Living Without Free Will

In *Living Without Free Will*, Derk Pereboom contends that given our best scientific theories, factors beyond our control ultimately produce all of our actions, and that we are therefore not morally responsible for them. His stance is similar to traditional hard determinism, although he maintains that if our actions exhibit the sort of indeterminacy attributed to quantum mechanical events, they would still be produced by factors beyond our control, and we would not be responsible for them.

Pereboom defends the view that morality, meaning, and value remain intact even if we lack moral responsibility, and moreover, he argues that adopting his position could even be significantly beneficial for our lives.

Living Without Free Will brings an original perspective to the topic of free will that compels us to reevaluate many of our most deeply entrenched ideas about ourselves. It will interest professionals and students in philosophy, psychology, and criminology.

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For my parents, Jan Dirk and Maria Elisabeth

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Introduction: Hard Incompatibilism

In recent decades, with advances in psychology, sociology, and neuro-science, the notion that certain patterns of human behavior may ultimately be due to factors beyond our control has become a serious cultural concern. In our society, the possibility that criminal behavior, for example, may be caused by influences in upbringing or by abnormal features of the brain is very much a live hypothesis. Furthermore, many people agree that criminals cannot be blameworthy for actions and tendencies produced in this way. At the same time, most assume that even if criminal actions frequently have this sort of causal history, ordinary actions are not similarly generated, but rather are freely chosen, and we can be praiseworthy or blameworthy for them.

A less popular and more radical claim is that factors beyond our control produce all of our actions. Since the first appearance of strate-gies for comprehensive explanation in ancient times, philosophers have been aware that our theories about the world can challenge our com-monplace assumptions about agency in this more general way. One reaction to this stronger claim is that it would leave morality as it is, or that if any revisions must occur, they are insubstantial. But another is that we would not then be blameworthy or praiseworthy for our actions – in the philosophical idiom, we would not be morally respon-sible for them. I shall argue that our best scientific theories indeed have the consequence that we are not morally responsible for our actions. A common objection to this position is that if it were correct, morality would have no place, and human life would be meaningless and without value. I shall defend the view that morality, meaning, and value remain

intact even if we are not morally responsible, and that adopting this perspective could provide significant benefits for our lives.[1]

The problem about moral responsibility arises from a conflict between two powerful considerations. On the one hand, we human beings feel that we are the source of our actions in a particularly weighty sense. We feel that the way in which we are the source of our actions is very different from the way a machine is the source of what it produces. We express this sense of difference by attributing moral responsibility to human beings but not to machines. Traditionally, it has been assumed that moral responsibility requires us to have some type of free will in producing our actions, and hence we assume that human beings, but not machines, have this sort of free will. At the same time, there are reasons for regarding human beings as more like machines than we ordinarily suppose. These reasons stem from various sources: most prominently, from scientific views that consider human beings to be parts of nature and therefore governed by natural laws, and from theological concerns that require everything that happens to be causally determined by God. For many contemporary philosophers, the first of these is especially compelling, and as a result, they accept determinism or claims about the universe that are similarly threatening to moral responsibility.

The history of philosophy records three types of reaction to this dilemma. Some philosophers maintain that determinism is not compatible with the free will required for moral responsibility – they are *incompatibilists*. But they resist the reasons for determinism, and claim that we have free will of this kind – this is the *libertarian* position. *Hard determinists* (William James's term[2]) are also incompatibilists, but they accept determinism and deny that we have the sort of free will required for moral responsibility. *Compatibilists* contend that we may have the free will required for moral responsibility even if determinism is true. In this book, I argue that there are strong reasons to reject both libertarianism and compatibilism and to accept a view akin to hard determinism instead.

According to the libertarian, we can choose to act without being causally determined by factors beyond our control, and we can therefore be morally responsible for our actions. Arguably, this is the

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1. In this book, I develop ideas that I presented in the article "Determinism *Al Dente*," *Noûs* 29 (1995), pp. 21–45.
2. William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 145–83.

