

The Compatibility of Determinism and Moral Responsibility

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Abstract—Compatibilism arises as a potential bridge between determinism and moral responsibility, suggesting that causal determinism doesn't necessarily negate free will or moral culpability. Proponents of compatibilism redefine free will, focusing on the alignment of actions with internal desires and values rather than the existence of alternative options. Thus, individuals can be morally responsible even within a deterministic framework if their actions reflect their genuine motivations and are not externally coerced. This nuanced understanding emphasizes the authenticity of an agent's intentions rather than the availability of choices. This perspective extends beyond philosophical discourse, impacting ethical frameworks and decision-making processes. Accepting determinism challenges traditional notions of blame, shifting focus towards systemic factors and fostering a more compassionate approach. By acknowledging the complex interplay of internal motivations and external influences, society may evolve towards a more empathetic understanding of moral responsibility and decision-making.

Keywords—determinism, moral responsibility, compatibility

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of whether people possess moral responsibility and the debate on free will and determinism has been a profound and intriguing inquiry that has captivated philosophers for centuries. In traditional views, the premise of moral responsibility is the possession of free will. For an agent to hold responsibility for an action, it is necessary for them to have alternate choices other than the choice they make. This is known as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), which states that for any person and any action, that person is morally responsible for performing or failing to perform that action only if they had a genuine alternate possibility open to them at the time of deciding to act. Frankfurt [1] describes PAP as "A person who is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise". This paper aims to argue for the thesis that moral responsibility and determinism are compatible with each other. While acknowledging and accepting the hard determinism, or, the incompatibilist's notion of determinism, this paper mainly focuses on arguing for the definition of free will, in that it does not contradict the idea of determinism.

In order to argue for the compatibility between moral responsibility and determinism, this paper will be split into three main sections, each considering a premise: Premise 1 will focus on exploring the definition of determinism, Premise 2 will focus on the definition of moral responsibility, and finally premise three arguing for the compatibility between Premises 1 and 2. Both determinism and moral responsibility will have multiple theses, rejecting possible counterarguments, and reinforcing the definitions. The proof for Premise 3 will include sub-premises defining keywords that are essential to the argument and that deal with potential conflicts and counterexamples of the compatibility between

determinism and moral responsibility.

II. PREMISE 1: THE DEFINITION OF DETERMINISM

Traditionally, causal determinism is the thesis that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature [2]. It is the belief that every event or state of affairs, including human actions and choices, is the result of prior causes or conditions. If causal determinism exists, then it is reasonable to assume that one would be able to predict the next event B, following the precedent event A, if they had known all aspects that exist in event A. In defining determinism, Inwagen [3] provided a notion called "the state of the world", which can be expressed through different propositions. A proposition is a statement or declarative sentence that expresses a complete thought and is capable of being true or false. It is the content or meaning conveyed by a sentence, abstracted from the specific words or symbols used to express it.

Propositions are taken to be non-linguistic bearers of truth-value, which have three main properties: there corresponds a proposition to every way the world could be, every proposition is either true or false, and the conjunction of a true proposition and a false proposition creates a false proposition. The first property highlights the idea that propositions represent possible states of affairs or ways in which the world could be. In other words, for every conceivable state or scenario that could exist in the world, there is a corresponding proposition that describes or represents that state. Propositions serve as abstract, non-linguistic representations of the various ways reality could be. The second property highlights the idea that propositions are truth-bearers and that they are capable of being evaluated as either true or false. When we apply propositions to the actual world, we determine whether they accurately depict the state of affairs they represent. If a proposition accurately represents a state of affairs that corresponds with reality, it is considered true; if it does not accurately represent reality, it is considered false. For example, if the sky is indeed blue, then the proposition "The sky is blue" is true. If it is not raining, then the proposition "It is raining" is false. The last property of proposition relates to the logical operation of conjunction, which combines two propositions using the word "and". It asserts that when you conjoin a true proposition with a false proposition, the result is always a false proposition. In other words, if one of the propositions in a conjunction is false, the entire conjunction is false. Van Inwagen claims that the state of the world at any instant can be expressed by a proposition. If there is some observable change in the way things are, then this change must entail a change in the state of the world. The details that should be included in the proposition that describes the state of the world at a certain time and the laws of physics that explain

how the change in different events physically entails changes to other events can be left unexplained since the argument and central idea of this paper is largely independent of them.

