choices and did the agent's actions come from his or her own practical agency? If responsibility is contingent upon the source of the action, then there may be no requirement for open alternatives in moral responsibility. The key question here is what was the agent's motive, motive in his motivational structure, without coercion or bypass manipulation (1982, Fischer, 1969, Frankfurt).

This understanding led to the development of "real sequence" theories of moral responsibility. This understanding culminated in the real sequence theories about moral responsibility. The question of whether the agent might have done otherwise is replaced by the question of whether the sequence of causes to the action included the agent's own rational abilities. This thinking is developed by an early study of Fisher, (1982) on responsibility and control, which broke the responsibility types of control into those that are relevant to responsibility. Subsequently, Fischer and Ravizza, (1998) worked out the influential theory of guidance control, which states that moral responsibility hinges on the fact that the action is produced by the agent's own mod-moderately reasons-responsive mechanism. Cases from Frankfurt continue to be controversial. Other's philosophers suggest that these are not 'real' eliminations, because the agent might still have some 'flicker of freedom', for example,

the potential to try to do something different or to start forming a different intention (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). Others say that the Frankfurt cases prove not that there are alternative possibilities in some special cases, but that in some special cases, alternative possibilities are not relevant. Yet Frankfurt's, (1969) argument is enduring: it demonstrates that the moral significance of freedom may be more than just metaphysical alternatives; it may be more in terms of source hood, ownership and rational agency.

This change means a lot of things. If there is moral responsibility based on actual-sequence control, then determinism does not exclude moral responsibility. If done in the right way, with the right motives and values, it may still be free, provided that it is a determined action (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Watson, 1975). In contrast, an undetermined action can be not free if it is arbitrary, haphazard, or not related to the agent's motivations. So, with indeterminism alone, responsibility cannot be guaranteed. Freedom has to have some kind of rational agency, not just randomness.

Compatibilism: Freedom as Rational Self-Governance

Compatibilism is a theory stating that determinism does not exclude free will and moral responsibility. It is not a typical feature of contemporary compatibilism to say that agents are uncaused causes. Rather, it asserts that freedom relevant to responsibility is rational self-governance. An action is free if it is done by the agent's own desires, values, reasons, and capacities of reflection rather than under external coercion, compulsion, manipulation or extreme incompetence (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Frankfurt, 1969; Watson, 1975). Classical compatibilists frequently saw freedom as something that was "free from" external constraints. When a person does what he or she wants to do without being physically compelled, the person acts freely. Modern compatibilists have a harder time accepting this. If the desire is compulsive, manipulative, pathological or not an authentic disposition of the individual, the person is still not free, even if it is their desire (Frankfurt, 1969; Watson, 1975). For instance, addictions pose challenging quandaries as when the addict desires something, it can be in conflict

with his or her reflective commitments. Therefore, freedom demands not only desire-satisfaction but a useful connection between desire, reflection, and endorsement as well.

An agent's motivational system and evaluative system are important to differentiate from each other, and this is where Watson's, (1975) 'Free Agency' comes in. For Watson, free agency is not that one simply goes with what one finds oneself wanting, but rather what one values. His account belongs to the larger trend of the hierarchal and evaluative debates about freedom. Another general theory of personhood that influenced compatibilism was the theory of Frankfurt, (1969) which held that a person had two types of desires: first-order desires and second-order volitions.

A person is free, not just when he does what he wants, but when he does what he wants, he wants it done. Another important dimension is Fischer and Ravizza's, (1998) reasons-responsive theory. On their part, the agent is morally responsible when the action comes from the agent's mechanism and the agent's mechanism is conducive to reasons. It doesn't have to be exactly logical. Humans are often coward, selfish, emotional or wrong. However, the moral mechanism needs to be able to identify and react to the moral reasons within an appropriate set of potential situations (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). This does not ask for impossible rational perfection but neither is it a way of believing anything which is internally caused a free act.

