

## The Revisionist Turn: A Brief History of Recent Work on Free Will

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Manuel Vargas

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### I. The story and how it shall be told

I've been told that in the good old days of the 1970s, when Quine's desert landscapes were regarded as ideal real estate and David Lewis and John Rawls had not yet left a legion of influential students rewriting the terrain of metaphysics and ethics respectively, compatibilism was still compatibilism about free will. And, of course, incompatibilism was still incompatibilism about free will. That is, compatibilism was the view that free will was compatible with determinism. Incompatibilism was the view that free will was incompatible with determinism.<sup>1</sup> What philosophers argued about was whether free will was compatible with determinism. Mostly, this was an argument about how to understand claims that one could do otherwise. You needn't have bothered to talk about moral responsibility, because it was just obvious that you couldn't have moral responsibility without free will. The literature was a temple of clarity.

Then, somehow, things began to go horribly wrong. To be sure, there had been some activity in the 1960s that would have struck some observers as ominous. Still, it was not until the 1980s that those initial warning signs gave way to real trouble. The meanings of terms twisted.

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I. This is a bit of shorthand. More precisely, we can say that *incompatibilism* is the view that the free will thesis is incompatible with the thesis of determinism. These locutions were introduced and made influential by Peter van Inwagen. See, for example, Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Peter Van Inwagen, "How to Think About the Problem of Free Will," *Journal of Ethics* 12 (2008): 327-41; Peter Van Inwagen, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism," *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975): 185-99. However, I will follow standard practice in speaking of determinism, keeping the "thesis of" only tacitly present.

Hybrid positions appeared. By the late 1980s a landslide had begun, giving way to a veritable avalanche of work in the mid-1990s that continues up to now. Now, self-described compatibilists and incompatibilists make frequent concessions to each other, concessions that made little sense in the framework of the older literature. New positions and strange terminology appear in every journal publication. The temple of clarity is no more.

At any rate, that's what I've been told. I think this tale is mostly correct, but for reasons importantly different than those given by its usual tellers. I do think the terminology deployed in the contemporary literature can mislead in a way that hinders an easy grasp of the issues. However, I also think the infelicities of the current literature arose in no small part because the architects of the prior debates did not appreciate some subtle fault lines running under the old temple. It is those fault lines, and why they went unnoticed, and what we can do about them now that we see them, that constitute the principal subjects of this chapter.

Less metaphorically, what I wish to explain is *how* we came to our current place, what under-appreciated difficulties the recent history has given rise to, and what ways we have for extricating ourselves from these difficulties. I will begin somewhat elliptically: I wish to focus on some broad themes before I make the case that there are genuine difficulties with our current ways of framing the issues of free will and moral responsibility. This is partly because the problems I will ultimately focus on are harder to see if they are disconnected from broadly methodological issues in philosophy. So, I begin by discussing some broader philosophical currents, and their implications for the free will debate. I then focus on some important changes internal to the literature on free will over roughly the past 40 years. I argue that these changes—both internal and external to work on free will—have indeed left us with some underappreciated challenges. I conclude by outlining one way out of these difficulties.

## **2. From metaphysics to ethics and back again**

Conventional wisdom is that there are two major clusters of interests on the free will problem reflected in two populations that approach matters with interests grounded in distinct sub-fields within philosophy. The two

groups are the *metaphysicians* and the *ethicists*.<sup>2</sup> The former are more apt to focus on *free will* and the latter are more apt to focus on *moral responsibility*. And, the former are more apt to be incompatibilists and the latter seem more evenly split, perhaps even favoring compatibilism.

The distinction is not perfect, but it is useful for getting at two phenomena: distinct centers of gravity in the literature and the way in which these centers of gravity structure interactions between groups. For instance, concerns that are regarded as central to one cluster seem peripheral, at best, to the other. The divergence of concern is manifest in the frequency with which philosophers disagree about the fundamental terms of the debate, the invocation of burden of proof arguments, and the increasingly frequent discoveries of purported “dialectical stalemates.”<sup>3</sup> However, to understand why ethicists and metaphysicians may be talking past each other, we have to look beyond the boundaries of work on specifically free will and moral responsibility.

Consider the following conventional story of mainstream Anglophone philosophy in the second half of the 20th century. Around

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2. In former camp, we find figures such as Peter van Inwagen, Carl Ginet, John Fischer, Kadri Vihvelin, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, Randolph Clarke, and Laura Ekstrom. In the latter camp, some of the notables include Gary Watson, T.M. Scanlon, R. Jay Wallace, and Susan Wolf. There are, of course, very influential figures who don't fit into this too-tidy story. Partly this is because there is at least a third strand here: those who work principally in philosophy of action in its traditional conception. Harry Frankfurt, Al Mele, David Velleman, and Michael Bratman are in this group (Carl Ginet should be counted in this group as well), and the concerns of most of these authors has had to do with the metaphysics of agency. For my purposes, though, the methodological disagreements between the metaphysicians and the ethicists is the core of the difficulty I am concerned to identify.
  3. My point is not that these things have no place in philosophical debates. Rather, my point is the frequency with which these things occur in the contemporary literature suggest that there are deeper issues lurking than the surface-level play of arguments would suggest. Hence, the suggestion that these things are symptomatic of some degree of talking past each other. (And, for the record, in my callow youth I was not immune to the temptation of declaring dialectical stalemates, as Mele has rightly noted: see Alfred Mele, “Moral Responsibility and History Revisited,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (forthcoming).)

the mid-century, logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy had both collapsed because of internal and external pressure. In the aftermath, there was a synthesis of those elements that seemed most promising from those prior movements. On one side there was a logical constructionist tradition (think: Frege, Russell, Carnap) that grew out of concerns about ideal language and the aspirations of a logical foundations to mathematics. On the other, there were the puzzles that emerged from ordinary language philosophy's reflections on natural language. The synthesis was one where the methods of the logical constructionists were brought to bear on, among other things, the concerns suggested by natural language.<sup>4</sup> Two strands emerged from this synthesis. One was a broadly naturalistic strand that took its proximal inspiration from Quine and the idea of philosophy being on a continuum with the sciences. The other strand was broadly Strawsonian: conceptual analysis was central and distinctive of philosophy, and any postulated metaphysics were expected to be elucidations of implicit conceptual structures.

The Quinean strand was broadly revisionist in that it accepted the necessity of philosophical accounts departing from common sense, and indeed, it fully expected that such departures were in keeping with the general scientific spirit. Where philosophical work is continuous with the project of science, conceptual reform is inevitable, and usually a sign of hard-nosed progress. From Quine, we get a recommendation to pursue naturalized epistemology and to treat philosophical theorizing as engaged in some degree of paraphrasing away from ordinary usage. Above all, we were enjoined to cast a baleful eye on grandiose metaphysics.

In contrast to the naturalistic, paraphrasing predilections of the Quinean strand, the Strawsonian strand was much less given to conceptual revision. The Strawsonian strand took its metaphysics descriptively—we

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4. Whether one views this as a synthesis or instead as the triumph of the logical constructionist strand over ordinary language philosophy is something we need not settle here. For an instructive overview of these developments, and one that argues that there is a synthesis, albeit one favoring the logical constructionist approach, see Tyler Burge, "Philosophy of Language and Mind: 1950-1990," *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 1 (1992): 3-51.

could uncover the ontology of our convictions, but advocating conceptual change was to be regarded with suspicion. If the ideal language tools of the logical constructionist carried the day, their success was to be put in service of illuminating our existing concepts and their relationship to one another. Of course, conceptual analysis of the old, bad sort was to be rejected—no hard and fast distinction between the analytic and the synthetic here—but the philosopher’s task was nevertheless to map concepts, both their internal structure and their relationship to one another.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1970s, this picture began to change in some important ways. In an effort to build roads from our minds to the world, the work of Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Alvin Plantinga, and many others paved over Quine’s beloved desert landscapes of ontology. The result was a renaissance in metaphysics. A particularly interesting aspect of that early work in metaphysics was that much of it hewed closely to the Strawsonian project of descriptive metaphysics. Intuitions were the arbiters of the limits of any piece of analysis, and counterintuitiveness was almost always taken as a sign that things had gone badly. It was not always clear why ordinary semantic intuitions were any guide to metaphysics, but the basic ground rules in play were the ones offered by Lewis:

One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these pre-existing opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system if it succeeds to the extent that (1) it is systematic, and (2) it respects those of our pre-philosophical opinions to which we are firmly attached. In so far as it does both better than any alternative we have thought of, we give it credence.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, this approach, when combined with the logical tools afforded by 20th century philosophy—modal logic, especially—was famously

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5. P. F. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford, 1992).

