(Un)just Deserts: The Dark Side of Moral Responsibility

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What would be the consequence of embracing skepticism about free will and/or desert-based moral responsibility? What if we came to disbelieve in moral responsibility? What would this mean for our interpersonal relationships, society, morality, meaning, and the law? What would it do to our standing as human beings? Would it cause nihilism and despair as some maintain? Or perhaps increase anti-social behavior as some recent studies have suggested (Vohs and Schooler 2008; Baumeister, Masicampo, and DeWall 2009)? Or would it rather have a humanizing effect on our practices and policies, freeing us from the negative effects of what Bruce Waller calls the "moral responsibility system" (2014, p. 4)? These questions are of profound pragmatic importance and should be of interest independent of the metaphysical debate over free will. As public proclamations of skepticism continue to rise, and as the mass media continues to run headlines announcing free will and moral responsibility are illusions,[1] we need to ask what effects this will have on the general public and what the responsibility is of professionals.

In recent years a small industry has actually grown up around precisely these questions. In the skeptical community, for example, a number of different positions have been developed and advanced—including Saul Smilansky's *illusionism* (2000), Thomas Nadelhoffer's *disillusionism* (2011), Shaun Nichols' *anti-revolution* (2007), and the *optimistic skepticism* of Derk Pereboom (2001, 2013a, 2013b), Bruce Waller (2011), Tamler Sommers (2005, 2007), and others.

Saul Smilansky, for example, maintains that our commonplace beliefs in libertarian free will and desert-entailing ultimate moral responsibility are illusions,[2] but he also maintains that if people were to accept this truth there would be wide-reaching negative intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences. According to Smilansky, "Most people not only believe in actual possibilities and the ability to transcend circumstances, but have distinct and strong beliefs that libertarian free will is a condition for moral responsibility, which is in turn a condition for just reward and punishment" (2000, pp. 26-27). It would be devastating, he warns, if we were to destroy such beliefs: "the difficulties caused by the absence of ultimate-level grounding are likely to be great, generating acute psychological discomfort for many people and threatening morality—if, that is, we do not

have illusion at our disposal" (2000, p. 166). To avoid any deleterious social and personal consequences, then, and to prevent the unraveling of our moral fabric, Smilansky recommends *free will illusionism*. According to illusionism, people should be allowed their positive illusion of libertarian free will and with it ultimate moral responsibility; we should not take these away from people, and those of us who have already been disenchanted ought to simply keep the truth to ourselves (see also 2013).

In direct contrast to Smilansky's illusionism, Thomas Nadelhoffer defends *free will disillusionism*: "the view that to the extent that folk intuitions and beliefs about the nature of human cognition and moral responsibility are mistaken, philosophers and psychologists ought to do their part to educate the public—especially when their mistaken beliefs arguably fuel a number of unhealthy emotions and attitudes such as revenge, hatred, intolerance, lack of empathy, etc." (2011, p. 184). According to Nadelhoffer, "humanity must get beyond this maladaptive suit of emotions if we are to survive." And he adds, "To the extent that future developments in the sciences of the mind can bring us one step closer to that goal—by giving us a newfound appreciation for the limits of human cognition and agency—I welcome them with open arms" (2011, p. 184).

A policy of disillusionism is also present in the optimistic skepticisms of Derk Pereboom and Bruce Waller. Derk Pereboom, for example, has defended the view that morality, meaning, and value remain intact even if we are not morally responsible, and furthermore, that adopting this perspective could provide significant benefits for our lives. In *Living Without Free Will* (2001), he argues that life without free will and desert-based moral responsibility would not be as destructive as many people believe. Prospects of finding meaning in life or of sustaining good interpersonal relationships, for example, would not be threatened (2001, ch. 7). And although retributivism and severe punishment, such as the death penalty, would be ruled out, preventive detention and rehabilitation programs would be justified (2001, 2013). He even argues that relinquishing our belief in desert-based moral responsibility might well improve our well-being and our relationships to others since it would tend to eradicate an often destructive form of "moral anger."

Bruce Waller has also made a strong case for the benefits of a world without moral responsibility—both in his paper today and elsewhere. In his recent book, *Against Moral Responsibility* (2011), he cites many instances in which moral responsibility practices are counterproductive from a practical and humanitarian standpoint—notably in how they stifle personal development, encourage punitive excess in criminal justice, and perpetuate social and economic inequalities (see Clark, 2012 review).