Compatibilism is appealing for many of the common distinctions. People tend to differentiate between wrongdoing, harm, coerced behaviour, childhood action, mental incapacity and manipulation. The differences are not related to the truth of determinism at the cosmic scale. Their reliance is on the agent's capacities, knowledge, control, understanding, rational responsiveness, and lack of coercive pressure (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2012). However, there are strong objections to compatibilism. The most important is the source hood objection. Values and reasons may come from the agent and yet they may also be the result of elements which are outside of the agent's control. If one's character is fully formed by one's genes, upbringing, trauma, social environment,

and previous causes, then it is hard to see how one can ultimately be responsible for one's actions from that character (Pereboom, 2001; G. Strawson, 1994). This objection gives rise to the free-will skepticism and manipulation arguments.

Libertarian Freedom and the Problem of Luck

Libertarian theories justify a more robust notion of freedom, arguing that free will is incompatible with determinism, but that not everything that people do is determined. To libertarians, responsibility entails more than doing something according to one's values or one's reasons in a given causal sequence. It demands agents to have a real ability to make decisions about what they will do. For instance, in his book, Kane (1996) has suggested that freedom is most important in self-forming actions, particularly during moments of conflict when the agents are torn between two or more competing motives and are helping to mold their future selves. What is appealing about libertarianism is that it allows for a strong feeling of agency to be maintained. If an agent has the real option to select between alternatives, then responsibility seems more certain. There also appears to be more similarity between libertarianism and many commonplace moments of deliberation. If there is a moral dilemma, they tend to feel like there's no future and that their decision will help decide their identity. This experience is ethically relevant because it brings responsibility and self-formation to a higher level than simply producing behavior. But luck is a problem with libertarian accounts. Without prior reasons, values, and character, it is hard to see how it would not be random or accidental in nature, but rather under the control of the agent. It is not automatically the case that indeterminism leads to responsibility because an undetermined event might not be more controlled but less. (Pereboom, 2001) If the agent's selection is partially random, his/her liability might be lower, not higher.

The libertarians respond that indeterminism does not imply randomness. The agent can still act for reasons, even if the reasons do not cause a single outcome. But the challenge is that they both sound like determinism the more the decision is explained by the character and "why?" of the agent; the less, the more likely they are

to be blamed on luck. This tension is one of the reasons for the appeal of compatibilist or skeptical accounts over traditional libertarian accounts among many contemporary philosophers (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Pereboom, 2014). The libertarian debate is useful as a reminder to philosophers that freedom is related to self-formation, rather than simply to outward action. If the notion of persons was challenged even in libertarian metaphysics, the notion that persons can shape themselves by means of reflective practice, moral struggle, and long-term commitment is important. A contextual theory can retain this practical wisdom without resorting to the bold position of claiming agents should not be placed inside the causal order.

P. F. Strawson's Reactive Attitudes and the Interpersonal Basis of Responsibility

P. F. Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' revolutionized the free-will debate by redirecting it from a metaphysical to a interpersonal level. There is a strong link between moral responsibility and reactive attitudes, such as resentment, gratitude, indignation, guilt, forgiveness and hurt feelings, P. F. Strawson (1962/1963) claims. These attitudes will not be theoretical evaluations imposed on human life from the outside. It is a component of being able to relate to others as persons. If a friend lets another friend down, the hurt friend's resentment goes beyond mere denial that determinism is true. It is a reaction to the quality of will in the action. The person guilty of the mistake is perceived as unconcerned, disrespectful, hostile or uncaring. Likewise, gratitude is a reaction to benevolence, care and consideration (P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). Reactive attitudes are then treating acts as expressions of interpersonal regard or disregard.

P. F. Strawson's approach is compelling because it allows him to give a reason for why responsibility is important. Identifying metaphysical authorship is not the point of responsibility. To control interactions between individuals who claim moral obligations for each other. Blame is a demand that someone acknowledge. Apology admits of a violation of the demand. Forgiveness alters or lets go of resentment in the context of moral rectification (McKenna, 2012; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). These practices are core to

moral community. P. F. Strawson (1962/1963) does not claim that some people may be excluded from the ordinary requirement of blame. The treatment of children or persons with a very serious mental disability or under extreme circumstances may differ. He also acknowledges excuses, meaning if someone committed the act on accident, at someone's order, or even if the person was unaware, resentment may be lessened. However, such exemptions and excuses take place in the context of responsibility practices. They do not have to go beyond anything to the metaphysical objective view.