6. David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

capable of yielding some startling, even strongly counter-intuitive conclusions. Still, the basic strategy was modest in its conceptual ambitions and profound in its respect for our received ontological categories and commitments.

At least some contemporary metaphysicians have aspirations importantly different than those given by Lewis in 1973. Nevertheless, Lewis' characterization captures the tenor of its time. Importantly, it also describes the rules of the work on the metaphysics of free will, both then and (to a lesser degree) now. There are several reasons why this conception of method persisted. First, the work on free will in the 1970s remains the starting point for understanding the metaphysics of free will. Arguments developed and cemented in that period—whether counterexamples to the conditional analysis or the Consequence Argument and its successors or Frankfurt cases, and so on—have remained central to the debate.<sup>7</sup> The methodological presuppositions of that period were inherited by the contemporary literature. Second, for reasons unclear to me, the broadly Quinean strand had less direct influence in the metaphysics of free will.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Although I will discuss them in more detail in later in this chapter, it may be useful to quickly characterize these bits of jargon. The *conditional analysis* of 'can' is the idea that the correct analysis of 'can' is one that identifies a conditional power, i.e., to say that one can do something means, roughly, that *were* one to decide to do it, one would successfully do it. The *Consequence Argument* is the name for an influential version of an argument for incompatibilism. The central idea of the Consequence Argument is that if you can't control the past and you can't control the laws of nature, then if determinism is true you cannot do otherwise than you in fact do (i.e., there are no genuine alternatives to any course of action.) *Frankfurt cases* are a type of example, made famous by Harry Frankfurt, that purport to show that one can be responsible even if one cannot do otherwise. On a standard Frankfurt-style example, someone is deciding how to vote in some election, but unbeknownst to the voter there is a chip in his head that will force him to vote for candidate X if the agent doesn't vote for candidate X on his own. Crucial to the power of the example, though, the voter votes for candidate X without intervention from the chip—hence, the voter lack alternative possibilities but decides on his or her own what to do.

8. Sometimes outsiders to the literature will project on to it Quinean impulses, especially if those impulses are central to their own project. For one example, see Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defense of Conceptual Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). There, Jackson interprets compatibilists as *not*

To be sure, the general rise of naturalism in analytic philosophy helped to rein in the seriousness with which non-naturalistic libertarian accounts were regarded. And the importance of consistency with naturalism was a crucial spur in the development of contemporary libertarian accounts, most of which are now intended to be compatible with naturalistic presuppositions.<sup>9</sup> However, the emphasis on conceptual revision, whether as a response to pressures from science or as part of a more general strategy of paraphrasing commonsense, gained little obvious traction in the metaphysically-oriented literature.

Here, though, is where that other center of gravity—the ethics-oriented literature—matters. Ethical concerns have long had a central place in work on free will.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1970s it was perhaps at a low ebb, but its influence was restored in the late 1980s and 1990s. The important thing to keep track of here is how philosophical ethics diverged from

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defending the ordinary, folk concept of free will, but instead a reasonable extension of it. In doing so, they are “changing the subject, albeit in a strictly limited sense” (45). Although I think there are many virtues to the project Jackson describes, it substantially mischaracterizes what most compatibilists I know take themselves to be doing. Indeed, perhaps the biggest challenge for compatibilists has been to explain to incompatibilists how their proposals are precisely *not* instances of changing the subject.

9. Randolph Clarke, “Toward a Credible Agent-Causal Account of Free Will,” *Nous* 27 (1993): 191-203; Laura Waddell Ekstrom, *Free Will: A Philosophical Study* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000); Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford, 1996); Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (Oxford: New York, 2006); Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
10. Sometimes philosophers claim otherwise, that, for example, a focus on ethical issues was an invention of the second half of the 20th century, or that coupling free will to powers required for moral responsibility are a recent perversion in debates about free will. But these philosophers are just plain wrong. Even bracketing notable historical examples such as Kant and Nietzsche, in the early 20th century, discussions of free will were commonplace in books on ethics, and worries about moral responsibility frequently propelled construals of free will. See, for example, chapters on free will in G.E. Moore, *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912); Moritz Schlick, *The Problems of Ethics*, trans. D. Rynin (New York: Prentice Hall, 1939).

metaphysics in some important methodological assumptions. At least since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, much of the philosophical tradition in ethics was already committed to the idea that intuitions were not sacrosanct.<sup>11</sup> Few ethicists held on to the ambition of showing that all our divergent intuitions about ethics could be neatly explained by a single ethical theory. There were always some intuitions that needed to be explained away. The challenge was to articulate principled reasons for doing discounting the problematic intuitions.

Awareness of this situation permeates the teaching of even introductory ethics. We challenge Kantian theories with Nazi at the door cases. We raise doubts about utilitarianism by asking students to imagine grabbing people off the street to harvest organs. We invite objections to virtue ethics on grounds of embracing a kind of moral narcissism that misses agent-neutral moral values. The challenge is typically to explain away such intuitions, to treat them as compromises in a theory that gets the core notions compellingly correct; the hard part is to get students to see this and to not simply treat these as decisive counterexamples.

This is not to deny the existence of an important tradition of ethical theorizing, construed as an enterprise whose aspirations are to illuminate the structure of the categories we already possess. Such strands can be found as far back as Aristotle, at least. But the dominant, intuition-ambivalent strand from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards was solidified by the advent of the Rawlsian methodology of wide reflective equilibrium.<sup>12</sup>

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11. The idea was present in Sidgwick, of course, but also in Nietzsche's more radical call for "a revaluation of values." See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, Or, How to Philosophize With the Hammer* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub, 1997); Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981).

12. Perhaps the right way to understand the influence of what I'm calling "the broadly Quinean strand" in the free will literature, beyond the influence of naturalist presuppositions, is through role of reflective equilibrium in the ethics strand, as introduced by Rawls who gets the idea from Nelson Goodman. It may also be worth noting that the uptake of reflective equilibrium in normative ethics was not hindered by the fact that Rawls' students ended up in virtually every major philosophy department in the US by the end of the 20th century.



Rawls' idea was that any adequate normative theory was going to involve some compromise between our intuitions, our considered convictions, and the wider evidence we had for relevant suppositions. So, unlike descriptive metaphysics, ethics was already widely open to even substantial revision of its subject matter.

Here, then, is where we find the seeds for much of the talking past one another that occurs between various camps in the free will literature. Much of the debate, at least as it was conducted in the late 1960s and 1970s was structured by issues close to the metaphysician's heart: the Consequence Argument, debates about the conditional analysis of 'can', alternative possibilities. Perhaps atypically, at least for the late modern period in philosophy onwards, the moral issues receded into the background. For all that, though, the moral dimensions of the problem were never fully expunged. Inevitably, these issues attracted the interests of some ethics-oriented philosophers. Such philosophers stepped into debates where the extant literature and governing suppositions were set by the aims and methods of the metaphysicians. These suppositions tended to be at cross-purposes with the methodology familiar to ethicists, and the dominance of the metaphysical approach made otherwise natural questions harder to ask. (For example, if one approaches the problem of free will internal to concerns in ethics, it should seem easy to ask why there is so much concern about ordinary intuitions about free will: why should we suppose that an adequate account of moral responsibility and the condition of control it demands of agents should perfectly map on to the intuitions we already have about this matter? It would be a miraculous alignment between the justified norms and our existing practices.) But these questions were hard to ask in a climate where the norms in play were those of descriptive metaphysics. An unstable solution began to emerge: maintain the ethical concerns but adhere to the norm of description.<sup>13</sup>

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I3. The work of P.F. Strawson is absolutely critical to how this part of the history unfolded. At the risk of misleading by omission, I lack the space to say much about the sizable influence of Strawson in cementing what I've called the "unstable solution." Nevertheless, it is clear that Strawson's approach in "Freedom and Resentment" inspired a very influential strand of compatibilism. For our purposes,

Importantly, the difference between metaphysicians and ethicists working on free will was not and is not *just* a difference in metaphysical versus moral issues. More fundamentally, it is a difference in how one goes about building a philosophical theory and what role departures from intuition play in that theorizing. So, there is a difference in focus and a difference in method. However, I also think there is a third difference: a difference in *the aim* of theorizing<sup>14</sup>

While there are certainly more, there have been at least two important conceptions of aim in the free will literature, one we can call *constructionist* and the other *descriptionist*.<sup>15</sup> The constructionist's aim is to build the most plausible picture possible with the best credentialed tools we have available to us. We begin by assessing what resources we have that are plausible or otherwise in good epistemic standing. The project of the descriptionists is related, but importantly distinct. Here, the chief aim is to say what it would take for us to have the kinds of things we, perhaps pre-philosophically, take ourselves to have. We begin with our stockpile of naive concepts and ask how we might make good on them.