Ultimately, according to Van Inwagen, determinism consists of two theses:

- 1) For every instant of time, there is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at that moment.
- 2) If two propositions express the state of the world at that moment, then together, one of those propositions with the law of nature entails the other proposition.

This definition of determinism largely depends on the law of physics, for it has to be exact and not vague propositions. This could mean that if experiments on quantum physics are true, that precise and certain knowledge at the quantum level is impossible, then determinism would be proven false. However, as quantum mechanics are still being explored by physicists, the discussion between determinism and physical properties being uncertain in the real world will be overlooked in this paper. The two theses of determinism clearly provide that every action or incident is entirely decided by already existing decisions. Logically, by the definition of the two theses, a combination of both provides that, given the past of the laws of nature, there is only one possible future, and that the future only corresponds to one unique past. It emphasizes that the relation between events is causal, and with the law of nature, there could only be one way that the world looks like that results from the previous state of the world.

III. PREMISE 2: THE DEFINITION OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The assessment of an individual's moral responsibility for their actions typically involves, at least as an initial approximation, ascribing certain abilities and faculties to that individual. It entails seeing their conduct as a result (in the appropriate manner) of possessing and utilizing these abilities and faculties [4]. Regardless of the precise nature of these abilities and faculties (with different interpretations explored in this discussion), their possession qualifies a person as morally responsible in a broad sense. This means they can be held morally accountable for specific instances of their actions. Typically, ordinary adult humans are assumed to possess these abilities and faculties, while non-human animals, very young children, and individuals with severe developmental disabilities or dementia (to name a few examples) are generally regarded as lacking them.

For an agent to have moral responsibility, they must first have the ability to understand the difference between right and wrong. This includes a need for developed consciousness and intelligence. Newborn babies, people who are mentally handicapped or people who have mental illnesses that prevent them from acting according to their own will, therefore, do not have moral responsibility. In *Freedom and Resentment*, Strawson [5] defines moral responsibility by considering the perspective of active moral psychology. To determine whether a person holds moral responsibility depends on whether other people develop reactive attitudes toward their behaviour. Reactive attitudes, by definition, are emotion-laden responses that human beings are naturally prone to in their interactions with one another. The emotions can include resentment, indignation, approbation, shame, guilt, remorse, forgiveness, and certain kinds of pride and love. What makes

reactive attitudes special is that they express both a sensitivity to how people are regarded and treated by one another in the context of their interactions and a normative demand that such treatment and regard reflect a basic stance of goodwill, modulated to suit the kinds of interactions in question. Caring about whether people manifest goodwill, affection, or malevolence in human interactions is a part of our humanity, as we naturally want people to treat us well.

Instead of approaching the problem of moral responsibility from the highly abstract, highly theoretical perspective of high-church "conceptual analysis" analytic philosophy, we should think about moral responsibility from the perspective of actual human moral psychology. In the heat of the moment, when someone has done something that makes you feel resentment, like a thief who robbed your house or a friend who ruined your reputation, we cannot help but experience reactive attitudes towards them, thus deeming them as moral agents. Thus, it can be argued that humans simply treat normal people (i.e., people who have enough intelligence and mental capability to understand right and wrong) as morally responsible, and we cannot help it. This fact alone, Strawson argues, provides a powerful justification for treating people as morally responsible. The existence and ubiquitous of reactive attitudes like resentment or gratitude show that we have a deep, stable, non-accidental, pre-rational, pre-theoretical commitment to hold (some) people morally responsible for (some of) their actions. We cannot escape that. To do so is not only impossible, but would be inhuman. This argument will be explored further in Premise 3.

The last requirement for people to have moral responsibility, or, in other words, to be able to stimulate reactive attitudes from others, would be that they have to decide by themselves, in that they consciously and actively choose to act in a certain way. This would imply that, for people to have moral responsibility, they must be free. It is generally agreed that a person who has been threatened to do something did not do it freely and is not morally responsible for having done it [1, 6]. However, when determinism is true, where one event is caused by the preceding event and therefore has no way but to occur, it may seem like determinism contradicts free will. This would then depend on how free will is defined, which will be explored in detail in Premise 3.

To conclude, people have moral responsibility if and only if:

- 1) They are capable of knowing what is right or wrong.
- 2) Being an apt target for one of the "reactive attitudes" on the basis of the behaviour.
- 3) They have free will.