common-sense position. Libertarian views can be divided into two categories. In *agent-causal libertarianism*, free will is explained by the existence of agents who can cause actions not by virtue of any state they are in, such as a belief or a desire, but just by themselves – as substances. Such agents are capable of causing actions in this way without being causally determined to do so. In an attractive version of agent-causal theory, when such an agent acts freely, she can be inclined but not causally determined to act by factors such as her desires and beliefs. But such factors will not exhaust the causal account of the action. The agent herself, independently of these factors, provides a fundamental element. Agent-causal libertarianism has been advocated by Thomas Reid, Roderick Chisholm, Richard Taylor, Randolph Clarke, and Timothy O'Connor. Perhaps the views of William of Ockham and Immanuel Kant also count as agent-causal libertarianism. In the second category, which I call *event-causal libertarianism*, only causation involving states or events is permitted. Required for moral responsibility is not agent causation, but production of actions that crucially involves indeterministic causal relations between events. The Epicurean philosopher Lucretius provides a rudimentary version of such a position when he claims that free actions are accounted for by uncaused swerves in the downward paths of atoms. Sophisticated variants of this type of libertarianism have been developed by Robert Kane and Carl Ginet.

Libertarianism and incompatibilism more generally are the main concerns of the first chapter of this book. There I examine Frankfurt-style arguments against incompatibilism, which aim to show that moral responsibility does not require alternative possibilities for action. I contend that such arguments are largely successful, and in the process I present a new type of Frankfurt-style argument that I believe will resist objections to earlier versions. However, I also argue that such arguments do not threaten what I consider to be the core incompatibilist claim – that moral responsibility requires actions to have indeterministic actual causal histories, or more fundamentally, to have causal histories that make agents ultimate sources of their actions. This discussion plays two important roles in my argument. On the one hand, it serves to capture what I consider to be the most significant requirements for moral responsibility. And further, it thereby provides a way to ascertain what sort of libertarianism might secure agents that are morally responsible.

Accordingly, in the second chapter, I argue that libertarians of the event-causal variety are mistaken to think that agents can be morally

responsible for the sorts of indeterminist events they envision human actions to be, for the reason that this kind of indeterminism does not allow agents to be the sources of their actions in the way required. There I also contend that agent-causal libertarianism might well satisfy this requirement. In the third chapter, I develop the claim that agent-causal theory is nevertheless seriously challenged by empirical considerations. The main problem for this position is that our choices produce physical events in the brain and in the rest of the body, and these events seem to be governed by physical laws. The agent-causal libertarian must make it credible that our actions can be freely willed in the sense it advocates given the evidence we have about these physical laws. I argue that given this evidence, it is doubtful that our actions can be freely willed in the sense that the agent-causal view proposes.

Beginning students typically recoil at the compatibilist response to the problem of moral responsibility. Nevertheless, for philosophers, retaining the legitimacy of our ordinary attitudes toward human actions, and at the same time regarding them as causally determined, has been so attractive that a majority of them are confirmed compatibilists. Galen Strawson points out that a compatibilist may believe any of at least the following:

(i) That determinism (D) is true, that D does not imply that we lack the free will required for moral responsibility (F), but that we in fact lack F.
(ii) That D is true, that D does not imply that we lack F, but that it has not been shown whether or not we have F.
(iii) That D is true, and that we have F.
(iv) That D is true, that we have F, and that our having F requires that D be true.
(v) That D may or may not be true [i.e., we do not know whether D is true], but that in any case we have F.
(vi) That D is not true, but that we have F, and would have F even if D were true.
(vii) That D is not true, that we do not have F, but that F is nonetheless compatible with D.[3]

James calls adherents of positions (iii) and (iv) *soft determinists*. My discussion of compatibilism focuses on those who hold that whether or not D is true we have F, a position that subsumes (iii)−(vi). From now on, I will use the term "compatibilism" to refer to this position.

3.   Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 5.

In the current discussion, we can distinguish two prominent routes
to compatibilism. The first type, developed by P.F. Strawson, specifies
that contrary to what incompatibilists assume, the truth of determin-
ism is irrelevant to questions of moral responsibility. According to this
sort of view, the basis of moral responsibility is found in reactive atti-
tudes such as indignation, moral resentment, guilt, and gratitude. For
example, the fact that agents are typically resented for certain kinds of
immoral actions is what constitutes their being blameworthy for per-
forming them. Justification for claims of blameworthiness and praise-
worthiness ends in the system of human reactive attitudes. Because
moral responsibility has this type of basis, the truth or falsity of deter-
minism is immaterial to whether we are justified in holding agents
morally responsible. Strawson's position appears to fall under (v) in
our table.