These differences in theoretical aims are oftentimes connected to an under-appreciated element among philosophers: religious commitments. It is striking how few non-religious libertarians there are in philosophy. My speculation—and that is all that it is—is that the many reli-

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Strawson's chief methodological contribution was to focus the free will debate on the centrality of praise, blame, and the attendant moral psychology while dismissing the need for revision of our practices or concepts. See P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* XLVIII (1962): 1-25. While I think there is much to be said for taking up the Strawsonian project along broadly revisionist lines, I do not think this is Strawson's own conception of his project in that article. See Manuel Vargas, "Responsibility and the Aims of Theory: Strawson and Revisionism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2004): 218-41. For a different interpretation, however, see Jonathan Bennett, "Accountability," in *Philosophical Subjects*, ed. Zak Van Straaten (New York: Clarendon, 1980).

14. Thanks to Dan Speak for pointing this out to me.

15. These are homely labels, I know. But given the loaded meanings of "constructivist" and "descriptivist" neologisms seem to be the better alternative.

gious philosophers who worry about free will do so because (1) they think that the powers of free will we need to get the traditional Christian conception of God off the hook for evil in the world must be pretty substantial and (2) only a radical species of freedom could suffice to ground the justifiability of eternal damnation. Indeed, I suspect that the variety (or varieties) of freedom apparently required for these tasks are more demanding than the conception of free will we need to do nearly everything else—e.g., justify praise and blame, explain the relevant senses of ‘can’ in ordinary discourse, to make sense of deliberation, and so on. Given the decidedly secular ethos of mainstream analytic philosophy, this motivation is invisible in most discussions. Widespread acceptance of a standard of consistency with naturalism does not help, either. But the religious aspect is not limited to motivations in favoring one or another conception of free will. It is also connected to the point I have been making about the aim of theorizing. In the context of philosophy of religion—especially in connection with the problem of evil—philosophers have offered “defenses” or theodicies that endeavor to show how some or another thesis is possible, or how there could be sufficient reason for its obtaining.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, their task has been closely aligned to the descriptionist project: it begins with a stockpile of concepts (e.g., human freedom, the existence of evil, the classical Christian conception of the deity, and so on) and attempts to determine whether and how it could exist. For philosophers familiar with, and sometimes operating internal to this sort of project, all-things-considered plausibility from the standpoint of a broadly scientific worldview is not the aspiration. Instead, we seek to explain how these commitments *could* be vindicated.<sup>17</sup> In many cases, then, religious convic-

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16. There is some dispute internal to the literature on these matters about how, precisely, to understand the term ‘theodicy’ and whether it is distinct from a philosophical “defense.” For example, Plantinga’s conception of what constitutes a theodicy is very demanding, and this has led him to propose a less ambitious plan of “defense.” See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Eerdmans, 1977).

17. Compare the project of “clarification” articulated and defended in Scott MacDonald, “What is Philosophical Theology?,” in *Arguing About Religion*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009).

tions may be joining a bundle of mutually reinforcing commitments: descriptionist aims, intuition-celebrating metaphysics, theological concerns, and continuity with theodicy or “defense” of some possibility.

It goes almost without saying that this picture simplifies a good deal. And, as natural as some of these clusterings may be, we should not lose sight that the particular cocktail of methodological presumptions in any given account will surely vary.<sup>18</sup> This variation, though, makes disentangling confusions from mere cross-purposes a complicated task. Still, recognizing methodological and aspirational differences is important if we wish to get a firmer grip on the free will problem.

Unfortunately, until very recently there was virtually no sustained discussion of methodological differences in the work on free will, what ramifications these differences have had for particular proposals, debates about them, and so on.<sup>19</sup> What I hope to have made plausible is the possibility of some amount of talking past each other in the literature. We can, for example, explain the sometimes mutually dismissive attitude

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18. Consider: Nozick’s interest in free will is part of a larger project of providing “philosophical explanations,” or explanations of how our stock of sometimes puzzling concepts could turn out to be true. To that extent, his project is in keeping with typical libertarian projects. However, his discussion is centrally concerned with free will’s importance for human dignity. In short, for Nozick, the descriptionist project is entwined with a fundamentally normative concern, albeit not the usual one. For a useful discussion of Nozick on free will, see Michael Bratman, “Nozick on Free Will,” in *Robert Nozick*, ed. David Schmidtz (New York: Cambridge, 2002).

19. Richard Double’s work was an exception, but an isolated one. See Richard Double, *The Non-Reality of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard Double, *Metaphilosophy and Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). I suspect that many people outside the literature on free will, and perhaps a few people internal to it, think that Dennett’s work—under the slogan of “the varieties of free will worth wanting”—made some groundbreaking contributions to the matter of methodology and free will. But Dennett’s contributions were not those suggested by asking what varieties of free will are worth wanting, because his answer was “the variety that we actually do want.” See Manuel Vargas, “Compatibilism Evolves? On Some Varieties of Dennett Worth Wanting,” *Metaphilosophy* 36, no. 4 (2005): 460-75.

among philosophers in each camp, frustrated at the deafness of the others to their work. The metaphysicians set the terms of the debate but given the motivating concerns and conception of methods, ethicists have seldom produced accounts that satisfy the intuition-championing terms of the debate. Similarly, ethicists are often baffled why one should be concerned to defend a picture of agency as demanding as those offered by (inevitably, metaphysician) libertarians. And so the debate has gone on.

### **3. Rip van Inkle in the Philosophy Library: Terminology**

In the previous section I discussed the effects various large-scale changes in philosophy had for work on free will. In this and the next section my focus is internal to the free will literature. In particular, I wish to consider some important ways in which the terrain of the free will problem has unfolded over roughly the past four decades, and why these changes have obscured some issues in the contemporary literature.

Suppose a dedicated inquirer into the problems of free will fell asleep in a philosophy library 35 years ago and awoke today with the aim of catching up on the current literature. This philosopher—let us call him Rip van Inkle—would surely be concerned by the contents of the latest journals. Rip would, I think, object to at least two developments over the past several decades: (A) the current uses of ‘compatibilism’ and ‘incompatibilism’, and (B) the prominence of moral responsibility in debates about free will. Let us consider each in turn.

*Compatibilist* and *incompatibilist* have become slippery terms. In the good old days, these terms denoted the thesis that the theses of determinism and free will were compatible or incompatible, respectively. In today’s literature, though, if someone self-identifies as a compatibilist, we need to know exactly what one is a compatibilist about, and what sort of compatibilism one is committed to. We need to know this because some philosophers use the term in connection with free will, but others use the term in connection with responsibility, and some use it in ways connected to both usages. So, for example, some philosophers are prepared to acknowledge that the thesis of determinism might be incompatible with some varieties of free will, even though moral responsibility is

compatible with determinism.<sup>20</sup> Others, oftentimes in defense of libertarianism, have declared that there are varieties of genuine freedom that could still be had even if determinism is true.<sup>21</sup> Others have argued that they are both compatibilists and incompatibilist.<sup>22</sup> Some have said that they are neither, or that such views are partly right but incompletely so.<sup>23</sup> And others have pronounced themselves agnostic about the whole business and offered accounts of both.<sup>24</sup>

Rip van Inkle would surely think that these Young Turks have made a mess of things. Back in the good old days, Rip might note, almost everyone was clear that free will was about the ability to do otherwise, and moreover, that without this ability no one could be morally responsible. The free will debate was about the compatibility of free will and determinism, and responsibility didn't much enter the picture. It was just obvious that people are morally responsible. Moreover, discussions about free will were comparatively tidy back then because they focused on a particular agential property—being able to do otherwise—and philosophers argued about what, exactly, that comes to. On this view, there was really only one debate in town: showing whether it was possible to do otherwise if determinism were true.

