

What's desert got to do with it? Pragmatic theories of responsibility and why we can discard our modern notion of free will

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the belief in free will and basic desert is not necessary to participate in our various responsibility practices. I discuss various concepts related to our responsibility practices, including attributability, answerability, and accountability responsibility, showing how they can be practically understood and grounded in both backwards-looking and forward-looking responsibility practices. By doing so, I show that holding people morally responsible can be justified without referencing classic free will or basic desert. Therefore, I propose that, when it comes to our moral and responsibility practices, we do not need to believe in and can discard our classical understanding of free will and embrace a minimalist pragmatic freedom.

About the author

Ivan Bock is a PhD student currently completing his thesis on virtue ethics and moral psychology. He has a day job as a business analyst working for a software development company. He hopes to complete his PhD and then to continue his philosophy career as a lecturer or a public philosopher. His interests span a large number of topic and fields, including virtue ethics, moral psychology, free will, moral luck, philosophy of religion, pragmatism, scepticism, and epistemology. He has recently grown to love reading philosophical short stories and novels, and when he is not reading or writing for his blog, he spends time rock climbing and mountain biking.

If the choice is yours, why do the thing? If another's, where are you to lay the blame for it? On gods? On atoms? Either would be insanity. All thoughts of blame are out of place. If you can, correct the offender, if not, correct the offence; if that too is impossible, what is the point of recrimination? Nothing is worth doing pointlessly.

– Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*, Book 8, 17)

1. Introduction

The contemporary debate on free will is as contentious and lively as it has ever been. Although a lot of progress has been made in analysing concepts and advancing ever more precise arguments and thought experiments, the debate itself does not seem any closer to a conclusion than a few decades ago. In this paper, I argue that much of this debate has little impact on our actual ethical practices and that we can justify our practices of holding moral agents responsible even if we discard our modern notion of free will and basic desert. I will support this conclusion by providing an account of our moral practices without relying on notions of freedom, the ability to do otherwise, or moral desert that are not themselves based on practice. I show that our modern metaphysically-loaded notions of free will and basic desert play no role – or if they do, a largely inconsequential role – in our moral practices. We are, therefore, no worse off for believing we do not have ultimate control or responsibility – classically, free will – and can continue to hold each other responsible without believing in free will.

I will start off by providing a brief overview of the contemporary literature and the most important concepts necessary for grasping the traditional presentation and understanding of free will and moral responsibility. I will then turn to our moral practices and discuss how these are, if at all, affected by our views of free will and basic desert. I will then conclude

by discussing what an alternative and practical view of human freedom and responsibility looks like. I defend a pragmatic conception of responsibility and ethics that allows us to discard our classical understanding of free will and basic desert, thereby showing that they are not necessary concepts or beliefs to make sense of and participate in our moral and ethical practices. Rather, a minimal, pragmatic conception of freedom and responsibility is all one needs to believe in¹ to participate in our responsibility practices.

2. Free will, analytic philosophy, and pragmatism

The history of the free will debate stretches from the very beginnings of the Western intellectual tradition until today. Early versions of the types of discussion we have today can be found in Aristotle (2004:1109b29–113b23), for example, who proposed that rational creatures are capable of voluntary action and that we are responsible for our voluntary actions because they are determined by our internal states and dispositions. Soon after Aristotle, both the Stoics and Epicureans forwarded various arguments about the nature of our freedom and its relationship to natural laws and moral responsibility (see Bobzien (1998) for an extensive discussion of the stoic views on freedom and Bobzien (2000) for a discussion of Epicurus' views). Similarly, the contemporary debate on free will centres around the ability to do otherwise and its interaction with determinism and indeterminism. It is thus evident that although we have refined our concepts and improved our various formulations of problems and solutions, we are still having much the same debate. Before turning to a suggested alternative approach, I will next discuss the common concepts and positions classically put forward.

2.1. Classic free will

In order to understand the modern debate and my issue with it, it will be useful to get a basic

¹ Here, “believe in” should be read as being compatible with a number of varying formulations such as “commit to”, “hold”, “endorse”, and “act on”. My point is therefore about the beliefs and

justifications an agent needs to appeal to or rely on when participating in our responsibility practices.

understanding of the concepts at play and the main arguments forwarded.