IV. PREMISE 3: THE COMPATIBILITY OF DETERMINISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The third premise of the paper aims to argue that determinism and moral responsibility are compatible with each other. Let us review the definitions of both terms:

For Determinism to be true:

- 1) For every instant of time, there is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at that moment.
- 2) If two propositions express the state of the world at that moment, then together, one of those propositions with the law of nature entails the other proposition.

For Moral Responsibility to be true on a person:

- 1) They are capable of knowing what is right or wrong.
- 2) They are an apt target for one of the “reactive attitudes” on the basis of the behaviour.
- 3) They have free will.

To say that determinism and moral responsibility are compatible, it is essential to prove that any of the three theses that define determinism can be compatible with any of the three theses that define moral responsibility. The most controversial one, however, would be the compatibility of determinism and free will. In traditional views, the premise of moral responsibility is the possession of free will. For an agent to hold responsibility for an action, it is necessary for them to have alternate choices other than the choice they make. This is known as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), which states that for any person and any action, that person is morally responsible for performing or failing to perform that action only if they had a genuine alternate possibility open to them at the time of deciding to perform the action. Frankfurt [1] describes PAP as “A person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise”.

An Alternate Possibility (AP) is defined as another option open to the agent at the time they act. This principle is built on the basis that the “ought implies can” principle is true. “ought implies can” principle, proposed by Kant [7, 8], states that for an agent to have a moral obligation or duty to perform a certain action, they must have the ability or capacity actually to perform the action. If a certain action is impossible for the agent to perform, then the agent cannot, according to the principle, own the moral obligation to do so. The principle may be interpreted differently in the relevant sense of “impossibility”. In the general sense, “impossibility” is defined by actions that exceed one’s mental and physical capacities. Therefore, it can be arguably contended that a person ought to refrain from a morally incorrect action only if they had the option, or in other words, an alternate possibility, to do so. According to this principle, if someone was only given one morally incorrect option or two morally incorrect options, and they are forced to perform or choose one action to perform, then they would not hold moral responsibility for their action. Kant conjectured this principle based on the Categorical Imperative, a fundamental framework in his moral philosophy. The principle can be broken down into two formulations:

The Formula of Universal Law: The principle denotes that one should act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can, at the same time, be willing for the action to become a universal law that all rational human beings follow. In other words, before taking an action, one should consider if it would be comfortable for everyone in the world to adopt the same action as a universal rule. If the answer is yes, then according to Kant, it is morally permissible. Otherwise, it is morally impermissible.

The Formula of Humanity: Kant states that “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end” (Gr. 429). He emphasizes that individuals should not be treated as mere objects or tools for achieving one’s own goals, but rather respecting each other’s rational agency and moral autonomy

while pursuing their own ends.

Both formulations are based on the assumption, or Kant’s belief, that all humans are rational beings with free will. Individuals must possess a rational will that allows them to act in accordance with established moral principles and maxims in order for an action to retain moral worth. Moral autonomy, required by both formulations mentioned above, is built on the basis of the assumption that humans possess free will. Rational will is the moral worth and enables individuals to make autonomous choices based on rational deliberation. For Kant’s principles to be relevant and meaningful, individuals must have the freedom to choose whether to act in accordance with these principles or not. The “ought implies can” principle, discussed earlier, proposes that moral obligations are only legitimate if individuals have the ability to fulfill them. Freedom, or free will, in this case, would be the fundamental and indispensable factor in order for this argument to stand true. If individuals do not possess the freedom to make choices, or that, in a deterministic setting, their actions are solely determined by external forces (i.e., following the mechanism of a preordained universe because one event causes the next, which naturally leads the action to take place without uncertainty), then rational would not exist, which prevents Kant’s principles mentioned above to be established.

As mentioned earlier, the Principle of Alternate possibilities is established based on the “ought implies can” principle, such that for moral responsibility to occur as a result of an action performed by an individual, they must have had the capacity to do so. The existence of an alternate possibility, in a situation before an action is performed by an agent, would lie in the realm of the word “capacity” in the previous sentence. In other words, for it to be possible to assign an agent moral responsibility, the agent must possess more than one choice for them to choose before making the action. This, consequently, implies that free will would be a requirement to hold PAP true, since the establishment of PAP is entailed by the “ought implies can principle”, which assumes humans as agents who possess rational wills and moral autonomy by taking free will as the fundamental element that exists in the world.