There were two ways one might try to motivate one's favored position in this debate. First, one could try to provide an account of 'can'

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20. John Martin Fischer, and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John Martin Fischer, *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: New York, 2006); Nomy Arpaly, *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2006).

21. Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*; Dan Speak, "Towards and Axiological Defense of Libertarianism," *Philosophical Topics* 32, no. 1&2 (2004): 353-69; Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck*.

22. Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (New York: Clarendon, 2000).

23. Ted Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism* (New York: Oxford, 1988).

24. Alfred Mele, *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck*.

or 'ability' to show that the ability to do otherwise was compatible with determinism or not. This was the work of those who proposed and attacked various conditional analyses of *can*, or the idea that all the word 'can' meant was that "if one had decided to do some action X, then one would have done X". Alternately, one could try to offer a more general argument about what determinism entailed and why that ruled out the ability to do otherwise. The most famous of this family of arguments is what is now widely called the Consequence Argument.<sup>25</sup>

In the intervening decades, things have changed in some important ways. For instance, the classic conditional analysis of 'can' has fallen into wide disfavor. Few, if any compatibilists, are willing to undertake a defense of it. (In very recent years there have been a few attempts to resurrect something like it, but with some important innovations.<sup>26</sup>) However, the failure of the conditional analysis proved to be less devastating to compatibilism than one might have thought. At about the same time the conditional analysis was put on life support, Harry Frankfurt's work opened up a different path for compatibilism, one that eschewed any requirement of an ability to otherwise.<sup>27</sup> This

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25. Early versions of something like the Consequence Argument can be found in Carl Ginet, "Might We Have No Choice?," in *Freedom and Determinism*, ed. Keith Lehrer (1966); David Wiggins, "Towards a Reasonable Libertarianism," in *Essays on Freedom of Action*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973). For canonical formulations of the Consequence Argument, see Peter Van Inwagen, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism.,"; Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*.

26. It is difficult to see how compatibilists could get by without *something* like the conditional analysis. For a critical discussion of the recent work on this issue (e.g., by David Lewis, Michael Smith, Michael Fara, and Kadri Vihvelin), see Randolph Clarke, "Dispositions, Abilities to Act, and Free Will: The New Dispositionalism," *Mind* 118, no. 470 (2009): 323-51.

27. See Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 829-39; Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5-20. Both are reprinted in Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). An influential alternative to Frankfurt's account, and one that similarly does not obviously appeal to alternative

development proved to be important for several reasons. First, it made it possible to persist in one's compatibilism even in the face of the failure to articulate a plausible conditional analysis of 'can'. Second, it broke apart the consensus that free will, the ability to do otherwise, and moral responsibility were a tightly integrated package of conceptual commitments. That is, Frankfurt came to be widely regarded as having offered an account of free will that made no appeal to the ability to do otherwise while also showing that moral responsibility did not require the ability to do otherwise. The latter conclusion was drawn by a class of examples commonly referred to as "Frankfurt cases." Frankfurt presented these cases as counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, which states that "a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise."<sup>28</sup> To some, this suggested a path whereby one could disconnect the requirements (and thus, threats to) free will from the requirements of moral responsibility.<sup>29</sup> To many it suggested that the future of compatibilism hinged not on analyzing 'can' but on defending Frankfurt-style cases where an agent lacked alternative possibilities but was intuitively responsible.<sup>30</sup>

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possibilities is Gary Watson, "Free Agency," *Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 8 (1975): 205-20.

28. Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About.*, p. I.

29. While Frankfurt's work first came on to the scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it took a while for the literature to reshape itself around these claims. Indeed, the flourishing of Frankfurt-inspired work in the free will literature did not really get going until the late 1980s and early 1990s, due in no small part to the efforts of John Martin Fischer in exploring the ramifications and consequences of this work. Fischer's own view, which couples compatibilism about moral responsibility with openness to the possibility that free will is incompatible with determinism, has been developed in numerous places. See, for example, John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994); John Martin Fischer, *My Way*; John Martin Fischer et al., *Four Views on Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); John Martin Fischer, and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*.

30. To get a sense of the directions this literature went, see the many excellent papers in David Widerker, and Michael McKenna, eds. *Moral Responsibility and Alternative*



So, many of the chief suppositions that structured the dialectic between incompatibilists and compatibilist in van Inkle's day are no longer uniformly accepted by even the major partisans of the literature that came after his nap: free will is not obviously to be analyzed in terms of an ability to do otherwise, many have become convinced that moral responsibility does not require the ability to do otherwise, at least some went on to think that one could be responsible without having free will. If debates about the Consequence Argument remain consequential, the defense of a conditional analysis seems to many less so. Changing conceptions of the free will problem are not new, but we do well to recognize them.<sup>31</sup>

When turning to the contemporary literature, I think it is fair to say that the contemporary free will debate is not as overwhelmingly preoccupied with the compatibility of free will and determinism as it once was. It is an important issue, to be sure. And, very smart and thoughtful philosophers continue to focus on this issue. However, it is no longer the only significant axis on which most of the self-identified free will literature centers.

Recognizing the newly multi-polar world of work on free will is crucial if one wishes to understand why the vocabulary has shifted—and, admittedly, gotten messier—in the flood of post-1970s neologisms.<sup>32</sup> At least some philosophers have argued that this terminological tide should

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*Possibilities: Essays on the Importance of Alternative Possibilities* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

31. For a history of conceptual accretions to what we now think of as the free will debate, see Richard Sorabji, "The Concept of the Will From Plato to Maximus the Confessor," in *The Will*, ed. Thomas Pink, and Martin Stone (London: Routledge, 2003).
32. A hardly exhaustive list of '-isms' that immediately came to mind: semicompatibilism, hard incompatibilism, revisionism, soft libertarianism, broad/narrow incompatibilism, neurotic compatibilism, attributionism, source incompatibilism, leeway incompatibilism, moderate libertarianism, event-causal libertarianism, agent causal libertarianism, illusionism, impossibilism, and mysterianism.

be resisted. For example, Peter van Inwagen “strongly recommend[s] that philosophers never use [‘libertarianism’ or ‘hard determinism’]—except, of course, when they are forced to because they are discussing the work of philosophers who have been imprudent enough to use them” (331).<sup>33</sup> To be sure, talk of libertarianism and other “-isms” offer new opportunities for confusion, but it also helps to make other matters clear for those less concerned about the compatibility debate. Many philosophers have sought to bracket the compatibility debate for the purpose of exploring those aspects of agency implicated in freedom and responsibility, aspects that are themselves neutral with respect to the compatibility debate. For example, suppose I am giving an account of rational, deliberating agency of the sort I take to be implicated in true ascriptions of responsibility. It may be useful for me to quickly identify what commitments, if any, my account has to an indeterministic form of agency. Rather than getting entangled in debates about what properly constitutes free will, I can simply say that my account does not presume libertarian free will. In saying this, I bracket the matter of the relationship of free will to moral responsibility, whether there are reasons apart from deliberative agency for requiring indeterminism in one’s account of free will or moral responsibility. Inelegance is sometimes the price of efficient expression.

The proliferation of terminology van Inwagen objects to is a by-product of three things: (1) the fact of a much larger body of philosophers working on the subject matter, generating novel views, and consequently needing to label positions in ways that distinguish their own view from others; (2) disagreement that the central issue is the compatibility debate, and (3) the fragmentation of convictions concerning how to characterize free will. But, it seems to me, either of (2) or (3) is all we need to justify the terminology, even if it does introduce some confusions. However, I wish to say a bit more about (3), or the fragmentation of convictions concerning how to characterize free will, and why these changes should matter to van Inwagen.

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33. Peter Van Inwagen, "How to Think About the Problem of Free Will."