Traditionally, free will is deeply tied to the notion of moral responsibility and the ability to do otherwise (O'Connor & Franklin, 2022). The ability to do otherwise is understood as an agent's capacity to determine their actions such that if they wanted to act differently, they could have or can in the future.² The ability to do otherwise is argued to be the fundamental requirement for being held morally responsible in the basic desert sense. Basic desert is understood as an agent being apt for moral praise or blame purely on the basis that the agent did something right or wrong.³ In other words, we can only blame an agent if it was within their power to both do and not do what they, in fact, did. Conversely, if the agent did not have the ability to do otherwise, then they cannot be blamed *purely* on the basis of what they did.

Given these basic requirements for moral responsibility, philosophers have used a number of factors to cast doubt on our ability to do otherwise. For example, a popular factor or concept is determinism in its many forms (Kane, 2005:5-10). One such form, causal determinism, is the view that every effect is wholly determined by preceding causes. This means that everything that occurs happens the way it does because of the events that precede it. If determinism is true, then it is hard to see how humans are supposed to transcend this causal network in order to be able to freely act as they choose without being determined to act in a particular way by what came before.

² I use this definition only to help introduce the topic at this point. This is only a basic definition of the ability to do otherwise, and there are a number of varying understandings and definitions depending on the nature of the ability (which should become clear as my discussion continues). For a full overview of positions, see O'Connor and Franklin's (2022) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Free Will, specifically the section 2.2.

³ Most philosophers seem to follow Derk Pereboom's (2014:2) definition: "The desert at issue here is basic in the sense that the agent would deserve to be blamed or praised just because she has performed the action, given an understanding of its moral status, and not, for example, merely by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations."

Libertarians are incompatibilists regarding free will and causal determinism (ibid.:32-33). The libertarian takes the ability to do otherwise to its metaphysical extreme and describes an agent's ability to do otherwise as them having genuine alternative possibilities when acting. An agent has genuine alternative possibilities if they can truly be said to be able to act in a number of different ways in the future regardless of the past. This means that they should, at the moment of making a decision, be able to decide between genuinely available metaphysical alternative decisions/actions without being determined one way or the other.⁴ Hard incompatibilists agree with libertarians that free will and determinism are incompatible because free will requires agents to have genuine alternative possibilities when acting (ibid.:23-31). However, the key difference is that hard incompatibilists believe that determinism is true and, therefore, humans do not possess free will.⁵

The consequence argument was in part made famous by Peter van Inwagen (1983:16) as a defence of hard incompatibilism. The basic argument amounts to arguing that we cannot change the past or the laws of physics, that these are the sufficient and complete causes of what happens in the present, and, therefore, we cannot change what we do in the present. This conclusion is then taken to support the refutation of our ability to do otherwise in the strong sense.

Compatibilists argue that free will is compatible with the existence of determinism (Kane, 2005:12). They do this by providing a variety of responses aimed at undermining the requirements of genuine alternative

⁴ Harry Frankfurt (1969:829) was the first to introduce the "principle of alternate possibilities". However, he understood the principle to be roughly synonymous with having the ability to do otherwise. Robert Kane (1996, 2007) is a well-known contemporary defender of libertarian free will that uses the phrase "genuine alternative possibilities" in this strict metaphysical sense incompatible with determinism. Throughout this paper, I will continue to distinguish between the ability to do otherwise (as merely a general description of our requisite control) and genuine alternative possibilities (as a strict understanding).