Waller suggests that if we abandon moral responsibility "we can look more clearly at the causes and more deeply into the systems that shape individuals and their behavior" (2011, p. 287), and this will allow us to adopt more humane and effective interpersonal attitudes and approaches to education, criminal justice, and social policy. He maintains that in the absence of moral responsibility, "it is possible to look more deeply at the influences of social systems and situations" (2011, p. 286), to minimize the patent unfairness that luck deals out in life, and to "move beyond [the harmful effects of] blame and shame" (2011, p. 287).[3]

Who then is correct? What would the actual consequences of embracing skepticism about moral responsibility be? Here I stand with Bruce Waller. *I maintain, like Waller, that belief in moral responsibility, rather than being a good thing, actually has a dark side.* I believe Waller does an excellent job documenting how belief in moral responsibility, rather than protecting rights for the accused, the convicted, or the unfortunate, is too often used instead to justify treating them in severe and demeaning ways. The problem, I maintain, is the belief that individuals "justly deserve" what they get. The idea of "just deserts"—which is so central to the moral responsibility system—is a pernicious one. For one, it often encourages punitive excess in criminal justice—including extreme forms of retributive justice such as the death penalty. It is also used, as Waller so aptly points out, to perpetuate social and economic inequalities. The myth of the "rugged individual" or the "self-made man" fails to acknowledge the important role *luck* plays in our live. The simple fact is that what we do, and the way we are, is ultimately the result of factors beyond our control. We are not (as the moral responsibility system would like us to believe) purely or ultimately self-made men and women.[4]

Since Waller, in my view, does such an excellent job addressing a number of common concerns—e.g., (1) that without moral responsibility there will be no limit on the harsh treatment meted out, (2) that moral responsibility belief is essential for respecting the dignity and worth of persons, and (3) that if we deny moral responsibility, then we lose the very protections built into the distinction between innocent and guilty—I would instead like to use the remainder of my comments to lend additional empirical support to Waller's central thesis that there is a dark side to belief in moral responsibility. For those not yet convinced that moral responsibility skeptics can adequately address these concerns, I here only direct you to Waller's more extended treatment of these issues in *Against Moral Responsibility* (2011) as well as the excellent work of Derk Pereboom (2001, 2013, forthcoming) and Benjamin Vilhauer (e.g., 2009, 2013a, 2013b).

The Dark Side of Moral Responsibility

Recent findings in moral and political psychology suggest that there may be a potential *downside* to believing in free will and moral responsibility. For the sake of this section, I will define *free will* as "a kind of power or ability to make decisions of the sort for which one can be morally responsible" (Fisher, Kane, Pereboom, and Vargas 2007, p. 1), where moral responsibility is understood in the *basic desert* sense. While most of the empirical work done so far has tended to focus on the potential *upside* of believing in free will (Vohs and Schooler, 2008; Baumeister, Masicampo, and DeWall, 2009),[5] a growing body of research has also found some interesting, and potentially troubling, correlations between people's free will beliefs and their other moral, religious, and political beliefs.

For example, recent empirical work by Jasmine Carey and Del Paulhus (2013) has found that *free will beliefs correlate with religiosity, punitiveness, and political conservative beliefs and attitudes such as Just World Belief (JWB) and Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)*.[6] They found these correlations by administering their The Free Will and Determinism Scale known as FAD-Plus (Paulhus and Carey, 2011)—a 27-item scale used to measure people's beliefs and attitudes about free will and related concepts—along with measures of religiosity, political conservativism, just world beliefs, and right wing authoritarianism. It's important here to highlight just how worrisome some of these correlations are. Take, for example, a few of the sample items used to validate belief in a just world.

- **Just World Belief Scale (JWB) (Lerner, 1980):**
  - "By and large, people deserve what they get."
  - "Although evil men may hold political power for a while, in the general course of history good wins out."
  - "People who meet with misfortune have often brought it on themselves."

And here are sample items from the Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale:

- **The Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA) (Altemeyer, 1996):**
  - "The established authorities generally turn out to be right about things, while the radicals and protestors are usually just 'loud mouths' showing off their ignorance."
  - "Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways of sinfulness that are ruining us."

- "It is always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people's minds."

Many of you, I suspect, will find that these items express troublesome (and perhaps even potentially dangerous) ideas. If you do not, I will try to persuade you that you should in a moment. But first it is important to note that Carey and Paulhus also found a relationship between beliefs about free will and punishment—in particular, they found that believing more strongly in free will was correlated with punitiveness. They found that free will believers were more likely to call for harsher criminal punishment in a number of hypothetical scenarios. As Thomas Nadelhoffer and Daniela Goya Tocchetto point out, this is unsurprising: "It makes a priori sense that people who believe more strongly in free will would be more interested in giving wrongdoers their just deserts" (2013, p. 128).