In 1969, Frankfurt rejected PAP by invoking “Frankfurt-style cases”, which strive to prove that one does not need alternative possibilities to be morally responsible for their actions [9]. His counterexamples involved agents who are intuitively responsible for their behaviour even though they do not have alternate possibilities. Take a common example of Frankfurt-style cases, for example, where we suppose Black wants Jones to kill Smith. Jones is contemplating whether or not to kill Smith. If Jones decides to kill Smith and actually kills him, then Black does not interfere. However, if Black receives the signal that Jones decides not to kill Smith, then Black will ensure that Jones kills Smith by whatever means he proposes. Frankfurt claims that in this case, even though Jones has no other option but to kill Smith, he would be morally responsible if he decided to kill Jones by himself without the interference of Black. The core structure of Frankfurt-style cases could be summarized as the following:

An external mechanism exists to affect the decision-making of the agent, where it ensures that the agent only makes one decision. This eliminates alternative possibilities

to which the agent might decide on performing. In the case where the agent's decision aligns with the decision ensured by the external mechanism, the mechanism does not interfere with the agent's decision-making process; the agent's conduct is, in fact, the result of their self-determination. As a result, by intuition, we think that the agent would hold moral responsibility in the case of 2).

According to Frankfurt, the reason why we intuitively believe that the agent should hold moral responsibility for their actions is because the act happened solely because of the agent's own thoughts and decision-making. Meanwhile, the external mechanism ensured the nonexistence of alternate possibilities. Although in 2), the mechanism does not actually interfere, its presence precludes other possibilities. As a result, 1) and 3) contribute to the counterexample that rejects PAP: Even if there are no alternate possibilities, the agent could still be morally responsible for their actions. If Frankfurt-style cases are valid, then not only does it disapprove of PAP, but it also affects the understanding of free will [10]. Usually, free will implies that we possess alternate possibilities when contemplating an action. On the other hand, determinism states that all events and actions committed by an agent would be certain because of causal relationships between one event and another, so alternate possibilities do not exist. Hence, it can be deduced that free will and causal determinism are not compatible with each other. Both free will and causal determinism proponents would believe that if determinism is true, moral responsibility cannot exist—an agent cannot be held responsible for an act if the act has been predetermined and there are no alternate possibilities for the act to change otherwise.

Objections regarding Frankfurt-style cases center around two arguments: inappropriate assumption and omission of all possibilities during the agent's decision-making. If the external mechanism ensures that the agent only makes a certain decision, then we would have to assume that the agent lives in a deterministic world since their decision and action are predetermined. However, if determinism is true, then our intuition in 3) would be wrong because moral responsibility would not coexist with determinism. Regarding the details of how the external mechanism functions to eliminate alternate possibilities, Frankfurt did not give specific explanations. In *Responsibility and Control* by Fischer, a prior sign is defined as an extrinsic mechanism that determines whether an actor will make a decision [11]. If the prior sign indicates that the actor will act in the way the mechanism expects, then the mechanism will not intervene; if the prior sign indicates that the actor will not act in the way expected, then the mechanism will intervene. The accuracy of the prior sign is crucial to the success of the Frankfurt-style counterexample: for if the pilot signal does not accurately predict the actor's decision; then there is a risk that the external mechanism will fail to intervene when it should have, leading to the possibility of other behaviour.

To ensure that actors act in a certain way, it is necessary to assume that the physical world operates exactly according to deterministic laws, thus guaranteeing a necessary connection between the pilot signal and the subsequent decision. But in doing so, the intuition in (3) becomes suspect. The central idea of the principle of multiple possibilities is that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility.

behavior has been fully determined by factors external to the actor, then the actor is not responsible for that behaviour. To successfully falsify this principle, a Frankfurt-style counterexample cannot be accepted without explanation when determinism is presupposed to be true (3); otherwise, it would be equivalent to presupposing (rather than proving) the principle of multiple possibilities to be false. If an argument is aimed at proving P, then the reasons it uses to support P must be independent of P, not P itself or it constitutes an improper presupposition.