⁵ Contemporary defenders include Derk Pereboom (2001, 2014) and Gregg Caruso (2012).

possibilities or by arguing that the ability to do otherwise is not as important as being the source of one's actions, even when those actions are causally determined. Roughly, classical compatibilists accept the requirement of the ability to do otherwise, but they argue that it can be understood in a manner that is compatible with determinism. They reject the understanding of the ability to do otherwise as a person having genuine alternative possibilities. Instead, they usually argue for either an epistemically counterfactual or conditional understanding. This allows them to describe an agent as having the ability to do otherwise if the agent would have acted differently if they wanted to due to having different reasons. In other words, they are not being forced or coerced to do a thing they do not want to. Therefore, if they had different reasons, they would have done something differently than they did (ibid.:13-15).⁶ Generally, classical compatibilism is not as popular as source compatibilism (also known as deep self compatibilism). Source compatibilists usually place much less emphasis on the ability to do otherwise and much more on an agent identifying with and us attributing to them the reasons and decisions that led to an action. Thus, it is not important or problematic if our actions are determined. Rather it is important that agents identify with their reasons/decisions and serve as a sufficient source (usually understood as not being coerced) for their actions (ibid.:93-119). The most plausible versions of this proposal tend to be capacity-type responses, usually reason-responsive views (see Fischer, 2010, 2012) or identification accounts/models (see Frankfurt, 1971; Shoemaker, 2015).⁷

Finally, Revisionism was popularised and supported by Manual Vargas (2004, 2013) as a sort of compromise and means of advancing the debate. Vargas argues that our general folk understanding of free will is, in fact, incompatibilist, and so we should conclude that

determinism really does threaten this freedom. However, he argues that although our natural understanding of free will is incompatibilist, this does not mean we have to stick to this understanding. We can revise our understanding of free will, and this is a useful endeavour because of how closely our notion of responsibility is tied to free will. Vargas' view is similar to Fischer and Ravizza's (1998) semi-compatibilism, which holds that free will might not be compatible with determinism, but moral responsibility is. The biggest difference is that Vargas is not interested in defending responsibility in the basic desert sense. Semi-compatibilism still holds that agents have a sufficient degree of control in determining their actions such that they can be held morally responsible simply for doing them (see Fischer and Ravizza's (1998) "guidance control"). Vargas has instrumental and forward-looking responsibility in mind (2013:158-198, 234-266). As such, his revisionist project entails adopting our usual language that designates our capacity for meaningful decision-making and being held responsible for it while discarding the ideas of alternative possibilities and basic desert.

Thus, based on all that has been discussed, the classical understanding of free will, and the one at play in the modern debate, is a free will that is meant to serve as a justification for moral praise and blame in the basic desert sense thanks to an agent's ability to do otherwise. A recurring theme is the understanding of the ability to do otherwise to be metaphysical in nature such that causal determinism can, on the face of it, seemingly undermine it (Kane, 2005:5-10). Very little progress has been made, and as John Searle has noted,

The persistence of the free will problem in philosophy seems to me something of a scandal. After all these centuries of writing about free will, it does not seem to me that

⁶ This view is most famously defended by David Lewis (1981) and Kadri Vihvelin (2004, 2013).

⁷ Identification account source compatibilists seem to follow Frankfurt's (1969:838-839) original thoughts more closely when he argues that it matters that someone identifies with what they did

and believes they did what they did because *they* really *wanted to*, as opposed to doing what they did *merely* because they could not have done otherwise. Reason-responsive views often still want to understand the ability to do otherwise in a classically compatibilist manner (see Fischer & Ravizza, 1998).

we have made very much progress (Searle, 2008: 37).

I agree, and it seems like the solution is to realise that the debate is mostly futile.

2.2. A pragmatic critique of classic free will

In the previous section, I gave a rough sketch of the main positions and concepts at play in the contemporary debate. As I hope is clear at this point, the usual debate surrounding free will is deeply metaphysical in nature and relies on a number of somewhat contentious ideas; ideas such as our control needing to be complete or all-encompassing if we are to be responsible and that moral desert can be basic (meaning someone can deserve something without that necessarily entailing any action or recourse). I believe there is another way to approach this topic, and it is one that usually stands in contrast to the traditional way analytic philosophers' approach free will and attempt to defend moral responsibility. My view finds inspiration in the pragmatist school of philosophy which, in this paper, takes the form of asking what, if any, consequences there are for not believing in free will and how our lack of belief in it is meant to affect the ways we live.