In addition to the findings of Carey and Paulhus, Nadelhoffer and Tocchetto (2013) have also found some troubling correlations. Using a slightly different scale—The Free Will Inventory (FWI), a 29-item tool for measuring (a) the *strength* of people's beliefs about free will, determinism, and dualism, and (b) the *relationship* between these beliefs and related beliefs such as punishment and responsibility (Nadelhoffer et al. in prep)—Nadelhoffer and Tocchetto found, once again, a correlation between free will beliefs and JWB and RWA. They also found a number of correlations between religiosity, conservativism, and political ideology—e.g., Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) was strongly correlated with political conservativism, religiosity, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Just World Belief (JWB), and Economic System Justification (ESJ). And here, "the ESJ scale measures the tendency to perceive socioeconomic and political arrangements as inherently fair and legitimate—even at the expense of individual or group interests," and the "SDO scale measures the degree of adherence to conservative legitimizing myths that attempt to rationalize the interests of dominant group members" (Nadelhoffer and Tocchetto, 2013, p. 132).

These findings, I believe, support Waller's central claim that where belief in free will is strongest, we tend to see increased punitiveness. They also appear to support Waller's claim that "conservative corporatist" thinking is generally correlated with an acceptance of economic inequality and a belief that the world is just and "people deserve what they get." One should not be surprised by these correlations since the link between conservative social attitudes and free will belief has long been known (see,

e.g., Atemeyer, 1981; Werner, 1993; Jost, 2006; and Baumeister, 2008). Robert Atemeyer (1981), for example, has shown that conservatives tend to be more blaming and punitive toward lawbreakers. And John Jost (2006) has found that conservatives and liberals tend to make different trait attributions for lawbreakers—conservatives draw attributions about "sinful" character, whereas liberals point to situational causes. Hence, the personal responsibility ethic emphasized by conservatives is firmly rooted in (and perhaps even necessitates) belief in free will.

To highlight once again the potential danger of belief in free will and moral responsibility, let me return to the aforementioned Just World Belief (JWB) scale.

> The origin of the *just world conception* can be traced back to the original empirical findings of Lerner and Simmons (1966); namely, that persons have a tendency to blame the victim of misfortunes for their own fate. Based on these empirical findings, Lerner (1965) formulated the Just World Hypothesis, whereby individuals have a need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve. In order to measure the degree to which persons are willing to believe that everyone deserves what happens to them, Lerner (1980) developed the JWB scale. Scores on the scale have been found to correlate with the presence of frail religious beliefs (Sorrentino and Hardy 1974), and internal (as opposed to an external) locus of control, and with the likelihood of derogating innocent victims (Rubin and Peplau 1975). In addition, people who score high on JWB are more likely to trust current institutions and authorities, and to blame the poor and praise the rich for their respective fates (Jost et al. 2003a). (Nadelhoffer and Tocchetto, 2013, p. 132)

For sake of time, I will focus the remainder of my comments on just world belief. I must unfortunately leave aside the Right Wing Authoritarian (RWA) scale—but it should be noted that RWA, just like JWB, is associated with a number of troubling tendencies. It is typically defined in the literature in terms of submission to established and legitimate authorities, sanctioned general aggressiveness towards various persons, and adherence to the generally endorsed social conventions. "It is also closely related to a large set of ego-justifying tendencies that provide support for social ideologies such as intolerance of ambiguity, dogmatism, terror management, uncertainty avoidance, and need for cognitive closure" (Nadelhoffer and Tocchetto, 2013, p. 131).

So what's so dangerous about just world belief? Well, belief in a just world (which, again, has been shown to be correlated with belief in free will) is a blame-the-victim approach. It promotes the idea that "people deserve what they get" and "people who meet with misfortune have often brought it on themselves." We can see evidence of just world belief in the unfortunate tendency, both among ordinary folk and the legal system, to blame rape victims for the circumstances. As Waller has elsewhere written:

> When we cannot easily and effectively help innocent victims then our belief in a just world is severely threatened, and the most convenient and common way of preserving that belief is to change the status of the victim from innocent to guilty. The case of rape victims is the most obvious and extensively studies example of this phenomenon. Rape is a brutal, demeaning, and trauma-producing crime; in a just world, no innocent person would be subjected to such a horrific fate. Thus there is a powerful tendency to see rape victims as really not quite so innocent: they dress provocatively; they were "loose" women; they did something to put themselves in that situation (they were careless about where they walked, or they drank too much); they "led him on" or were "asking for it" (thus in some parts of the world, rape victims are subject to death by stoning). Harsh cross-examination of those who claim to be rape victims are notoriously common; those harsh cross-examinations are common because they are often effective; and they are often effective because juries—eager to preserve their belief in a just world—are already inclined to see the victim of this terrible ordeal as other than innocent. (2013, p. 73)