The advantage of P. F. Strawson's conception is that it refutes the notion that determinism is likely to wipe out moral responsibility. If determinism is true, men and women would still be engaged in relations of goodwill and ill will (P. F. Strawson 1962/1963). But his perspective is counter to some objections. Some criticize the naturalness for not being justification. A practice can be a most human and at the same time a questionable practice. Resentment can be overly intense, prejudiced, vicious and/or misguided. So a complete theory cannot only explain responsibility practices, but also assess and improve them (McKenna, 2012; Pereboom, 2014). The advantage of this approach that the reactive-attitude is very useful at the level of journals to link with social ethics and free will. The issue of responsibility is not just one of singular decision moments. It is about the meanings of actions in the context of relationships, communities and institutions. This insight enables modern theory to be developed to deal with not only the question of free agents, but the question of responsibility practices.

Free-Will Skepticism and the Problem of Ultimate Responsibility

The free-will skepticism rejects the moral responsibility of human beings even in the deepest sense of the word that is connected with the concept of desert. Skeptics are not always atheists who reject the possibility of human deliberation, choice, or reaction to reasons. Instead, they claim that humans do not have the control needed to have a straightforward, non-instrumental sense of blame or punishment (Pereboom, 2001, 2014; G. Strawson, 1994). One of the strongest skeptical arguments is presented in 'The

Impossibility of Moral Responsibility' by G. Strawson, (1994). His fundamental premise is that if a person has a moral responsibility for his or her own actions, he or she must also have a moral responsibility for the way he or she is. But to be really responsible for oneself, one would have to have selected or created oneself somehow. But no one can be *causa sui* (the cause of himself), so that there cannot be true moral responsibility (G. Strawson, 1994). This argument is hard to make given the fundamental issue with blame in the desert. Personality, values, feelings, opinions, and abilities influence a person's decisions. Those features are genetically determined, family, culture, education, trauma, opportunity and chance shaped.

The ability and will to be reformed also stems from the previous circumstances (Pereboom, 2001; G. Strawson, 1994). Now, when it comes to ultimate responsibility, no one can truly fulfill it except for the individual. A similar challenge is posed by hard incompatibilism of Pereboom (2001, 2014). Pereboom claims that determinism and indeterminism are not sufficient to allow agents to have the control they need to warrant basic desert. When actions are not under the agent's control, then the agent is not responsible. When actions are not determined in a controlled manner by the agent, it may be a matter of luck, not freedom. Thus, neither way leads to desert-based responsibility (Pereboom, 2001, 2014).

Free-will skepticism has implications for practice, particularly the practice of punishment. If no one is responsible in the simple retributive sense, then a system of criminal justice should not be retributive in terms of the strict desert. Rather, the reaction to misbehavior should focus on protection, rehabilitation, deterrence, restoration and moral education (Caruso, 2021; Pereboom, 2014). This skeptical stance doesn't mean overlooking harm. Instead, there must be a more compassionate and progressive approach to holding people accountable. But the doubts are not easy to overcome. First, it can be overly demanding of what the responsibility demands. Maybe there's never a need to be the creator of one's own moral responsibility. The ordinary moral practices could only ask for an agent's reasonable capacities for understanding, self-control, and responding to moral reasons (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2012). Second, UniversePG | www.universepg.com

the doubt undermines some key practices in accountability. When wrongdoing has occurred, victims have a right to be recognized, to have their wrongdoing apologized to them, and to be made right. Skepticism can strip away all the blame and thus may not acknowledge the moral significance of harm. There should be some element of skepticism that's being learned without giving up the burden of responsibility entirely. The skeptic is correct in identifying the depth of human agency conditioning, and the practice of blame in a humble fashion (Caruso, 2021; Pereboom, 2014). But this doesn't mean that all accountability is futile. Ultimate metaphysical desert can be present while moral answerability is not.