#### 4. Rip van Inkle, Again: The rise of responsibility-centrism

If Rip persisted reading the current literature, it would not take him long to become distressed by the way in which moral responsibility has come to be in the foreground of discussions about free will. Compared to the literature Rip knew before his nap, where free will was often characterized in terms of the ability to do otherwise, the newer literature oftentimes explicitly appeals to a conception of free will that treats it as a kind of control that must be satisfied for an agent to count as a responsible agent.<sup>34</sup>

Let us suppose that we cannot talk Rip out of thinking of free will in terms of the ability to do otherwise.<sup>35</sup> Now I have already noted some reasons for thinking that attention to the larger historical record would show that the period prior to Rip's nap was atypical, at least in the modern period. But let us suppose that it was not. Even so, we would do

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34. For a similar criticism, see Peter Van Inwagen, "How to Think About the Problem of Free Will." There, he writes "Whatever you do, do not define 'free will' this way: 'Free will is whatever sort of freedom is required for moral responsibility' (or 'Free will consists in having whatever sort of access to alternative possibilities is required for moral responsibility')" (329n). For some examples (among many) of explicit appeals to a conception of free will picked out by its role in responsibility or responsible agency: John Martin Fischer et al., *Four Views on Free Will*; Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck*; Derk Pereboom, "Defending Hard Incompatibilism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2005): 228-47.

35. Van Inwagen has, (I think) tongue-in-cheek, characterized himself as unresponsive in this sort of way, claiming that, for example: "Van Inwagen summed up his thought on free will in his book *An Essay on Free Will* (1983), and has pretty much avoided learning anything about the problem since—other than by sitting about and thinking it over" (215). See Peter Van Inwagen, "Van Inwagen on Free Will," in *Freedom and Determinism*, ed. Joseph Klein Campbell et al. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004). To be clear, I reject that school of van Inwagen interpretation as both uncharitable and almost certainly false. Indeed, I can testify that van Inwagen read several books and articles on free will in the Fall of 1995, as he taught them in a graduate seminar I took from him that term. He had not previously read some of that material and (to my knowledge) he did not seek to avoid teaching that class. Collectively, these facts suggest that van Inwagen didn't completely avoid learning anything, and what he did learn did not *only* involve sitting and thinking. So there.

well to understand why free will is no longer widely characterized in terms of alternative possibilities. As it turns out, there are some very good reasons for this change.

As we've already seen, one reason why philosophers stopped characterizing free will in terms of alternative possibilities was Frankfurt's work. If one could provide a plausible enough story about free will that did not appeal to alternative possibilities, then it was simply a mistake to characterize free will in terms of alternative possibilities. Note that one need not have been *convinced* by Frankfurt's account. Rather, all one had to think was that Frankfurt's proposal was recognizably an account of free will, even if one regarded it as false. That is, if one thinks that something is recognizably an account of free will without it obviously requiring alternative possibilities, then one is going to want some way of characterizing free will that does not appeal to a requirement of alternative possibilities. Characterizing free will in terms of a control condition on moral responsibility was the solution.<sup>36</sup>

Second, it is worth noting that much of the way philosophers have motivated the free will problem—both in Rip's time and now—is by appealing to its connection to moral responsibility. In undergraduate classrooms and in professional venues, it is common for philosophers to motivate the interest or importance of their work by appeal to the relevance of free will for moral responsibility. Indeed, the importance of free will for moral responsibility is a recurring theme among a many philosophers in much of the modern period with Hume, Kant, and Nietzsche among them. It is beyond both my expertise and the scope of this paper to speak to the extent to which these figures thought of free

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36. Notice, for example, that despite his rejection of defining free will in terms of the freedom required for moral responsibility, van Inwagen's presentation of what he calls "the problem of free will" goes on to invoke the idea that moral responsibility entails the existence of free will. This is not to say that van Inwagen does not have good reasons for insisting that free will not be defined in terms of a freedom required for moral responsibility. Rather, my point is that given a widespread sense of entailment between moral responsibility and free will, many philosophers thought it sensible to characterize free will in virtue of the role it plays in ascriptions of responsibility.

will as something like a control or freedom condition on moral responsibility. Nevertheless, the widespread invocation—both historical and contemporaneously—of moral responsibility entailing free will is surely one reason why philosophers in the current literature widely appeal to a characterization of free will in terms of it.<sup>37</sup> If the philosophical and pedagogical interest in the matter turns on the relevance of free will to moral responsibility, and there is dispute about whether free will involves alternative possibilities, then it should be unsurprising that philosophers will characterize free will in terms of some condition on moral responsibility.<sup>38</sup>

One interesting consequence of thinking more systematically about moral responsibility and what its conditions require has been the development of a view that might strike Rip as startling, and something of a bizarre outlier: the view that we lack moral responsibility and/or free will. In Rip's day, it was widely assumed by philosophers that we are

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37. It may be tempting to think of *moral responsibility* as exclusively a philosopher's term of art, albeit an umbrella category for a range of things. Although it is surely used as something of a term of art, it is not purely a philosopher's invention. 'Moral responsibility' has currency in ordinary discourse, sometimes referring to an agent's status ("is responsible" "being responsible"), sometimes picking out characteristic practices—blaming, sanctioning, praising, rewarding—as when we speak of "holding responsible," and sometimes being used to pick out a particular class of action (e.g., when we speak of "the responsible thing to do"). The uses are interconnected, but perhaps not univocal in their uses and meanings of responsibility. Nevertheless, there is an anchor in ordinary discourse for philosophical talk of responsibility, an anchor sunk into our understandings of moral praise and blame, and the thought that there is a distinctive form of agency required to deserve those things.

38. Again, the influence of P.F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" is surely a part of the more complete story. Strawson's work begins with the supposition that determinism is a threat to various moral notions, and that we can answer that threat by understanding how our interpersonal attitudes operate in a way that is insensitive to the truth or falsity of the thesis of determinism. Many philosophers were (and are) persuaded by his account, at least in general outline, and thus accepted that the principal philosophical issue concerning determinism and sophisticated agency was the threat to moral responsibility.

morally responsible, and that this fact was obvious.<sup>39</sup> Today, however, there has been a considerable amount of careful work done by philosophers to argue that it is not at all obvious that we are free and responsible.<sup>40</sup> I write this not to embrace the skeptical conclusion. Indeed, elsewhere I've argued against it.<sup>41</sup> Still, it is striking that what was widely regarded in Rip's time as a philosophical curiosity is now taken seriously by a number of philosophers firmly in the mainstream of the literature.

There is another element to the story. The possibility of Frankfurt-style counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities suggested that moral responsibility might not require alternative possibilities. Since many philosophers were taken with the idea that free will was to be defined in terms of something like a control or freedom condition on moral responsibility, this suggested that free will need not require alternative possibilities. Out of this mix of ideas came the thought that perhaps what free will required was not alternative possibilities—as nearly everyone back in the 1960s might have thought—

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39. Van Inwagen has famously thought it obvious—his words— that we are morally responsible for what we do. (So obvious that he may be willing to give up his incompatibilism if he became convinced that causal determinism is true. See p. 219 of Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*.) In a similar vein, a number of philosophers have tried to motivate the thought that responsibility is in some sense not “up for grabs” and used this as part of an argument for compatibilism. This element is present in, for example, P. F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment.” It is also an important motivation for how John Fischer regards his own compatibilism about moral responsibility (what he calls “semicompatibilism”). See John Martin Fischer, *My Way*; John Martin Fischer et al., *Four Views on Free Will*.

40. Ted Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*; Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001); Gideon Rosen, “Skepticism About Moral Responsibility,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 295-313; Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion*; Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

41. Manuel Vargas, “Libertarianism and Skepticism About Free Will: Some Arguments Against Both,” *Philosophical Topics* 32, no. 1&2 (2004): 403-26; Manuel Vargas, “Desert, Retribution, and Moral Responsibility,” (unpublished).

but instead a kind of “sourcehood” or “origination.”<sup>42</sup> The idea here is that threats to free will are threats not because they rule out alternative possibilities, but rather, inasmuch as they undermine the possibility of us being the appropriate sources or originators of our actions. How, precisely, these accounts operate and the complexities they raise with respect to their connection for a broader theory of action, is something I will not try to detail in this paper. The important point, though, is that the development of these accounts closed off the possibility of simply characterizing free will as involving an ability to do otherwise. There are too many self-described accounts of free will that require no such thing. Thus, insisting on characterizing free will as an ability to do otherwise suggests either a willful disregard to recent developments or a deafness to how the terrain has shifted.