The second and most common type of route to compatibilism tries
to distinguish causal circumstances of actions that exclude moral respon-
sibility from those that do not. What underlies this approach is the con-
viction that moral responsibility requires some type of causal integration
between the agent's psychology and his action, while it does not demand
the absence of causal determination. This route to compatibilism is
typically explored by surveying our intuitions about blameworthiness
and praiseworthiness in specific cases – cases involving, for example,
coercion, addiction, mental illness, hypnotism, and brainwashing. These
reactions are used to discover the conditions on causal integration that
moral responsibility requires. Varieties of this sort of view have been
developed by Aristotle, Augustine, Leibniz, and Hume, and in the
twentieth century by R. Hobart, A.J. Ayer, Harry Frankfurt, Gary
Watson, and John Fischer, and with respect to praiseworthiness, by Susan
Wolf. Proponents of this route maintain views that range from (iii)–(vi).

In the fourth chapter, I contest each of these two compatibilist
strategies. I argue that contrary to Strawson's view, determinism can
indeed be relevant to the attitudes and judgments that comprise our
practice of holding people morally responsible. In addition, I contend
that the causal integrationist accounts fail to provide sufficient condi-
tions for moral responsibility, and that as a result, none can plausibly
capture conditions under which agents are both determined and
morally responsible. To defend this conclusion, I devise effective
counterexamples to these conditions, and a general argument that no
relevant distinctions can be made between cases in which agents are
determined in ways compatibilists think are consistent with moral

responsibility and those in which agents are determined in ways that
clearly undermine moral responsibility. I maintain that as a result, we
are forced to deny that agents are morally responsible if their actions
are causally determined, even if these agents meet compatibilist condi-
tions on moral responsibility.

Hard determinists argue that moral responsibility is incompatible
with determinism, and because determinism is true, we lack the sort of
free will required for moral responsibility. Proponents of this position
are relatively uncommon, but Spinoza, Holbach, Priestley, C.D. Broad,
B.F. Skinner, Galen Strawson, and Bruce Waller defend this view, or
ones similar to it. Critics have expressed many worries about views
of this type. They have argued, for example, that hard determinism
threatens our self-conception as deliberative agents, that it undermines
the reactive attitudes that lie at the core of human interpersonal
relationships, that if hard determinism were true, there would be no
reason to be moral, and then perhaps even morality itself would be
incoherent.

I argue for a position closely related to hard determinism. Yet the
term "hard determinism" is not an adequate label for my view, since I
do not claim that determinism is true. As I understand it, whether an
indeterministic or a deterministic interpretation of quantum mechanics
is true is currently an open question. I do contend, however, that not
only is determinism incompatible with moral responsibility, but so is
the sort of indeterminacy specified by the standard interpretation of
quantum mechanics, if that is the only sort of indeterminacy there is.
Furthermore, I argue that we have no evidence for indeterminacy of
the kind that would be required for agent-causal libertarianism, and
that therefore, we have no evidence that we are morally responsible.
Supplying an expression to designate this position presents a challenge.
Richard Double has coined "no-free-will-either-way theory," but this
term suggests the view of G. Strawson that whether or not determin-
ism is true we could not, metaphysically, have the sort of free will
required for moral responsibility, and indeed this is how Double defines
it.[4] I maintain, by contrast, that there is a coherent indeterminist sce-
nario in which we have this sort of free will, the one in which we are
libertarian agent-causes, and that it may well be that agent-causal lib-
ertarianism is metaphysically possible. Here is my terminological pro-

4. Richard Double, *Metaphilosophy and Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996),
   p. 102.

posal. Traditionally, 'incompatibilism' has been taken to refer to the claim that the sort of free will required for moral responsibility is incompatible with causal determinism. The denotation of this term might be extended to include the view that moral responsibility is incompatible with the sort of indeterminacy specified by the standard interpretation of quantum mechanics, if that is the only sort of indeterminacy there is. Then, since the 'hard' in James's term 'hard determinism' indicates the denial of the sort of free will required for moral responsibility, I will designate my position 'hard incompatibilism.'

Strawson sets out an instructive table of nine possible positions on determinism (D) and the sort of free will required for moral responsibility (F), using t for 'true,' f for 'false,' and ? for 'don't know'[5]:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
D	t	f	t	f	t	f	?	?	?
F	f	t	t	f	?	?	f	t	?