There is not much need to go into the details of pragmatist philosophy. For our purposes, the most important aspect is the pragmatic method of William James and the pragmatic maxim that C.S. Pierce expressed:

[T]he tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. (James, 1907:29)

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to

have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Pierce, 1992:132)

The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol. (Pierce, 1998:346)

Pragmatism is, in this sense, first and foremost, concerned with practice. More specifically, pragmatism is concerned with how beliefs and concepts inform or effect our actions and practices, and then attempts to limit our understanding of a concept to only those effects. Whereas philosophers in the analytic tradition have long wanted to discuss essences, grounding, and sufficient and necessary causes, pragmatic philosophers want to start with our behaviours, actions, and practices and evaluate the conceptual tools we employ to navigate and guide these behaviours, actions, and practices. I want to do the same for our practices related to our sense of free will, especially moral ones.

For our purposes, a practice is any set or group of activities and actions that humans regularly engage in. As such, responsibility practices include evaluating agents and their moral characters, reflecting on our moral aims, cultivating virtue, and praising and blaming people.

Pierce's maxim is ultimately a maxim about reining in our metaphysical concepts and meanings. What is the point of discussing something if it never makes a difference to our way of living, especially if these concepts are purely principled and without any practical basis? How do we even settle such discussions? Free will, especially as it is used in the classic debate, seems like a concept that is best understood in such a pragmatic way, and that this might help us make progress with the free will problem. This is not to say no philosopher has presented a pragmatic-type theory of free will. But the majority of philosophers tackling the issue of free will

are still concerned with abstract concepts like basic desert and are getting bogged down in explicating the metaphysical nature of our free capacities.⁸

Libertarian free will requires that agents be the ultimate source of their behaviour so that we can ground and justify responsibility and accountability in the basic desert sense. The compatibilist understanding, although happier in a determined world, still wants to assign moral desert purely based on our moral evaluation of the agent's control. But a pragmatic ethic only requires, I argue, that we have some capacities relevant to responsibility practices, such as identifying with and being able to adapt according to our reasons in a way that allows us to engage and communicate with others and cultivate responsible agency. It does not seem like an agent needs to have ultimate responsibility, nor do we need to believe they are ultimately free, only enough to effectively engage in moral practices, including evaluation and cultivation. This is gained by taking our experiences and practices at face value, trying to see what these practices want to accomplish, and figuring out how our concepts and tools should be understood and need to adapt to better navigate our lives. It does not look like believing in libertarian free will grants the agent any better conceptual tools than believing in a sort of pragmatic freedom, since, as I will argue, both can allow us to justifiably engage in our moral practices. I will substantiate this argument in the next section.

Of course, this is not going to satisfy the philosopher concerned with basic moral desert and its relationship to human freedom. But the challenge that a pragmatist understanding of human freedom and responsibility poses is to ask what difference basic desert really makes. If we are able to retain most, if not all, of our

ethical and moral practices without making reference to basic desert and classical free will, then why can we not simply discard the concepts? I turn to justifying the first part of this question next.

3. Moral practices, free will, and basic desert

As I briefly mentioned in the previous section, there have certainly been philosophers who advance a similar pragmatic-type of free will in the way I mean here. These philosophers also discuss what I call our responsibility practices and create taxonomies of types of moral responsibility that are usually concerned with the responsibility type's focus or purpose (or can be framed as such). The most famous of these is P.F. Strawson's (1962) view of reactive attitudes.⁹ Strawson's work has been highly influential and his views are also compatibilist in nature, as he argued that to hold a person responsible is to believe they are apt for certain reactive attitudes, such as resentment or praise, as a result of the quality of their wills regarding us (i.e. their intentions, desires, and good or bad will they have for us), and that determinism has no effect on these sorts of attitudes and practices (Kane, 2005:107-109). These types of discussions and views lead me to believe that we have social, practical, and consequential reasons (all of which are part of or constituted by our moral practices) for holding people responsible that do not require notions of free will or basic desert.