Manipulation Arguments and the Limits of Compatibilism

One of the most serious counterarguments against compatibilism today involves manipulation arguments. These arguments involve imagining a person who has had their values, desires or reasoning mechanisms deliberately inserted or engineered into them by someone else. Conditions of compatibilism may be met by the manipulated agent: may act in accord with their desires; affirm their reasons; react to reasons. However, many people think that the agent is not morally responsible since the source of their agency has been external to their responsibility (Pereboom, 2001, 2014).

Manipulation arguments are powerful in that they expose a historical condition of responsibility. An action may not be sufficient because it is in accord with the agent's current psychological structure. It's also important to question how that structure came about. Even when the action seems internally coherent, if it is done because the person's motives were implanted by brainwashing, hypnosis, direct neural intervention, or covert psychological programming, then it is not free (McKenna, 2017; Pereboom, 2001). A well-known version of this challenge is the 4 case manipulation arguments by Pereboom, (2001). It introduces cases which are slowly shifted from direct manipulation to ordinary deterministic causation. The first case involves a manipulated agent who is not responsible, and this case is not distinguishable from the deterministic formation of character, so it could be

that the ordinary deterministic agents are not responsible. This argument requires compatibilists to account for the moral distinction between ordinary causal formation and intentional manipulation (Haji and Cuypers, 2006; McKenna, 2017).

There are a number of different answers to this question from compatibilists. While some manipulated agents may be responsible if they are in the right psychological state, hard-line compatibilists agree that this is the case (Haji & Cuypers, 2006). Soft-line compatibilists say that manipulation involves interfering with responsibility conditions, like the condition of ownership, authenticity, and normal development, which are history-sensitive. Other compatibilists claim that manipulation is relevant only if it bypasses or interferes with the agents' capacities, not simply because it causes agents' capacities (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2017). The manipulation debate demonstrates that freedom is not solely an issue of the mental structure at the moment. There is a history of human agency. The responsibility of a person partly depends upon whether his moral values, beliefs and desires were formed in a manner that enabled moral learning, reflection and self-correction (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2017). Don't think agents need to "make it up as they go along. It is a history that undermines responsibility, in the sense that it does not allow the agent to be involved in its formation. So, the manipulation argument does not provide a complete defeat for compatibilism, but it does compel the compatibilist to be more sophisticated. A theory of compatibilism must also contain both structural and historical conditions: the agent must have reasons-responsive capacities, and these capacities must not be the result of responsibility-undermining manipulation (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2017).

Neuroscience and the Challenge to Conscious Agency

One of the best-known obstacles to free will is neuroscience. The presence of readiness potentials in the brain before the appearance of a subject's conscious decision to move was proposed by Libet *et al.* (1983). Some have interpreted this finding as evidence that the brain is initiating action before the

consciousness is involved. The study by Libet *et al.* (1983) is of particular importance as it directly investigated the temporal relationship between the conscious intention and neural preparation. Soon *et al.* (2008) followed up on this problem by using fMRI to find that patterns of activity in frontopolar and parietal cortex reflected simple decisions before conscious awareness. The results of such studies are disturbing, since the first cause that people expect in the case of spontaneous action is consciousness of purpose. When the neural process precedes conscious intent, then conscious will can feel like a late report of the neural process, rather than the originator of it (Libet *et al.*, 1983; Soon *et al.*, 2008). The meaning of the experiments, however, is to be taken with a pinch of salt in the philosophical sense. First, the actions studied tend to be simple, uninteresting, and neutral with regard to morality, like pushing a button or deciding between hands. These are not the same as complex moral choices that require long-term planning, moral reflection, feeling conflicted, and relating to social significance (Mele, 2014). Secondly, agency does not depend on conscious preparation. Human agency can be an unconscious, preconscious, and conscious process and may consist of all these integrated over time. Even if the motor preparation is not conscious, a person's character, commitments, and reasons can influence action (Mele, 2014). Thirdly, prediction is not compulsion. The fact that a brain scan can make a prediction with above average accuracy does not necessarily indicate lack of control. The brain is the site of the realization of human mental states. Thus, identification of neural correlates of decision-making does not demonstrate the absence of agency but can provide insight into how agency operates in humans (Mele, 2014; Soon *et al.*, 2008). For meaningful agency, no such dualistic picture is necessary that 'the self' must be separate from the brain.