A second type of criticism against Frankfurt-style counterexamples similarly focuses on core structures (1). Inwagen and Rowe were the first philosophers to offer this type of criticism. This type of criticism argues that even if an extrinsic mechanism excludes the possibility of an actor doing something else, it does not exclude all other possibilities. For example, although Blake has the ability to ensure that Jones does not do an action other than the one he expects, Jones still retains a degree of multiplicity of possibilities, i.e., whether the action is ultimately caused by his own will or by Blake's interference. Blake's interference with Jones depends on his prejudgment of Jones' next action. Blake intervenes only if he judges that Jones is going to do something other than A. That is until Blake's actual interference occurs, Jones is still faced with at least two possibilities: Jones chooses to do A on his own, and thus Blake does not intervene; Jones chooses not to do A on his own, and thus Blake intervenes. Black can ensure that Jones will only do A, but he cannot rule out other possibilities for Jones' choice. By omitting multiple possibilities of choice, (1) in the core structure of the counterexample does not hold. Even if the free will theorist agrees with the intuition in core structure (3), the Frankfurt-style counterexample does not constitute a true refutation of the principle of multiple possibilities. This is the "improper omission" criticism of Frankfurt-style counterexamples.

In response to this criticism, proponents of the Frankfurt-style counterexample, on the one hand, recognize that other possibilities do remain in the counterexample as described above. For example, Fischer [12] comments that "even if the external interloper eliminates most other possibilities, not all other possibilities have been eliminated – even in the Frankfurt-style counterexample, there still appears to be a sort of 'flash of freedom'". Fischer proposes a 'flicker of freedom', i.e., the multiplicity of possibilities of choices available to the actor before the intervention of external mechanisms. On the other hand, proponents argue that this "flicker of freedom" is not ontologically significant enough to serve as a basis for moral culpability. In Fischer's words, "I agree with those scholars who maintain that some multiplicity of possibilities remains (even in the Frankfurt-style counterexample) for the flash of freedom theory, but my most basic query is that this flash of freedom is too weak to serve as the basis for a corresponding moral imputation" [13].

Furthermore, the implications of determinism extend beyond abstract philosophical discussions. Legal systems and societal norms heavily rely on notions of moral responsibility to assign blame and impose consequences. If determinism were conclusively established, it could prompt a reevaluation of how society deals with wrongdoing. In a deterministic worldview, individuals' actions are the result of a

predetermined chain of events, including their genetics, upbringing, and environment. This could lead to a shift from punitive approaches to ones focused on understanding and rehabilitation. Instead of solely punishing individuals for their actions, society might adopt measures aimed at addressing the root causes that contribute to those actions, effectively transforming how we approach crime and punishment.

In response to the tension between determinism and moral responsibility, compatibilism emerges as a potential reconciliatory perspective. Compatibilism seeks to demonstrate that the existence of causal determinism doesn't necessarily undermine the concept of free will and moral responsibility. Advocates of compatibilism redefine free will in a way that sidesteps the need for alternative possibilities. According to this perspective, an agent possesses free will if their actions align with their desires and values, and if they are not externally coerced into those actions. In other words, an individual can be morally responsible for their choices even if those choices are causally determined, as long as they're acting in accordance with their internal motivations. This reinterpretation of free will opens the door to a nuanced understanding of moral responsibility. Instead of being dependent on the availability of alternative options, it hinges on the authenticity of an agent's desires and intentions. If an agent's actions are a true reflection of their personal values, even in a deterministic world, the notion of moral responsibility remains viable. This view echoes the sentiment that moral responsibility is intertwined with an individual's ability to make decisions reflective of their own intrinsic beliefs, regardless of the underlying deterministic fabric of reality. This reimagining of free will and moral responsibility underscores the nuanced nature of the debate. Rather than being contingent upon the availability of multiple options, moral responsibility becomes hinged on the authenticity of an agent's intentions and motivations. If an individual's actions genuinely mirror their intrinsic values, the viability of moral responsibility persists even in a deterministic realm. This perspective accentuates the viewpoint that moral responsibility is intertwined with an individual's capacity to enact choices that resonate with their internal convictions, irrespective of the deterministic framework underlying reality.

The debate surrounding determinism and moral responsibility reverberates far beyond the philosophical sphere, impacting our ethical frameworks and the way we navigate decision-making. The acceptance of determinism could instigate a paradigm shift in how we view our choices and actions. Instead of fixating solely on assigning blame, society might embrace a more holistic perspective that takes into account the intricate interplay of internal motivations and external circumstances. The deterministic lens challenges traditional notions of moral culpability. If actions are fundamentally products of deterministic processes, some argue that the concept of blame becomes less meaningful. Individuals might be seen as conduits through which predetermined events unfold, making the assignment of blameless about personal agency and more about identifying

systemic factors that contribute to undesirable outcomes. This shift could potentially lead to a more compassionate and empathetic approach to both individuals and the circumstances that influence their choices.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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