3.1. Responsibility practices and types

Another development in the philosophy of responsibility that I also see as informed by our practices and the ways we go about holding people morally responsible is Susan Wolf's (1990:37-75) influential distinction between responsibility-as-

⁸ For some notable exceptions, see Wegner (2002), Smilansky (2000), and Strawson (2010), who all argue that there are pragmatic benefits to belief in free will that would otherwise be lost, such as a belief in moral desert and a stronger sense of self-determination.

⁹ Another position that I would also label as forwarding a pragmatic-type of responsibility that seems fairly close to my

proposal here yet slightly differs is Jay Wallace's (1996) view that the relevant facts of being morally responsible are dependent on and grounded by our practices of holding people responsible. Although also concerned with responsibility practices, Wallace does not seem to think these themselves serve certain relational and forward-looking aims that allow us to discard the idea of basic desert, as I intend to argue.

attributability and responsibility-as-accountability. More recently, David Shoemaker (2011) has also introduced responsibility-as-answerability. Typically, these different types of responsibility have different conditions for being apt and tend to involve different sorts of judgements about what the responsible agent should do or can be done to; they help us clarify the different notions of responsibility at play. Different philosophers have forwarded different definitions and understandings of this taxonomy, so there is no single agreed-upon classification.¹⁰ What is important for my purposes is that a plausible account of these sorts of responsibility types can be forwarded that makes reference to our practices and aims, since I wish to use them to demonstrate that we can continue with a variety of moral practices, regardless of whether we have free will in the classic sense. With this in mind, I argue for the following understandings:

Attributability responsibility: Our practice of evaluating the cause and origin of good or bad behaviour as being an agent's dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims, such that we attribute the good or bad behaviour to the agent.

Answerability responsibility: Our practice of evaluating an agent as capable of meaningfully engaging in ethical and moral behaviour, such that they consciously assent to their dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims in a way that allows them to appreciate the ethical and moral dimensions of their behaviour and

participate in ethical discussion and deliberation, especially when it comes to relating to and working together with others. Answerability usually entails the practice of communicating and discussing values and perceived wrongs between the parties involved, if possible and productive.¹¹

Accountability responsibility: Our practice of evaluating an agent as being apt for moral praise and blame, reward and punishment, such that holding them accountable helps restore broken positive relationships or develop virtuous dispositions/agency¹². Holding an agent accountable will usually entail expecting some further behaviour from them, such as recognition of good and bad behaviour, reparations, and further efforts to cultivate virtue.

As I understand them, these types of responsibility capture different aspects and practices we engage in as we hold one another responsible for our actions. They pick out different factors and capacities as their object of focus and evaluation. For the most part, they are related and depend on each other. What is important for now is that we realise that the conditions for responsibility all depend on the capacity of the agents in question to participate in our moral practices, as well as the aims and consequences of these practices, not on our ultimate responsibility or undetermined wills. Also, notice that I do not make mention of basic desert at all, nor need I. All of these types of

¹⁰ As examples, both Pereboom (2014) and Smith (2015) put forward different understandings of answerability than Shoemaker does. Furthermore, some philosophers believe that attributability is the only condition required for being responsible in the accountability sense (see Talbert, 2012; Schlossberger, 2022), while others believe that there are further conditions that need to be met (see Levy, 2011; Shoemaker, 2011).

¹¹ This type of responsibility is closely related to a condition for responsibility usually called "moral competence": an agent's ability to recognise and respond to moral considerations (Wolf, 1988). It is

also similar to Michael McKenna's (2012) conversational approach to responsibility, which argues that an agent's responsibility can be questioned if said agent is deemed to be incapable of acting from a will that does not meet a certain "moral quality", thus not being a valid candidate for moral assessment.

¹² I have in mind here developing our moral character such that we are better people in the future, both in what we consider and how we act. The aim is thus that praise and blame will make us better moral agents.

responsibility depend on practical forward-looking and backwards-looking notions of moral desert and responsibility. To further explain my view of responsibility and praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, I turn to explaining forward-looking and backwards-looking responsibility next.