According to Mele, (2014) neuroscience has yet to prove that free will is an illusion, because the experiments do not demonstrate that conscious reasoning is not causally relevant. Attention, memory, reflection, and self-control, are the ways in which the decision to study, to apologize, to avoid harm, to keep a promise, or to resist temptation is realized over time. These processes are not merely a conscious choice at a

single moment. Neuroscience thus refutes the idea of "will" as a simple phenomenon and does not rule out more encompassing conceptions of agency. Theories of freedom should rather become more realistic in the light of neuroscience, not nihilistic. It questions the notion that the will is solely a conscious order. However, it extends a more general view in which agency is spread across cognitive processes, habits, reflective capacities, emotional control, and social learning (Libet *et al.*, 1983; Mele, 2014; Soon *et al.*, 2008). Freedom isn't lack of cause in the brain. The organized activity of individuals as embodied rational agents.

Experimental Philosophy and Folk Intuitions

Experimental philosophy has brought empirical approaches to the discussion on free will and moral responsibility. Researchers do not make assumptions about the beliefs of ordinary people; rather, they ask them what they believe about the agents in deterministic or indeterministic situations. The value of these studies is that philosophers rely on intuition to back up positions on compatibilism versus incompatibilism (Nahmias *et al.*, 2005; Nichols, 2011; Nichols & Knobe, 2007). Nahmias *et al.* (2005) reported a set of people's evaluations of agents as free and morally responsible in deterministic scenarios. They found that laypeople do not always view determinism as being incompatible with moral responsibility. Others, however, have given more complicated results – for example, Nichols and Knobe, (2007). They found that individuals form judgments differently in the abstract situation than in the emotionally concrete situation. If they are given abstract descriptions of deterministic universes, they can tend to be incompatibilist. However, when the wrongdoer is presented with emotionally charged wrongdoing, they may still judge the wrongdoer responsible (Nichols & Knobe, 2007). This pattern is significant because it demonstrates the non-static and non-simplistic nature of intuitions concerning responsibility. They are subject to emotion, framing, moral rigor, personality, and cultural expectations (Nichols, 2011; Nichols & Knobe, 2007). Some may think that in theory, determinism lays out the blame at the door of the murderer or the betrayer, but in a real case, they blame the murderer or the betrayer nonetheless. This indicates that there are

interpersonal and emotional functions as well as metaphysical analysis in the role of responsibility judgments.

Experimental philosophy does not decide the free-will controversy. It is not possible to determine compatibilism versus incompatibilism by majority vote. These studies, however, provide some insight into the psychological complexity of responsibility judgments (Nahmias *et al.*, 2005; Nichols, 2011; Nichols & Knobe, 2007). They also caution philosophers from prematurely proclaiming that common sense "speaks for one side. Experimental philosophy has helped for a moderate conclusion in this paper's argument. Moral emotions and expectations are deeply intertwined with human practices of responsibility. In parallel, these practices can be subject to bias and inconsistencies. Therefore, philosophical theory must be fair, evidence-based, and attentive to context, disciplines and challenges the concept of accountability, while respecting its human importance (McKenna, 2012; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963).

Toward a Contextual Theory of Moral Responsibility

From the foregoing debates it would seem that neither the assumption of complete compatibilism nor the complete rejection of it is convincing. There are three pitfalls in a strong theory. It must first be free of metaphysical hyperbole: a man's freedom must not be that of becoming a self-created originator or an uncaused cause (G. Strawson, 1994). Second, it must not be psychologically reductionist (as responsibility is not the same as simply being the product of internal states, whether these states are caused by, or are the result of, other factors) (Pereboom, 2001, 2014). Third, it should refrain from being cruel in the social sphere: blame and punishment should not overlook trauma, inequality, manipulation, mental illness, and limited capacity (Caruso, 2021).

