

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Freedom and Agency: Two Critiques to Hard Determinism

Shuoning Zhang

Student, Department of Humanity, Beijing Normal University, China

Abstract:

Moral responsibility is the very foundation of all moral actions and social practices. Hard determinism, however, becomes a serious threat to morality by raising the impossibility of moral responsibility. This paper evaluates two criteria under which moral responsibility can be justified, reconstructs Strawson's basic argument of hard determinism, and provides two solutions (one libertarian, one soft deterministic) to the challenge raised by hard determinism. Finally, this paper points out that moral responsibility does not necessarily require freewill as its precondition.

Keywords: Moral hard determinism, compatibilism, libertarianism, agency, moral responsibility

1. Introduction

Our actions are impacted by external environments and genetic variations beyond our control. A dilemma appears: are we still responsible in this deterministic world? I argue that we are responsible for our actions, even if they are subject to prior causal chains.

I suggest that responsibility is established either (a) ontologically, we have sufficient free agency *even if* actions and preferences are predetermined by prior causal chains, or (b) certain doxastic or action-based beliefs of responsibility ought to be socially accepted.¹

Finally, I place the discussion of responsibility into a broader context, arguing that the will of the agent is what ultimately causes us to be responsible for our actions without the need for freewill.

1.1. Definition & Criteria of Moral Responsibility

Responsibility, generally, refers to certain capacities that an agent possesses and views one's action as arising from the exercise of these capacities (agency).

On whether people genuinely have these capacities, there are three general philosophical positions:

- Hard Determinism (HD):² is necessary for people to be responsible for their actions, and they lack free will, so they are not responsible for their actions.
- Libertarianism (L): Freewill is necessary for people to be responsible, and people do have freewill, so they are responsible for their actions.
- Compatibilism (C): People can be responsible for their actions even if they lack freewill.

L and C hold that we are ultimately responsible for our actions, while HD does not since hard determinists believe that all our decisions are subject to external causal chains that have been predetermined. The crucial difference between L and C is that L requires an ontological commitment to a free agency, while C only needs a normative belief of what we ought to hold true.

Thus, from three positions, I summarize that we are responsible either if (a) we have a metaphysical free agency or (b) we normatively are justified to have normative beliefs of responsibility.

In the following parts of this passage, I will provide three arguments for L and C.

¹The second criteria especially apply to moral responsibility.

² Freewill implies alternative possibilities for people to act otherwise. Whether freewill exists or alternative possibilities exist

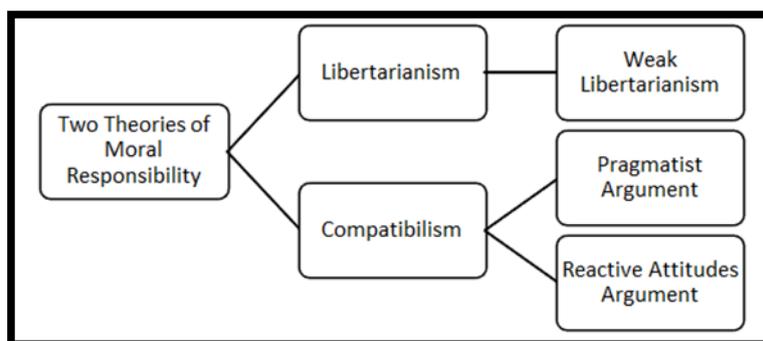


Figure 1

1.2. Weak Libertarianism³

Before I begin my argument, I shall briefly reconstruct hard determinism's challenge to moral responsibility. Strawson formulated the reasoning as the Basic Argument.

- What you intentionally do comes from who you are.
- You have to have responsibility for who you are to be responsible.
- Responsibility for who you are does not exist because your nature N must be determined by prior causal chains.
- Responsibility is impossible since a regress is generated (Strawson, 6).

Premise (3) implies the agent does not have alternative possibilities to do otherwise because the decisions made by a person depend on prior causal chains of which an agent lacks control. Premise (3) is implausible because it treats causal chains as a linear relation without branches. Consider a case in which James was angry and tried to kill Wu, a victim. According to HD, James will kill the victim due to his anger. However, consider the following sentences:

- S1. If motivation a caused James to kill Wu, he would kill Wu.
- S2. If motivation b caused James to act otherwise, he would act otherwise (Chisholm 5).