3.1. Forward-looking vs backwards-looking practices

It is possible to describe the relationship between the three types of responsibility discussed above as sequential. In a way, we move from attributing responsibility to evaluating answerability to holding accountable. Put differently, we evaluate an agent's involvement and moral character and then attribute actions and dispositions/motivations to the agent, then we evaluate their epistemic and moral capacities by determining to what degree they voluntarily did what they did and are able to appreciate reasons and change their behaviour, and finally we determine our and their appropriate responses. As such, some of our responsibility practices seem concerned with backwards-looking responsibility and others more with forward-looking responsibility. The distinction between backwards-looking and forward-looking responsibility is used to distinguish between the different reasons for why moral responsibility is justified. Backwards-looking responsibility holds that an agent is justifiably praiseworthy or blameworthy due to them having done something good or bad. Forward-looking responsibility holds that an agent is justifiably praiseworthy or blameworthy when praising or blaming them would lead to positive consequences, especially regarding the agent's behaviours, such as them being encouraged or deterred to act in the same way they did going forward (Talbert, 2024).

I hope it is clear after our discussion of classical free will that the usual understanding of basic desert is a sort of backwards-looking responsibility. Our requirement that an agent be free when they act in order to hold them responsible is exactly because we care that it was truly them who did what we judge to

be good or bad. On my proposed pragmatic view, moral evaluations are indeed backwards-looking. But this is to set the stage, as it were, for the forward-looking responsibility practices to be justified, especially as being aimed at an appropriate target. The backwards-looking aspect is not concerned with praise and blame or justifying basic desert on my view. Thus, practically speaking, our responsibility is both backwards- and forward-looking.

Returning to our three different types of responsibility, it is again useful to consider them against backwards- and forward-looking responsibility. As I present it, attributability is wholly backwards-looking since it is chiefly concerned with evaluating and attributing behaviours, dispositions, virtues, etc., to agents. I believe answerability has both backwards- and forward-looking aspects. The attributions we make to the agent are certainly involved in judging their moral capacities and qualities, which is an important part of our answerability practices. The same is true of the agent's past and how they came to have the moral character they do. Thus, we are clearly evaluating the way the agent had acted, the motivations they had, and their capacities then and now; it matters why and how they acted. This seems to involve some backwards-looking motivations. At the same time, we are trying to assess whether the agent can meaningfully engage with our responsibility practices, which seem concerned with the present and the future; we care about the capacities they had and those they have now, since these determine to what extent they can meaningfully engage in our responsibility practices and benefit from them. As such, I think answerability is both backwards- and forward-looking. Accountability also seems somewhat concerned with backwards-looking factors, especially since judging an agent as accountable requires that they are attributable and answerable, but for the most part, it is forward-looking. It is concerned with helping restore broken positive relationships or develop virtuous dispositions/agency.

As a final means of explicating my view, let us consider accountability responsibility and forward-looking justifications. Some examples of philosophers who argue for a forward-looking account of responsibility similar to mine are Vargas (2013), Pereboom (2014), and McGeer (2018). Pereboom argues that considerations such as protecting potential victims, reconciling relationships, and moral formation more generally are able to justify many of our responsibility practices, especially punishment (2014:134). Both Vargas and McGeer propose justifications for our responsibility practices by arguing that they are aimed at cultivating better moral agency, with Vargas (2013) calling his proposal the agency cultivation model and McGeer (2018) calling her proposal the scaffolding view due to reactive attitudes assisting in the development and maintenance of our responsible agency. These sorts of views seem highly plausible and pragmatic to me, and I would only add that these forward-looking practices are informed and justified by backwards-looking practices as well.

Throughout these examples of responsibility practices, basic desert only plays the role of justifying pure blame; blame only for the sake of blame – ultimately, in practice, it justifies resentment or scorn purely because we feel like they are appropriate. It advances no cause, produces no good, and is not specifically conducive to flourishing. Why even keep the concept? It looks like our practices and aims are perfectly able to explain and justify our responsibility without it. Additionally, they do so in productive and virtue-conducive ways. As we usually understand it, basic desert requires ultimate control understood as our free will. But neither of these concepts is necessarily required for understanding and justifying our responsibility practices.