This is just one unfortunate example of the pernicious nature of belief in a just world. Other examples include blaming those in poverty for their own circumstances, viewing criminals as "deserving what they get," labeling those on welfare as "lazy" and "mooches," and blaming educational inequity on the parents and children themselves—since, of course, if the world is just, then people must have brought these circumstances upon themselves. This blaming of victims (in defense of belief in a just world) has been established by numerous studies, including studies showing that the stronger the belief in a just world the greater the likelihood of blaming victims for their unfortunate fates (Wagstaff, 1983; Furnham and Gunter, 1984; Harper and Manasse, 1992; Dalbert and Yamauchi, 1994; Montada, 1998).

We all know, however, (at least in our more rationally self-reflective

moments) that the world is *not* just and the lottery of life is not always fair. We need to admit that luck plays a big role in what we do and the way we are. As Nietzsche long-ago wrote:

> The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far; it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic. But the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for "freedom of the will" in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and, with more than Baron Munchhausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness. (1992, pp. 218-19)

It's my proposal that we do away with the myth of the "rugged individual," the "self-made man," the *causa sui*. If what I have argued here is correct, these conceptions (along with the beliefs in free will and moral responsibility) are intimately connected with a number of other potentially harmful beliefs—e.g., just world belief (JWB) and right wing authoritarianism (RWA). It's time that we leave these antiquated notions behind, lose our moral anger, stop blaming the victim, and turn our attention to the difficult task of addressing the *causes that lead to* criminality, poverty, wealth-inequality, and educational inequity.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, I agree with Waller that belief in moral responsibility is not a protector of rights for the accused, the convicted, or the unfortunate, but is instead used, quite often, to justify treating them in severe and demeaning ways. To help aid Waller's case, I have introduced and discussed some recent findings in moral and political psychology. These findings, I have argued, point to the potential dark side of belief in free will and moral responsibility. While I have not attempted to make the case for skepticism about free will and moral responsibility here—although I have made the case elsewhere (Caruso, 2012)—we should at least conclude that there are good reasons to doubt the putative pragmatic benefits of believing in free will and desert-based moral responsibility.

Notes

[1] Here are just two recent examples of such headlines: "Free Will is an Illusion," *The Chronicle Review* (March 23, 2012); and "Scientists Say Free Will Probably Doesn't Exist…," *Scientific American* (April 6, 2010).

[2] While Saul Smilansky maintains a skepticism about our purportedly commonplace belief in libertarian free will and desert-based moral responsibility, his *Fundamental Dualism* also acknowledges that certain compatibilist insights are true. As Smilansky describes his position: "I agree with hard determinists that the absence of libertarian free will is a grave matter, which ought radically to change our understanding of ourselves, of morality, and of justice. But I also agree with the compatibilists that it makes sense to speak about ideas such as moral responsibility and desert, even without libertarian free will (and without recourse to a reductionist transformation of these notions along consequentialist lines). In a nutshell,...'forms of life' based on the compatibilist distinctions about control are possible and morally required, but are also superficial and deeply problematic in ethical and personal terms" (2000, p. 5; see also 2013).

[3] According to Waller, "Blaming individuals and holding people morally responsible...is not an effective way of making either systems or people better; instead, it is a design for hiding small problems until they grow into larger ones and a design for concealing system shortcomings by blaming problems on individual failure. If we want to promote effective attention to the causes and correction of mistakes and the developments of more effective behavior and more reliable systems, then we must move away from the model of individual blame and instead encourage an open inquiry into mistakes and their causes and into how a system can be devised to prevent such mistakes and improve individual behavior" (2011, p. 291).

[4] For moral responsibility skeptics like myself, this means we are never morally responsible for our actions in the basic desert sense—the sense that would make us *truly deserving* of blame or praise. This is not to say that there are not other conceptions of responsibility that can be reconciled with determinism, chance, or luck. Nor is it to deny that there are good pragmatic reasons to maintain certain systems of punishment and reward. Rather, it is to insist that to hold people *truly* or *ultimately* morally responsible for their actions—i.e., to hold them responsible in the non-consequentialist desert-based sense—would be to hold them responsible for the results of the morally arbitrary, for what is ultimately beyond their control, which is (at least on my view) fundamentally unfair and unjust (Caruso, 2012 and 2013).

[5] For a good criticism of these findings, see Miles (2011) and Summers (2008).

[6] Many of the findings reported in this section were first brought to my attention by Nadelhoffer and Tocchetto (2013).

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