These two sentences are both compatible with HD since they satisfy the causal chains with distinctive causes and results. However, James, under the description, had alternative possibilities to do otherwise, which challenges premise (3). Given this, I argue that this alternative possibility is conceivable because a weak sense of free-decider must exist to make second-order volition. This view treats agents as *causa sui*, or *Subjekt*⁴. Agents are free to initiate an action from various prior causal chains, providing sufficient alternative possibilities to be responsible (Aristotle VII, 5, 256a).

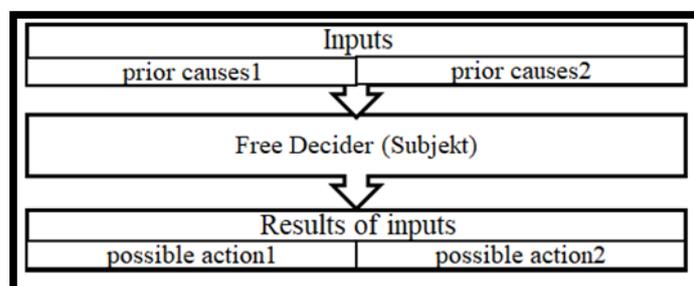


Figure 2

Consider that there are two identical bottles of tea in front of Katherine, but she only has money to purchase one. Everything is identical: color, taste, brand, and price. According to HD, a person must make a volition based on the prior causal chains without invoking a decider.⁵ There are three possibilities:

- S3: Katherine uses a utilitarian calculation to pick one.
- S4: Katherine does not pick one.
- S5: Katherine arbitrarily picks one.

I suggest that none of them are plausible under HD. The first option is virtually impossible because the two bottles are identical, so they provide the same utility for Katherine, so utilitarian calculation is unable to select the optimal option. The second candidate is also implausible because doing so will reduce the total utility from one bottle to zero, violating the principle of rational calculation. In the third option, the selection becomes the random result of probability, so each bottle

³ Why weak libertarianism? The difference between my position here and traditional libertarianism is that I do not deny the existence of prior causal chains and genetic inheritance. However, I argue that alternative possibilities granted by free agency are compatible with the existence of causal chains.

⁴ *Subjekt* is a metaphysical entity that is different from stones or other physical objects that are subject to causal chains. *Subjekt* has the power to be self-caused and hence plays an active role in the formation of causal chains. Nonetheless, the existence of *Subjekt* is compatible with the existence of causal chains or genetic inheritance.

⁵ I deal with a special form of Hard Determinism based on utilitarianism, suggesting that a person will eventually choose to perform that action that maximizes her utility.

has a 50% probability of being selected. However, this outcome provides an alternative possibility for Katherine, which violates the deterministic principle of (3). Since the deterministic calculation is insufficient to provide an outcome, a decider must exist to make the final decision in this scenario.

The insufficiency of HD is the outcome of a false inference: HD infers the impossibility of alternative possibilities from the presence of causal chains. However, such a claim ignores the role of Subjekt in the formation of causal chains as it only explains the causality of events, while people's decisions are not reducible to passive physical entities without causal powers. As Subjekt, people have an active power over the given causal chains, and they use their will to influence the formation of future causal chains.

I conclude:

- C1: we are responsible for our actions because a free decider exists even under the presence of prior causal chains.

2. Compatibilist Argument for Moral Responsibility

2.1. Pragmatist Argument

- If believing in morality and moral incentives, as doxastic beliefs, make our lives better off, we should hold moral responsibility true and base our actions on moral beliefs.⁶
- Believing in Morality and moral incentives, as doxastic beliefs, make our lives better off.
- We should hold moral responsibility true and base our actions on moral beliefs.⁷

According to pragmatists, morality is a social construct grounded by doxastic moral beliefs to encourage moral agents to secure positive behavioral outcomes, regardless of whether determinism is true.⁸ Doxastic beliefs of morality thereby influence the social actions of people and provide a better society. In other words, these beliefs provide the legitimacy of moral responsibility (Schlick 60).