4. Pragmatic freedom and responsibility

To be clear, my contention is not that philosophers up to now discussing free will and basic desert have been completely wrong or that their ideas are not relevant to moral responsibility at all. It is intuitively the case, at least in my view, that we usually hold to some kind

of condition that the agent is not being coerced or manipulated, and so some conception of and belief in the ability to do otherwise (or, at least, a concept resembling it closely) is likely to play a role in our ethical beliefs and practices. Similarly, it also seems like it matters if you believe you are the source of your actions, at least in some sense – likely if your actions align with your consciously endorsed values and aims – and so I have a lot of sympathy for the views of many compatibilists. But the point is that these conditions or criteria can be seen as principles employed to help guide our ethical practices so that they remain productive. They do not have to be mere conditions for basic desert or blame for blame's sake.

Importantly, the general conditions of being able to do otherwise and being the source of our actions seem to me to map onto our various responsibility practices. To illustrate the point, consider our responsibility practices as backwards-looking and forward-looking again. Our sense of an action's sourcehood and how it is informed by an agent's values and aims play an integral part in our backwards-looking practices. Depending on the sourcehood and the values and reasons at play, we might be more inclined to attribute certain character traits to an agent. It seems equally clear to me that our ability to do otherwise, that is, our capacity to act according to reasons and that we can or would act differently if we had different reasons, allows for our forward-looking practices to be feasible and successful. As such, sourcehood and freedom are certainly important concepts and factors when it comes to attributability, answerability, and accountability responsibility. The point is that determinism and basic desert play no role in undermining these concepts if they are understood practically; they can be separated from our classic notion of free will. Thus, I am not saying that belief in a sort of freedom is not an essential part of believing we are justified in blaming and praising people, just that free will and basic desert in the classic sense are not and need not be.

Another important factor of pragmatic ethics is the evaluation and adaptation of moral principles and conduct according to their effectiveness.¹³ The same can be done for principles of freedom and responsibility. If we have a principle; an agent can only be blamed if they are the ultimate source of an action – where ultimate means that the reasons and motives of the agent were themselves also due to the agent in some sense – but we see that applying this principle leads to problems, then we can adjust our principle. Maybe we should rather say something like the following: an agent can only be blamed if 1) they were the source of the action such that their capacity for reasoning (especially about their behaviour and actions) combined with their values and aims is a significant enough cause¹⁴ of the action and 2) if doing so has a positive practical effect on the agent's behaviour, reasoning, and motivations such that any positive relationships are restored and the agent potentially cultivates virtuous dispositions. On pragmatism (combined with a sort of eudaimonism – that is, the view that ethics is about flourishing), this move is perfectly fine and only needs to be adjusted if it also leads to issues for our moral practices. It is not necessary to dogmatically stick to only one conception of freedom and moral responsibility. We are free to adjust or shift our beliefs as needed.

With this in mind, here is a preliminary definition of pragmatic freedom informed by our discussion:

A conceptual tool that designates a person's capacity to meaningfully determine their actions via their dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims such that they 1) would behave

differently if they had different dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims, and 2) they have the capacity to change these dispositions, reasons, values, motives, and aims through our usual relational, conversational, and responsibility practices.

All of this does bring our practical reasoning and moral psychology/phenomenology to the forefront of the debate. Discussing the boundaries of freedom will entail grappling with the ways that we actually experience moral reasoning. Pragmatic freedom will, therefore, exist on a spectrum. Different degrees of volition and freedom will be afforded depending on the psychological state the agent was in. It, therefore, seems coherent to speak of agents having different degrees of freedom.¹⁵ But to simply ask if an agent does or does not have free will, specifically if the answer has to be a simple yes or no, then the answer is going to be no.

We are now in a position to ask, does pragmatism solve the free will debate? I think, at the very least, it dissolves it by refocusing our attention toward developing tools that are meant to help us navigate the practices we find ourselves in rather than a critical evaluation of the grounds and justification of those practices found in essential rules, principles, and properties that are more metaphysical in nature than practical. It shows that belief in free will is not required to justifiably hold people responsible. As is usually the case with pragmatic projects, my view is a deflationary one in that I want to propose a less demanding and implausible conception of our idea of meaningful freedom; one grounded and justified by our responsibility practices.