There has been a curious conceptual doubling back in the literature, where the old view of the free will problem gave birth to its own demise. By insisting on what was supposed to be an unremarkable and obvious entailment between moral responsibility and free will, the only way to accommodate the possibility of successful Frankfurt cases was to abandon the idea that free will requires alternative possibilities. Of course, one could resist Frankfurt cases and still hold on to the idea that free will requires alternative possibilities. There are both compatibilists and incompatibilists who have gone this route. Alternately, one could give up on the idea that moral responsibility entails free will.<sup>43</sup> However, given

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42. The language of “sourcehood” was, I believe, first introduced by Michael McKenna in Michael McKenna, “Source Incompatibilism, Ultimacy, and the Transfer of Non-Responsibility,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2001): 37-51. Although it clearly has a number of antecedents, in the recent literature one of the first articulations of the idea in its current form can be found in John Martin Fischer, “Responsibility and Control,” *Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1982): 24-40.

43. This view is rarely strongly embraced anywhere in the literature, although it is sometimes attributed to John Fischer. (Here I will simply bracket whether that attribution is correct, as matters are deceptively complicated on this point.) Arpaly explicitly detaches compatibilism about responsibility from compatibilism about freedom. See n.3, p. 6 of Nomy Arpaly, *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage*.

that many were persuaded by Frankfurt cases or their successors, the only way to recognize this fact in the literature is to abandon insistence on characterizing free will in a way that involves alternative possibilities.

Still, a number of philosophers would surely agree with Rip that the recent centrality of responsibility is a grave error. Some of these philosophers have argued that what is properly central to the free will problem is a kind of *deliberative agency*. On this conception of the problem, free will is a kind of capacity that is implicated in deliberation and threatened by beliefs that undermine the efficacy, utility, or necessity of freedom in deliberation, usually when considered against the backdrop of the natural causal order. There are also philosophers who have focused on the idea that free will is centrally about our ability to make a distinctive difference to the causal order, whether deterministic or not. Call this a *causal contributor conception* of free will. Moreover, there have been philosophers whose interest in what can be called *strong agency*, or the kind of agency required for robust self-control, and perhaps characteristically human powers such as creativity and originality in decision-making. For these latter philosophers, their interest in free will may intersect with concerns about moral responsibility but what is really at stake is to characterize some particularly complex or demanding form of agency, oftentimes identified as *autonomy*.<sup>44</sup>

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44. Searle is a notable example of someone who seems particularly interested in understanding free will as tied to conscious, deliberative agency and has at times contrasted this with accounts that focus on moral responsibility. See John Searle, *Freedom and Neurobiology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Robert Nozick also emphasized that his interest in free will was disconnected from moral responsibility. See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). If one only read these authors—especially Searle—one might be led into thinking (erroneously) that there have been no philosophers in the past 50 years interested in free will detached from concerns about moral responsibility. But there is a lively literature on the relationship of freedom to deliberation that often proceeds with little or no reference to moral responsibility. See, for example: Randolph Clarke, “Deliberation and Beliefs About One’s Own Abilities,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1992): 101-13; Richard Holton, “The Act of Choice,” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 6, no. 3 (2006): 1-15; Dana Nelkin, “Deliberative Alternatives,” *Philosophical Topics* 32, no. 1-2 (2004): 215-40; Derk Pereboom, “A Compatibilist Account of the Epistemic Conditions on Rational Deliberation,” *Journal of Ethics* 12



Note that these conceptions I have just mentioned need not be “pure” or interrelated with alternative conceptions. You could, for example, think one or more of these notions are co-extensional, or that free will is an agential feature that combines several of these concerns.<sup>45</sup>

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(2008): 287-306; J. David Velleman, “Epistemic Freedom,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 70 (1989): 73-97. One philosopher whose interest in free will seems largely grounded in a concern for how we can be genuine contributors to the causal nexus is Thomas Nagel. See Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). I take it, though, that something like this concern has motivated a number of source incompatibilists and agent causationists, include N. Markosian, “A Compatibilist Version of the Theory of Agent Causation,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1999): 257-77; Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*; Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives* (New York: Continuum, 2008). A concern for strong agency is suggested in Alfred Mele, *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy*; Gideon Yaffe, “Free Will and Agency At Its Best,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000): 203-29. An interest in strong agency, but with little or no appeal to free will, is central to much of Frankfurt’s later work and to the recent work of Michael Bratman. See many of the essays in, respectively, Harry G. Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Michael E. Bratman, *Structures of Agency: Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007).

45. I suspect that for anyone disposed to reject the centrality of a conception of free will bound up with moral responsibility, there are three main alternatives for conceiving the relationship between one’s own favored conception of free will and the dominant responsibility-focused conception of free will. First, one could think there is a relation of dependence: free will<sub>x</sub> (reading for ‘free will<sub>X</sub>’ any of the non-dominant conceptions of free will previously mentioned) is prior to free will<sub>MR</sub>, (read: free will<sub>moral responsibility</sub>) and that the latter depends on the capacities specified in one’s account of free will<sub>X</sub>. Where there is no free will<sub>x</sub> there can be no free will<sub>MR</sub> (perhaps moral responsibility requires more than is required for free will<sub>x</sub>). Second, one could think there is a relation of independence: one could think that one’s preferred conception and free will<sub>MR</sub> are altogether independent things with no substantive relationship, but that free will<sub>x</sub> is the true and proper meaning of the term ‘free will’. On this second view, the current concern with free will<sub>MR</sub> represents a perhaps crass, moralized hijacking of a perfectly respectable and properly metaphysical or epistemological topic. A third possibility is a relationship of overlap: one could think that these notions imperfectly overlap without any hierarchy of dependence. On this latter view, the alternative form of agency that is of interest and responsible agency might both rely on set of shared characteristics,

Or, one could reject all of this and instead try to police the terminological shifts and related changes in foci that have occurred under the umbrella of work ostensibly on free will. Van Inwagen seems inclined to something like this, proposing that by 'free will' we should only mean "the thesis that we are sometimes in the following position with respect to a contemplated future act: we simultaneously have both the following abilities: the ability to perform that act and the ability to refrain from performing that act" (330).<sup>46</sup> However, in light of developments tied to Frankfurt's work and the advent of "source" theories, such a proposal strikes me as a non-starter. Instead, we would be better served by recognizing the existing disagreements, and flagging our own interests and concerns in what—at least as matter of tradition—we might continue to call "the free will problem", even as we recognize that there is no single problem that has a unique and exclusive claim on being the problem of free will. It makes things less terminologically tidy, but it reflects the diversity of genuinely interesting philosophical puzzles that have a recognizable claim on being part of the philosophical tradition of reflection on free will. But it does leave us with a problem.

### 5. The revisionist turn

The confluence of methodological differences, blindness to them, and important shifts in terminology over time has impeded our understanding of each other and our grasp of the free will problem. The first step to solving this problem is to acknowledge that it exists. Then, we need to be clear about what it is that our own projects are endeavoring to do, and what we take to be the conditions of success or failure for that project. Here, I will briefly outline a new approach to walking out of this thicket of competing methodologies, priorities, and interests.

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even if one or the other also requires some additional features to hold true as well. On this model, perhaps the most natural thing to say about the current focus on free willMR is just that it represents a natural and perhaps respectable confusion with the true and proper subject of free will.

46. Peter Van Inwagen, "How to Think About the Problem of Free Will."

In my work the animating question is this: what are the conditions under which we rightly morally praise and blame agents for what they do? My interest in the free will problem, and in responding to alternative views (including views that deny we have free will and moral responsibility), is largely driven by a concern for determining whether these accounts provide the tools to answer that core question. So, I think about free will as a kind of power or capacity that is a distinctive requirement on being a responsible agent, and in this, I share the current responsibility-centric assumptions of the literature.<sup>47</sup> In framing the matter this way, I do not deny that there are other concerns that have and do motivate how philosophers have come to frame the free will problem, and it is an open question whether a responsibility-centric account will be able to satisfactorily address those concerns. However, I do challenge those who think about the free will problem differently to be clear about what the governing conception of free will is in their own work. Moreover, if they think it is the only philosophically appropriate way to think about free will, then they need to explain why we should think so.