As Strawson points out, incompatibilists can occupy any of these positions except for 3, 5, or 8. Position 1 is the classical hard determinist view, 2 is classical libertarianism. I understand hard incompatibilism as subsuming positions 1, 4, and 7. Within position 7, one can differentiate two sub-positions, a no-free-will-either-way theory and the sort of view for which I argue.

In the last three chapters, I set out my hard incompatibilist position. The fifth chapter features the argument that our best theories about the nature of the physical world do indeed undermine moral responsibility. There I also contend that many of the practical reasons for opposing the hard incompatibilist denial of moral responsibility are not as compelling as they might at first seem. Rejecting the claim that we are morally responsible does not, for example, threaten our self-conception as deliberative agents, and neither does it jeopardize moral principles and values. For many, by far the most worrisome threat posed by the denial of moral responsibility is that it would render unjustified our responses to human evil. Hence, the entire sixth chapter assesses hard incompatibilism's legitimate options for dealing with criminals. I maintain that while severe punishment – involving death or confinement in prisons of a sort common in our society – is ruled out by hard

5. Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, p. 6.

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incompatibilism, preventive detention and programs for rehabilitation can be justified.

The seventh chapter examines hard incompatibilism's impact on the meaning of life, and in particular on the attitudes and emotions that have bearing on our most fundamental concerns. Hard incompatibilism, I claim, does not significantly threaten our hopes for meaning in life through success in our projects. While this view does render certain emotional attitudes irrational, those that are legitimate by its standards are sufficient to sustain good interpersonal relationships. Finally, hard incompatibilism holds out promise for challenging a pervasive type of anger that is destructive to our well-being, and thereby encouraging a sort of equanimity that has significant value for human life.

I will now clarify several key conceptual issues. First, in my view, for an agent to be *morally responsible for an action* is for this action to belong to the agent in such a way that she would deserve blame if the action were morally wrong, and she would deserve credit or perhaps praise if it were morally exemplary. The desert at issue here is basic in the sense that the agent, to be morally responsible, would deserve the blame or credit just by virtue of having performed the action, and not, for example, by way of consequentialist considerations. This characterization leaves room for an agent's being morally responsible for an action even if she does not deserve blame, credit, or praise for it – if, for example, the action is morally indifferent. Alternatively then, but less clearly, for an agent to be morally responsible for an action is for it to be imputable to her.

I oppose the idea that to judge a person morally responsible essentially involves having an attitude toward her. Rather, I think that to make a judgment of this sort is most fundamentally to make a factual claim. To defend this position adequately would involve turning back a non-cognitivist position on judgments about moral responsibility, a task I will not undertake. But there are two considerations, analogs of which will be familiar from discussions on moral realism, in favor of my view. First, judging a person morally responsible for an action that is morally indifferent, or for an action that is not morally indifferent but generally expected, like feeding and clothing one's children, need not be accompanied by any discernible attitude. Second, it seems possible to imagine rational but emotionless beings who yet have a deep concern for right and wrong, and who believe that agents are morally responsible. Such beings would believe wrongdoers to be morally responsible without having any emotional attitudes, such as indignation or moral

resentment, toward them. It is of course consistent with the view that judgments about moral responsibility are factual that such judgments are typically accompanied by attitudes.

Furthermore, in this book, I take moral responsibility to apply primarily to decisions. I do not broach the topic of responsibility for omissions. I also do not consider the notion of responsibility for consequences of decisions. The view that responsibility for decisions is especially important is driven by the sense that responsibility is fundamentally a matter of control, a kind of control agents would have primarily over their decisions, in conjunction with the fact that decisions are causally prior to consequences of decisions. Intuitions about "moral luck" cases support this view. Suppose two agents, A and B, are psychologically identical and each makes the decision to shoot an innocent person, and then carries out the decision. However, A's bullet does not reach the intended victim because it hits a bird instead, whereas B's bullet kills the victim. A common intuition here is that A and B are equally blameworthy in some especially important respect, an intuition captured by the notion that responsibility for decisions is especially important.