The starting point of a contextual theory of moral responsibility is the concept of answerability. To hold someone responsible is to see him/her as a proper object of moral issues: What did you do wrong? Did you know that it was harmful? What reasons did you take yourself to have? Have you been able to see any other motives? Do you have the courage to admit and

make amends for the error? Responsibility is thus linked with moral communication (McKenna, 2012; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). This perspective is similar to Strawsonian and conversational theory. The conversational theory of moral responsibility developed by McKenna, (2012) is an analogy that equates actions as expressions of meaning and blame as a reply or response to that meaning. His ideas are furthering the line of thought that being responsible and holding responsible are intertwined practices. A contextual account acknowledges that responsibility is not just something that is held internal to individuals separately. It is a social relation between individuals who may offer, receive, require or react to reasons (McKenna, 2012; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963).

But answerability needs to be evaluated. Different agents have different capacities and different circumstances can allow different control. The mature adult who does knowingly harm another person for selfish purposes is more responsible than the child or coerced person or the one with serious cognitive impairment. Capacities like the ability to handle moral issues, test reality, control impulses, regulate emotions, reflect on their own actions, and have access to reasonable alternatives influence responsibility (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Watson, 1975). This also takes social factors into consideration. Poverty, discrimination, trauma, lack of education, coercive institutions do not negate or remove responsibility; they might affect the nature or extent of responsibility. They could also devolve part of the responsibility onto the social systems as well. For instance, if someone causes harm, they are still held responsible; if a society regularly makes people feel unsafe because of inequality, neglect, or institutional failure, they are responsible for making the conditions unsafe (Caruso, 2021; Pereboom, 2014).

A contextual theory also can differentiate responsibility from harsh retribution. Marking a person responsible is not always a good thing to do because they deserve suffering. It could involve demands for acknowledgement, restitution, apology, treatment, education, restriction or social repair (Caruso, 2021; McKenna, 2012). It is particularly important to this process in criminal justice as retributive blame can be excessive and dehumanizing.

Human Freedom as Situated Self-Governance

It seeks to describe what the freest form of self-government is arguably in current philosophy: the situated. Human beings are placed because they are designed, historical, social and psychological. They are not the ones to select their genes, their childhood, their culture, their language, their first attachments, their basic neurobiology (G. Strawson, 1994). They are self-governing, however, to the degree that they are capable of reflection, deliberation, learning, evaluating reasons, changing their behavior, and engaging in a moral relationship (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2012). On this side, freedom is not complete freedom from causation. It is a potential that emerges under causal conditions. Reflective agency can be raised by education, stable relationships, moral training, social trust, and psychological health to enhance freedom. The freedom of the agent can be curtailed by trauma, coercion, addiction, manipulation or extreme deprivation, which results in a diminished capacity to respond to reasons (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Pereboom, 2014).

This perspective is part of the reason for the concept of 'degrees of responsibility'. One may be responsible enough to be culpable but not responsible enough to be severely punished. It is possible that someone can be at fault but not responsible for the wrongdoing. A person might be culpable, however deserving of pity, due to harmful circumstances that led to their misdeed (Caruso, 2021; McKenna, 2012). These differences are more realistic than all-or-nothing theories. Avoiding the luck objection to libertarianism is another advantage of situated self-governance. Freedom, however, would lose its determinative nature if free action demanded indeterministic breaks in causation, in which case freedom may turn out to be a matter of chance (Kane, 1996; Pereboom, 2001). If freedom is about being responsive to reasons and being a self-governing agent, however, then causation is not its enemy. That's the kind of causation that makes action "attributable" to the person, and it's the kind that the reflective, the valutive, and the understanding have (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Watson, 1975). Meanwhile, this account eschews mere "compatibilism". It does not state that a person is free when he/she performs his/her utmost desire. It demands the agent has a sense

of meaningfulness with regard to reasons. It also demands that the agent's psychological structure not be created through manipulation outside of their agency (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2017). In this way, theory is compatibilist with a historical and social awareness. Self-governance can also account for the social nature of freedom. Individuals are empowered as agents through language, education, trust, supportive relationships, and fair institutions. Social domination, on the other hand, can lead to a loss of agency through restriction of options, by creating a skewed self-understanding, and by reducing the ability to imagine alternatives. One must link individual responsibility and social responsibility in a realistic manner in order to discuss freedom in a realistic manner.