Internal to my responsibility-centric approach to free will, I'm interested in pursuing a constructionist project. That is, I am interested in articulating what I take to be the most plausible and defensible account of the conditions on agency required for deserving moral praise and blame. And, importantly, I do not think that our best account of *that* will necessarily cohere with our pre-philosophical intuitions. It is important that we distinguish between an account that describes the contours of our ordinary thinking about freedom and responsibility (something we might think of as conceptual mapping of a sort), and an account of what we *ought* to believe about these things, given everything we know. The first I call a "diagnostic" or "descriptive" project. The latter I call a "prescriptive" project. The possibility that we get divergent theories from doing, respectively, description and prescription is what creates the

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47. Moreover, I expect that when the dialectical winds change, I will come to regard this period as the good old days of the literature. In philosophy, the good old days are those days in which the prejudices of the literature reflect one's sense of what matters.

possibility of revisionism. That is, revisionism, of the sort I recommend, is the view that the best prescriptive account will depart in important ways from our best diagnostic account.<sup>48</sup>

One might wonder how it could be possible that free will and moral responsibility might be anything other than what we think it to be. There are several paths to an answer. One is by reflecting on developments in philosophy of language from the mid-1970s and on.<sup>49</sup> The advent of externalist semantics—accounts of the meanings of terms, roughly—showed how it was plausible that the meanings of various terms is not settled by the contents of speaker’s thoughts. Putnam and Kripke made these points in the context of natural kind terms, but the basic strategy is not obviously dependent on natural kinds (indeed, it is not altogether clear what constitutes a natural kind). A second but related strategy is to make use of an externalist theory of reference. On this approach, even if you accept that there is some sense to be made of the idea that our thoughts about something fix the strict meaning of something, it is still another matter what the term refers to or “picks out” in the world. And, one might think, facts about usage or the world make a contribution in some way external to what is in our heads. So, for example, at one point in the mid-20th century, perhaps the U.S.-specific meaning of ‘race’ in its social category sense was, roughly, a category of human kind distinguished by particular genetic features. Plausibly, however, the reference of ‘race’ was

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48. On at least one construal of wide reflective equilibrium, the revisionist approach I recommend is consistent with it.

49. I am puzzled why these developments did not make their way into the literature on free will earlier. Many of us who have been moved to adopting revisionism in name or in de facto commitments were driven by the thought that some important but familiar points in philosophy of language had failed to be taken seriously by people working on free will. See, for example, Mark Heller, “The Mad Scientist Meets the Robot Cats: Compatibilism, Kinds, and Counterexamples,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (1996): 333-37; Susan Hurley, “Is Responsibility Essentially Impossible?,” *Philosophical Studies* 99 (2000): 229-68; Shaun Nichols, “Folk Intuitions on Free Will,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 6, no. 1 & 2 (2006): 57-86; Manuel Vargas, “The Revisionist’s Guide to Responsibility,” *Philosophical Studies* 125, no. 3 (2005): 399-429.

groups of people marked *not* by shared genetic features (it has been extraordinarily difficult to isolate any that map on to our categories) but instead groups marked by malleable social categories and relations. Importantly, those social relations used a web of markers for identifying race, none of which were genetic. So, one might embrace externalism about meaning and/or reference in the case of free will and moral responsibility. A third path is to argue that even if the meaning of ‘free will’ is fixed by our thoughts about it, this putative fact does not mean that we cannot change how we think about free will, thereby changing its meaning. In the face of new evidence, pressures to coherence, or changing patterns of usage, we can and have re-anchored reference for any number of ideas—marriage, adultery, being a magician, quarterback sacks, and so on. There are, I suspect, other paths to the same basic point that concepts, meanings, and references associated with terms are not always fixed to an immovable firmament, discovered from the comfort of our armchairs. Of course, revisions of meanings, reference, or concepts cannot be done willy-nilly. There are various constraints on any plausible revision, including preserving the general conceptual role of the term, adhering to standards of plausibility, and capturing the main normative burdens implicated in usages of the term. My point, though, is that there is no reason to think that, on this face of it, revisionism about free will and moral responsibility is closed off to us.<sup>50</sup>

So, we can and should distinguish between a descriptive and

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50. An important recent development has been a body of experiments directed at probing ordinary intuitions about philosophically interesting cases. The initial results of these experiments suggest that non-philosophers have remarkably diverse intuitions about free will, and that any account that prescribes a consistently compatibilist or incompatibilist account of free will must revise away from a non-trivial set of ordinary judgments about the conditions of free will. See Eddy Nahmias et al., “Free Will, Moral Responsibility, and Mechanism: Experiments on Folk Intuitions,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXXI (2007): 214-41; Shaun Nichols, and Joshua Knobe, “Moral Responsibility and Determinism: The Cognitive Science of Folk Intuitions,” *Nous* 41, no. 4 (2007): 663-85; Shaun Nichols, “Folk Intuitions on Free Will.”; Eddy Nahmias et al., “Is Incompatibilism Intuitive?,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73, no. 1 (2006): 28-53.

prescriptive account of free will. I think the best descriptive account is one that is tantamount to an incompatibilist conception of the free will problem. However, the best prescriptive account—the picture of agency we ought to believe is true—turns out to be compatible with determinism. Because it renounces a variety of incompatibilist intuitions—for example, a particularly robust conception of alternative possibilities, the demand for being the ultimate source of any free action, and some attendant ideas about the origin of one’s responsibility-relevant capacities—this latter picture of agency will not be fully intuitive for many competent users of the concepts of free will and moral responsibility. This counterintuitiveness reflects the fact that for many of us, our default conceptual commitments in this domain are neither necessary nor advantageous.

Elsewhere, I have attempted to explain why I think it is extremely implausible to think that any acceptable account of freedom will cohere with our pre-philosophical intuitions. Here, I can only outline some of the details. First, I think that we have diverse intuitions on these matters. For many of us, there is a robust set of incompatibilist intuitions, but they are not uniformly or universally present in all of us.<sup>51</sup> We are better off acknowledging this and abandoning the dream of finding an account that is immune to counterintuitive results. Second, even if we did have these intuitions uniformly and universally, there is little hope of vindicating them. That is, I think that the best libertarian accounts, while coherent, describe a form of agency we are unlikely to have.<sup>52</sup> This is problematic, however, because if the only justification for moral praise and blame is the libertarian one, then all those moral and legal practices that depend on

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51. For some discussion of the relevant evidence, see Manuel Vargas, “Philosophy and the Folk: On Some Implications of Experimental Work for Philosophical Debates on Free Will,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 6, no. 1 & 2 (2006): 239-54; Manuel Vargas, “Revisionism About Free Will: A Statement & Defense,” *Philosophical Studies* 144.1 (2009): 45-62.

52. Although the details have changed a bit over time, see my discussions of libertarianism in John Martin Fischer et al., *Four Views on Free Will*; Manuel Vargas, “Libertarianism and Skepticism About Free Will: Some Arguments Against Both.”

these things are untenable. This is, I think, an under-appreciated moral problem for libertarianism. Until libertarians can show that we have good reason to think that we are indeed agents of the sort described by their preferred accounts, then we are left in a position of holding people responsible on tenuous epistemic grounds, grounds that those subject to blame and punishment dependent on moral responsibility can justifiably object to.<sup>53</sup>

I also reject skepticism and eliminativism about free will and moral responsibility. I do so because there is a justification for praise and blame available to us that, while not capturing all of our intuitions about responsible agency, is sufficient to capture the bulk of our ordinary ascriptions, attitudes, and practices—albeit on grounds different than many of us previously supposed.<sup>54</sup> For this reason, I believe a revisionist project has something new to offer the free will debates: it provides us with a way to acknowledge the attractions of our concepts as we find them, while at the same time permitting us to bracket the attendant intuitions. Our task is then to grapple directly with the matter of what forms of agency are required to justify attributions of praise and blame. In doing so, the moderately revisionist approach provides a place for the method of concept-mapping that is important to those engaged in descriptive metaphysics. However, it also opens the door to re-writing our self-conception in light of a firmer grasp on what forms of agency are minimally required to justify the practices of praise, blame, and desert that have been central concerns for ethicists.

The categories of the compatibility debate, when combined with the diverse methodological aims, and the various conceptions of how to frame what is at stake, have too often obscured the more specific commitments and projects that philosophers can and do undertake. The

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53. Manuel Vargas, "Revisionism About Free Will: A Statement & Defense."

54. My account focuses on the role these practices have in cultivating a special form of agency. See Manuel Vargas, "Moral Influence, Moral Responsibility," in *Essays on Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, ed. Nick Trakakis, and Daniel Cohen (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008).

moderate form of revisionism that I recommend is proposed partly with an eye towards clarifying some of these issues, but also with an eye towards recommending a kind of theory whose possibility has been underappreciated and seldom developed. In reply to this latter aspiration, however, one might protest that the prescriptive element of the account is merely another form of compatibilism, and that revisionism is not a theory in its own right.