¹³ This is a theme specifically in the ethics of another pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey. See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Dewey's Moral Philosophy, especially section 4.4 (Anderson, 2023).

¹⁴ I mean here something similar to Fischer and Ravizza's (1998:69-85) "moderate" reason-responsiveness since the agent does not need to be wholly or strongly reason-responsive, only moderately reason-responsive such that their reasons do play enough of a role to attribute the behaviour to them and to make them an appropriate target of praise or blame.

¹⁵ Daniel Dennett (2004:162-163) also uses the term "degrees of freedom" and says, "A system has a degree of freedom when there is an ensemble of possibilities of one kind or another, and which of these possibilities is actual at any time depends on whatever function or switch controls this degree of freedom". I have a different usage in mind here focused more on the degree of ability of an agent's psychological capacities to engage in ethical practices.

Dissolving the issue of free will also dissolve the issue of basic desert. The idea that someone can deserve something absent of anyone to hold them accountable is a practicably ridiculous idea. Responsibility is not some property that belongs to a thing in itself in any practically meaningful way. It is a practice between social creatures in relation to one another. Thus, the strong sense of the ability to do otherwise and basic desert, as classically understood, have no support in and no bearing on our moral practices. It does not matter whether we believe or disbelieve we have them.

The above is in opposition to the views of contemporary illusionists, who argue that although our belief in free will is an illusion, this belief nonetheless plays an important and pragmatic role in facilitating and justifying moral responsibility (Wegner, 2002; Smilansky, 2000; Strawson, 2010). Others have also argued that belief in free will has epistemic benefits regardless of whether it is true or false (Tollon, 2023). To be clear, my claim here is not that our usual folk understanding of our responsibility is not tied up with the notion of free will. I suspect it very well may be. Rather, the point is that a belief in free will is not the *only* type of belief that can ground and justify our responsibility practices to an agent. A person only needs to feel associated enough with certain reasons, be able to engage in ethical deliberation and conversation, and believe they and others are able to change. This is only a minimal and pragmatic type of freedom. Of course, this is not to say that those who do believe they have free will are not also able to justify and participate in our responsibility practices. In short, both belief and disbelief in classical free will are sufficient but not necessary for grounding our responsibility practices.

In a sense, the pragmatist is unphased by the many problems classical free will faces and by the prospect that we might not have it. Whether free will exists or not, we can remain responsible and hold each other responsible. We do not need the concept of and belief in free will to make sense of our responsibility practices. Some of these are communicative, some are

restorative, and some are virtue-conducive. All of them only require that an agent be able to participate in certain practices. At the same time, I recognise and agree that our concept of free will is so tied up with notions of absolute freedom and determination along with basic moral desert that I am not hopeful of being able to revise this notion. I think we are better off simply accepting that we do not know whether we have free will or not. Instead, we have a sort of minimal, pragmatic freedom that is perfectly capable of accounting for our practices of moral evaluations and responsibility. To either believe we have free will or not is perfectly permissible, at least when it comes to justifying our responsibility practices.

5. Conclusion

It strikes me as unfortunate that in the process of trying to make sure we are justified in holding people responsible and understanding our own freedom we have gotten stuck on the ability to do otherwise and trying to explain how it is compatible with determinism, rather than focusing on our moral and responsibility practices as constituents of human conduct and our pursuit of a good and happy life while co-existing with and depending on other people. Starting with our practices and evaluating the concepts, principles, and conditions we employ to help us live, leads to a much more fruitful understanding of ethics, responsibility, and praiseworthiness/blameworthiness. It is an understanding that is not susceptible to the threat of determinism and is much more flexible in allowing us to have fruitful and productive engagements. Describing our different responsibility practices as three types of responsibility (attributability, answerability, and accountability) that have both backwards-looking and forward-looking grounds and justifications helps us see that absolute free will and basic desert play a negligible role. Practically speaking, we do not have to believe we have free will to continue with the ethical practices we engage in. It seems about time we accept that we can discard our modern notion

of free will and embrace a more minimalist, deflationary pragmatic freedom.

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