Implications for Ethics, Law, and Social Life

When we think about freedom and responsibility, it makes a difference in practice. In ethics, it is the call to shift from a moral of blame as emotional retaliation to moral of blame as moral address. Blame should let it be known that a moral demand has been breached. It should elicit recognition, explanation, and repair (McKenna, 2012; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). This is not to say that blame is weak. Blame can be strong, serious and right. Rather it ought to be channeled by fairness and proportionality. The contextual approach in law does not only promote responsibility practices but also questions retributive punishment. There are already different gradations of responsibility in the law, such as intention, negligence, diminished capacity, coercion, and insanity. The divisions should be reinforced by a philosophically based legal system. It should inquire not only about the individual's culpability but about the capacities he or she possessed, the pressures he or she endured, the risks he or she was aware of, and what is the best thing to do to protect society and respect human dignity if the individual caused harm (Caruso, 2021; Pereboom, 2014).

Consider freedom in education and moral development as a knack that is teachable. Children take responsibility as they learn to control themselves, be empathetic, reason and be accountable. The adults can also gain increased freedom by means of therapy,

moral reflection, community support, and social reform (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Watson, 1975). The developmental perspective does not make responsibility a static metaphysical position. Social life involves the theory of humility. As everyone is formed by means that are beyond his or her control, blame must be moderated by a sense of luck (G. Strawson, 1994). Individuals' good and bad qualities are not all self-created. But there is nothing wrong with moral silence, which is not synonymous with humility. There are still cases where people are expected to make restitution for wrongs, repair relationships, and better themselves (McKenna, 2012; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). This can also help to minimize any negative polarization. In public forums, one is either wholeheartedly a guilty monster or wholeheartedly a blameless product of circumstance. A contextual theory can be more generously understood as a "humane middle way" in which people may be truly accountable and also deeply conditioned at the same time (Caruso, 2021; McKenna, 2012; Pereboom, 2014).

2. Conclusion

Moral responsibility and human freedom should be rethought in the context of modern philosophy, neuroscience and moral psychology. The old dichotomy of determinism and free will has its merits, but it is a one-sided proposition. The more fundamental question is whether action can be meaningfully attributed to an agent, rather than whether it is caused (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Frankfurt, 1969; Watson, 1975). The Frankfurt-style cases demonstrate that in some cases it is not necessarily a matter of alternatives with regard to responsibility (Frankfurt, 1969). The theory of reactive attitudes of P. F. Strawson demonstrates that responsibility is a matter of interpersonal relations (P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). The account of responsibility given by reasons-responsive compatibilism specifies how agents can be responsible when they act, not with external reasons, but with their own rational mechanisms (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). The right skepticism of free will (Caruso, 2021, Pereboom, 2014, G. Strawson, 1994) takes aim at the idea of ultimate self-creation and the threat of excessive retribution. The history of agency is relevant, as shown in the manipulation arguments

(McKenna, 2017; Pereboom, 2001). While neuroscience makes simplistic models of conscious will seem problematic, it does not remove the possibility of more complex forms of agency (Libet *et al.*, 1983; Mele, 2014; Soon *et al.*, 2008). Experimental philosophy indicates that responsibility judgments are psychological and social, complex, and embedded (Nahmias *et al.*, 2005; Nichols & Knobe, 2007). The best account, then, is one of a contextual theory of situated self-governance and moral answerability. Human beings are not free, in the sense that they are uncaused creators of themselves. They can be free in the moral sense, however, if they know why, know how to act, and value the reasons for their actions, and if they are subject to practices of accountability (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; McKenna, 2012; P. F. Strawson, 1962/1963). The grading of moral responsibility should be moral, relational and humane. It must maintain an ethical focus on accountability, and acknowledge causal history, vulnerability, social conditions and limitations of human control.

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4. Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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