In my conception, being morally responsible is distinct from behaving responsibly – that is, behaving morally – and from taking responsibility for something – making a sincere commitment to a task in one's community, for example, or to care for someone. It is also different from the legitimacy of holding oneself and others morally accountable, where this amounts to the legitimacy of demanding that agents explain how their decisions accord with the moral point of view, and that they consider what their decisions reveal about their moral character and dispositions. Now the issue in the debate about determinism and moral responsibility is not whether determinism threatens the legitimacy of holding oneself and others morally accountable, if, for example, this legitimacy consists just in the fact that it would be effective for moral improvement. For nothing about determinism suggests that such procedures would not be effective for this purpose.[6] Arguing that

6. Hilary Bok claims that "to say that we are responsible for our conduct in this sense is to say that we can appropriately hold ourselves accountable for it: that it can legitimately be laid at our door or reckoned to our charge." She then characterizes holding oneself accountable as follows. "When I take some action to reflect my will, I attribute it to myself, and ask what it reveals about my will and my character, and about the ways they might be improved. To do this is to hold myself accountable for my action" (Hilary Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 152).

determinism is compatible with moral responsibility construed in this way therefore avoids the issue in the traditional debate, and moreover, it is difficult to see why anyone might think this sort of compatibility would be controversial. The debate is not about behaving responsibly, taking responsibility, or the effectiveness of holding oneself and others morally accountable (in these senses), since determinism does not threaten these notions at all.

I think it is important to distinguish whether we are free in the sense required for moral responsibility from whether it is valuable to be free in this sense. Here I am resisting a trend initiated (to my knowledge) by Daniel Dennett.[7] His attempt to recast the debate in terms of the question, "What is free will such that we should want it?" potentially confuses two issues: Do we have the sort of free will required for moral responsibility? and do we want the sort of free will required for moral responsibility? It could be, for instance, that we are free in the sense required for moral responsibility, but since being free in this sense is not especially valuable to us, we would not want it much. It is important to frame the issue so as to make conceptual room for views of this type.

Finally, when the hard incompatibilist disavows freedom of the sort required for moral responsibility, he is not denying that we have freedom of every kind. In fact, hard incompatibilism is consistent with our having most of the sorts of freedom that have appeared on the philosophical landscape. When the hard incompatibilist disavows freedom of the sort required for moral responsibility, he is not also

Subsequently, she argues that responsibility in this sense is not undermined by deter-minism. This claim is correct, I believe, but it may be misleading for her to call herself a compatibilist because she maintains this view. For responsibility in this sense is not at issue in the traditional debate. Bok's argument for what she calls compatibilism faces a dilemma. If what it means for an agent to be morally responsible is for it to be legiti-mate to hold him morally accountable because doing so is effective for promoting moral development, then her argument does not join the traditional debate. If, however, she were to agree that moral responsibility at least includes the notion of fundamental desert, then she has not provided an argument against the incompatibilist view that determin-ism undermines moral responsibility. But although I disagree with Bok on how the debate should be characterized and on where the arguments are owed, I endorse much of her picture of agents as legitimately held morally accountable and free, for example, in the sense that they can select from among epistemically possible alternatives. For positions related to Bok's, see Moritz Schlick, "When Is a Man Responsible?" in *Problems of Ethics*, tr. David Rynin (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939), pp. 143–56; J.J.C. Smart, "Free Will, Praise, and Blame," *Mind* 70 (1961), pp. 291–306.

7.   Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), especially pp. 153–72.

denying that we have many of the sorts of freedom compatibilists have thought to be sufficient for moral responsibility, such as the ability to choose in accord with one's values, or the capacity to be responsive to the reasons there are for acting. In addition, he is not denying that we might have and strive for freedom from coercion by tyrannical governments, or from authoritarian social situations, or from unhappy conditions in our personal lives. One can be a hard incompatibilist and consistently claim that we can aspire to the freedom from the control of the harmful passions that Spinoza prized. A view of this sort by no means rules out various sorts of freedom connected with religious ideals – St. Paul's Christian freedom, for example, or Buddhism's freedom from desire or from the self.

The aim of this book, then, is to show that the reasons for accepting hard incompatibilism are substantial, and that this view does not have the deep practical problems often associated with it. We must begin by evaluating the opposing positions. This methodological requirement springs from a characteristic that hard incompatibilism does not share with its rival positions. Both libertarians and compatibilists must devise positive accounts, whereas hard incompatibilism is essentially a negative position. It is the view that there is no freedom of the sort required for moral responsibility, and thus, to show that if it is true, one must successfully argue that any account according to which we have this sort of freedom is dubious or mistaken. The positive task of hard incompatibilism is to explain how we might live without this kind of freedom – as hard incompatibilists. But to defend the truth of this position, one need not provide such an account. For hard incompatibilism might be true while at the same time living as if it is would be practically impossible. As we shall see, however, this concern is unfounded.