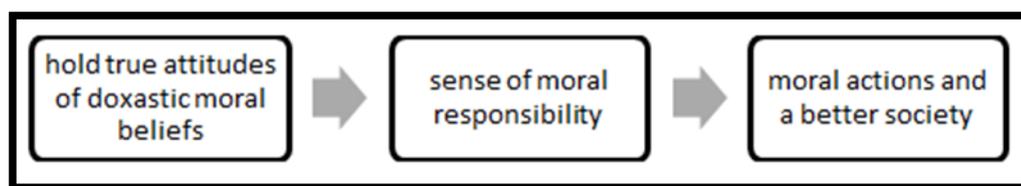


Figure 3

The self-fulfilling prophecy thesis: believing that x helps to realize x (James, II). This is the key to my pragmatist account of morality. To illustrate how doxastic beliefs can make an actual difference, let's suppose two possible worlds, both of which are based on the determinist principle:

- W1: a world in which people hold doxastic moral beliefs true and refrain from their will or impetus to kill each other in action.
- W2: a world in which people do not hold doxastic moral beliefs true and use their will or impetus to kill each other in action.

Although two worlds are all subject to determinism, W1 is far more favorable than W2. W2 is a miserable world of brutal killing and conflicts, while people's lives and rights are protected in W1.

These moral constraints held in W1 are essential for people's well-being. The realization of *eudaimonia* depends on a good society (*polis*) where virtues and friendships are encouraged to grow.⁹ In contrast, a brutal society with killing and suffering limits the cultivation of virtues and eventually leads to the failure of well-being (Aristotle NE).

What contributes to this difference is that the doxastic moral beliefs of people in W1 provide sufficient guides to their actions. As a result, their actions become morally based. In other words, morality is a self-fulfilling prophecy that relies on moral beliefs and makes difference in actions (Dewey 66).

I conclude:

- C2: we are morally responsible for our actions because we already hold and should hold moral beliefs resulting from the social construct, for they make our lives better off.

2.2. Reactive Attitudes Argument

Reactive Attitudes Argument (RAA): no metaphysical facts beyond praising and blaming practices are needed to ground moral responsibilities.

⁶Hold true is a propositional attitude that may either be true or false, so the hold true attitude persists in the world of hard determinism. Most importantly, hold true attitudes, as doxastic beliefs, guide our actions, which make genuine differences in society.

⁷I focus on a particular form of responsibility in this section: moral responsibility. It is perhaps the most important form of responsibility that provides the basis for our everyday actions and explains how interpersonal relationships should form.

⁸An agent being subject to determinism does not entail that he is subject to constraints that force him to act independently of his choices.

⁹Eudaimonia, literally, is the 'flourish of human excellence'. For Aristotle, eudaimonia is the ultimate goal of our lives, and its realization depends on the cultivation of good virtues.

RAA emphasizes the importance of reactive attitudes. That is, 'to the quality of others' wills towards us' (Strawson 56).

In human psychology, we have various moral emotions toward others, including appreciation, love, anger, and resentment. These reactive tendencies to respond with relevant attitudes to demonstrate good or ill will implicates a demand for moral respect.

To see how RAA is free from the attack of hard determinism, I reconstruct it in the following form:

- To be morally responsible for our actions, moral responsibility must either be grounded in the metaphysical entity of free agency or grounded in the use of blaming and praising propositional attitudes to assess actions.
- To be morally responsible for our actions is to use blaming and praising attitudes to assess actions.

From (11) and (12), we may infer: If (9) is true, no further metaphysical account of free agency is needed for an agent to be morally responsible for her actions.

Premise (8) provides two accounts to establish morality—the first account is the traditional libertarian account, and the second is the compatibilist account without any ontological commitment to free agency. (10) applies the law of excluded middle, suggesting that the acceptance of one thesis implies the rejection of the other:

$$(x) (y) (-[x=y] \vee [x=y])$$

From Strawson's discussion of human psychology, we may justifiably suggest that these moral emotions are natural components of our conceptual scheme, and these reactionary attitudes have been widely applied in our everyday lives by moral intuition. Consider the following scenario (Frankfurt 3-5):

An evil scientist installed a machine in the brain of a homicidal maniac. If the maniac decided to stop killing, the machine would make sure he was unable to do otherwise. According to HD, we should not blame this maniac because he could not do anything other than kill, even if he wanted to stop. However, in this story, our maniac enjoyed killing so much and never wanted to stop, so the machine in his brain was never activated. Should we blame this madman for his killing?