I do think it is fair to say that there are strands of revisionism floating around in the literature, especially in the compatibilist literature.<sup>55</sup> But such strands are caught on some thorny branches of commitments that favor disavowals of revisionism. As I have noted above and elsewhere, there is an ambiguity in many compatibilist accounts, and many of the norms imported from the project of descriptive metaphysics have put pressure against the ready acceptance of revisionism.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, there are a number of things that might count as revisionism, but many of these things turn out to be comparatively uninteresting forms of revisionism, as when, for example, an account suggests that we have misunderstood our own commitments and that we need to revise our theories to better track the commitments we already have.<sup>57</sup>

Let me say a bit more about this last issue. In practice, revisionism is importantly distinct from the projects of the mainline of compatibilism. In a more conciliatory mode we might identify two varieties of compatibilists with distinct relationships to the form of revisionism I propose. Call one group *purebloods*. Purebloods see nothing

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55. Not exclusively, though. See Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*. One way to read Tim O'Connor's rejection of Kane's event causal libertarianism is precisely as a rejection of a kind of revisionism internal to libertarianism (41-2). Indeed, I suspect Clarke took a similar view of event causal libertarianism, prior to his abandonment of libertarianism in Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

56. See Manuel Vargas, "Compatibilism Evolves."; Manuel Vargas, "Revisionism About Free Will: A Statement & Defense."

57. Manuel Vargas, "The Revisionist's Guide to Responsibility."



interestingly revisionist about their project. These philosophers are, in keeping with the bulk of the compatibilist tradition, insistent that our concepts and meanings as we find them are indeed compatible with the thesis of determinism. They endeavor to tell us “what we mean, *all* we mean” by ‘free will’ and ‘moral responsibility’.<sup>58</sup> From the standpoint of purebloods, moderate revisionism will seem distinctive, but committed to unnecessary concessions to incompatibilists on the matter of the current meaning or concepts of free will and moral responsibility. Purebloods think that careful reflection on the matter shows that substantive revision is unnecessary. We might label a different group of compatibilists *mongrels*. Mongrels are more prone to slipping into the language of otherwise revision-tolerating ethicists—for example, speaking of varieties of free will worth wanting. And, if they held true to these ways of thinking and talking, we might rightly think that revisionism of the form I recommend is indeed a mongrel compatibilism. However, most existing mongrels have internalized norms of the literature expressed in the frequent citation of hoary accusations against compatibilism as “quagmires of evasion” (James) and a “wretched subterfuge” (Kant). So, these potentially revision-friendly compatibilists have had reason to disavow any suggestion of revision.<sup>59</sup> So long as that tension between pro- and anti-revisionist sentiment is present among them, revisionism will seem perhaps too uncomfortably familiar to be much of an alternative, even if—as I believe—it is what these self-identified compatibilists *ought* to espouse.

Given these considerations, and the tangled skein of commitments I described in sections 2-4, I am not much interested in arguing that the form of revisionism I advocate could not be assimilated under *some* construal of compatibilism or incompatibilism. I have no objection to my view being characterized as a moderately conceptually revisionist

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58. Many of the recent “new wave” dispositionalist compatibilists fall in to this camp, I suspect. And, I take it that much of the work of Kadri Vihvelin, Dana Nelkin, Eddy Nahmias, and Joe Campbell is in this vein.

59. See Manuel Vargas, “Responsibility and the Aims of Theory: Strawson and Revisionism.”; Manuel Vargas, “Compatibilism Evolves.”

prescriptive form of constructionist compatibilism. My reluctance concerns the the connotational baggage of the simple, unmodified labels of compatibilism and incompatibilism. Too often, that baggage pollutes the theorist's proposal and the interpreter's grasp of it. Thus, I have emphasize an idea that is not already widely a part of the literature: any plausible (constructionist) account of moral responsibility will depart from important strands of our in fact commonsense thinking about moral responsibility. This is what is distinctive about the kind of view I favor, and this is what is missing in going accounts of free will, whether compatibilist or incompatibilist.<sup>60</sup> Skeptical or eliminativist incompatibilists are vulnerable to this complaint, too: they reject free will and moral responsibility precisely because they think it is either as we imagine it to be or it must not exist.<sup>61</sup> So, as long as this idea—the idea that that we will need to excise some aspects of ordinary thinking—is taken seriously, I do not have any investment in whether one treats my accounts as compatibilist or incompatibilist. My aim has been to re-focus our attention on explaining *why* some or another account would require

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60. John Martin Fischer's "semicompatibilism" might be taken to represent a counterexample to this claim. However, I think there is something misleading in how many people think of semicompatibilism. First off, the kind of revisionary nature it suggests is much less dramatic that one might think, for it seems that the revisionary element is somewhat "meta"—it is not the idea that concepts, meanings, or reference must be changed but simply that our self-understanding of these things is out of alignment with the commitments we already have. This is something I elsewhere call *weak revisionism*, and it is distinct from the moderate form of revisionism that thinks that (whatever our self-understanding of our concepts, meanings, or reference) at least some of the first-order elements are themselves in need of change. Second, I think that despite the suggestion that semicompatibilism is an alternative to compatibilism, it is instead simply a species of compatibilism on most contemporary conceptions of compatibilism, and indeed, on nearly any historical conception of compatibilism in the modern period. For these arguments, see, respectively, Manuel Vargas, "Revisionism About Free Will: A Statement & Defense."; Manuel Vargas, "Taking the Highway on Luck, Skepticism, and the Value of Responsibility," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2009): 249-65.

61. Susan Hurley, "Is Responsibility Essentially Impossible?"; Manuel Vargas, "Libertarianism and Skepticism About Free Will: Some Arguments Against Both."

this or that power for moral responsibility.

On this latter issue, the *why* of some stipulated power or condition on agency, appealing to its intuitiveness is not good enough for the revisionist. In contrast, it has been for most conventional compatibilists and incompatibilists. What I reject is the idea that we have done our work by simply illustrating the intuitiveness of, for example, agent causation, the idea that we must be responsible for what capacities we have, or that our intuitions about some case of responsibility attribution cut one way rather than another. What we need is some explanation of why these requirements are necessary for freedom and responsibility, and why we should take seriously intuitions that favor some or another reading of, for example, a Frankfurt case. The answers to these questions should invoke principles, arguments, and justifications which may themselves, eventually, bottom out in considerations that are intertwined with intuitiveness. That's fine. We cannot repair all of our ship simultaneously. Conceptual improvement is always piecemeal. Still, inasmuch as blame and punishment are visited on real people in light of our conceptions of responsibility, we must take seriously the normative pressure to articulate a justification that goes beyond a declaration that one's proposal coheres with our pre-philosophical prejudices.

To summarize, once we acknowledge the possibility of a revisionist approach to these matters, what is foregrounded is the need to explain why posited requirements on free will and moral responsibility should be taken seriously. Intuitiveness is a kind of virtue, but a limited one. We are only now beginning to take seriously that there are discreet families of intuitions at work in ordinary and philosophical cognition about the matter, and that such intuitional diversity may be found within individuals, and that it may even be pervasive across cultures. If there is a lesson here, it is that we must be clear about the aims and methods of our theorizing, and sensitive to the possibility that our interests are not always best met by the stockpile of assumptions and conceptual commitments we already possess. Indeed, this should seem especially plausible for concepts like free will, which have a long and complicated history with potentially diverse subject matters that have been bandied about under the same title. Even if we prefer to focus on some and not others of these subjects we

should be careful to both recognize the diversity and respect the possibility of differing interests.<sup>62</sup>

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62. Several years ago, over lunch in Bloomington, Indiana, Al Mele convinced me that I should write a paper about these issues of methodology and how distinct conceptions of the philosophical project generate the peculiar structure of the free will debate. Without his encouragement I doubt I ever would have tried to make explicit many of these thoughts— he has my thanks. Thanks also to Andrei Buckareff, Al Mele, Michael McKenna, Jason Miller, and Kevin Timpe for feedback on an earlier version of this paper, and to Dan Speak for conversations about many of the ideas in this paper. Thanks too, to the material and financial support of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, where I worked on this paper during a sabbatical from the University of San Francisco. Finally, I am grateful to Peter van Inwagen for having gotten me interested in the free will problem in the first place. We obviously disagree about what these matters come to and how they should be framed, but I have learned a good deal from him and his work.

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