HD says no, for he lacks alternative possibilities, but RAA, as well as most reasonable people, will say YES. While man is subject to determinism, he is not subject to constraints that force him to act independently of his will. His will confirms the action and causes the deaths of innocent victims, and other people have reactionary attitudes and moral emotions to negatively assess his actions, concluding that he should be punished. The success of this argument lies in the commitment that the lack of alternative possibilities cannot be the excuse for us to escape from responsibilities. Therefore, (12) is plausible to accept.

I conclude:

- C3: we are morally responsible for our actions because we have reactionary moral emotions to assess the outcome of people's intentions.

3. Escape from Pessimism

After the examination, we reach three conclusions:

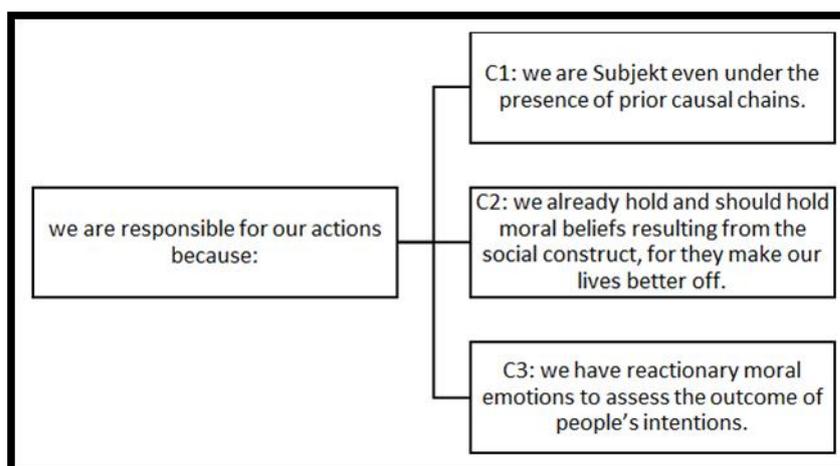


Figure 4

C1 corresponds to criteria (a), while C2 and C3 correspond to criteria (b). Therefore, we are responsible for our actions even if these actions are influenced by external causal chains and genetic traits. Hard Determinism will not and should not become the ultimate reason for people to abolish moral norms and institutions.

We traditionally hold that the existence of causal chains and genetic traits impose a serious threat to moral responsibilities. After the examination in the fourth section, we have the confidence to argue that responsibilities for action arise only because of the will of an agent who makes the decision. When we no longer consider determinism as a threat to responsibility, we not only approach the truth but also enable more possibilities for future investigation of ethics.

4. References

- i. Aristotle. 'The Internet Classics Archive: Physics by Aristotle.' The Internet Classics Archive | Physics by Aristotle. Accessed on: June 5, 2022.
<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.html>.
- ii. Berofsky, Bernard. *Free Will and Determinism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- iii. Blackburn, Simon. *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- iv. Chisholm, Roderick M. 'Human Freedom and the Self,' 1964.
<https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/12380/Human%20Freedom%20and%20the%20Self-1964.pdf?sequence=1>.
- v. Frankfurt, Harry G. 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.' *What Is a Person?* 1988, 127-144.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-3950-5_6.
- vi. Frankfurt, Harry. 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility.' *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities*, 2017, 17-25.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315248660-2>.
- vii. James, William. 'The Will to Believe.' The Project Gutenberg E-text of The Will to Believe, by William James. Accessed on: June 5, 2022.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>.
- viii. Strawson, Galen. 'The Impossibility of Ultimate Moral Responsibility.' *Real Materialism*, 2008, pp. 319-333.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199267422.003.0014>.
- ix. Strawson, Peter F. 'Freedom, and Resentment.' *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, 2008, 43-70.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203882566-7>.
- x. Talbert, Matthew. 'Moral Responsibility.' Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, October 16, 2019.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-responsibility/#ForwLookAcco>.