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# Freedom as self-government

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Are free will and moral responsibility possible in a world where choices are the inevitable consequences of past causes governed by physical law? Both libertarian and hard incompatibilist theories suggest not. By contrast, this paper develops an account of freedom as self-government, motivated by the need to address key challenges: the need for a broad understanding of free will beyond the limitation of liability, the charge that it proceeds by equivocation, the problem of the lawful causal origins of choice, the recognition of degrees of freedom and moral responsibility, and the risk of conformist functionalism. The framework of freedom as self-government integrates five key ideas. One, it recognizes a wider realm of autonomy for which freedom is relevant, anchored in non-domination. It holds that it is identified by the cognitive and practical role it has in liberation movements against domination, which aims to protect and secure wide capacities for choice. Two, it does not proceed by equivocation, but rather is grounded in a robust compatibilist tradition of thinking about free will from Plato onwards, present in both common and expert circles today. Three, it acknowledges that relative to all causes governed by physical law, no person has free will and moral responsibility. However, drawing from the model of the physical relativity of motion, it argues that the frame of reference of freedom as self-government is also valid, that relative to it people can be free, and that this frame of reference is the more relevant to adopt. Four, the view presented also suggests that in contrast to libertarian and hard incompatibilist doctrines, it can parsimoniously acknowledge degrees of freedom and proportional responsibility. And five, the present view suggests that the functionalist methodological component of freedom as self-government does not have to lead to conformity with de facto evil, if coupled with moral realism.

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## Introduction

The concept of freedom is central to domains where human decision-making and actions, referred to here as ‘choices,’ play a pivotal role. Free will, which involves the capacity for genuine choice, has also been taken to be a necessary precondition for moral responsibility, given that individuals should not be held responsible for actions entirely beyond their control (Kant 2012/1785; Van Inwagen 1975; 2003; Clarke 2005; O’Connor 2009; Kane 2024; Pereboom 2001; 2024; Vargas 2024). However, scientific inquiry, which seeks to explain phenomena through causal mechanisms, often frames human behaviour in terms of processes incompatible with certain notions of free will. This scientific perspective frames choices as outcomes of lawful causal chains, whether fully deterministic or involving randomness. Such framing challenges traditional notions of freedom, human autonomy, and moral responsibility (e.g., Libet et al. 1982; Hossenfelder 2022; Sapolsky 2023). However, these perspectives from scientists frequently presuppose certain conceptions of free will and selection of concerns, while giving the impression that all possible valuable forms of freedom are eliminated (Nahmias 2010; Bayne 2022).

Philosophical perspectives on free will diverge widely. Libertarians argue that if choices are determined entirely by external natural factors, genuine freedom becomes impossible. To address this, they posit either a metaphysically free agent that operates independently of nature’s deterministic mechanisms or invoke quantum indeterminism as a physical basis for the possibility of free will and morally responsible action (Kant 2012/1785; Kane 2024; Clarke 2005). In contrast, hard incompatibilists accept the apparent consequence of the mechanistic framework, arguing that because choices can be traced back to factors beyond the agent’s control—including events before their birth and the laws of nature—freedom and moral responsibility are not real (Van Inwagen 1975; 2003; Pereboom 2024; Mele 2021). This scientific and philosophical position suggests that free will, its implied personal autonomy, and the moral responsibility it grounds, are among the things that scientific progress eliminates, with important consequences for reactive attitudes, such as praise and blame, as well as criminal law (Pereboom 2024; Greene and Cohen 2004).

Reworking Manuel Vargas’ (2024) revisionist framework, this paper presents a theory of freedom as self-government. By integrating compatibilist insights from philosophers such as Plato and Hobbes, this theory contends that a valuable form of freedom and moral responsibility is not undermined by determinism nor quantum indeterminism. While the proposed view agrees with Vargas (2024) that free will and moral responsibility practices are instrumental for maintaining trust and cooperation within society, it emphasizes the role that social practices about free will and moral responsibility play in the protection of individuals from domination. It distinguishes between free and manipulated agents by examining both internal and external factors that influence choice, and emphasizes the validity and distinctive relevance of the framework of freedom as self-government, as opposed to the framework of determinism and indeterminism. Further, in the framework of freedom as self-government, free will and moral responsibility can parsimoniously be recognized to exist on a spectrum, with freedom and moral responsibility increasing as the difficulty of choice decreases. The theory champions non-domination as a key criterion for determining genuine freedom and responsibility, while cautioning against conformist functionalism by grounding the responsibility system in moral realism, thus ensuring that freedom and moral responsibility remain aligned with robust moral principles.

The paper proceeds by first introducing key elements of Manuel Vargas’s revisionist theory. It then addresses a series of challenges to this view, and of relevance for the debate as a whole.

This serves to elucidate the problem-solving abilities and limitations of revisionism, while suggesting adaptations that lay the groundwork for the theory of freedom as self-government. The challenges emanate from the possible contention that freedom is not just for grounding moral responsibility but for general autonomy, that revisionism proceeds by equivocation, that the causal origins of choice preclude free will, that freedom and moral responsibility must come in degrees, and the idea that functionalism makes the moral responsibility system conformist with whatever system is in place, eliminating its normative moral authority. Each of these challenges and their responses are presented in subsequent sections and, before concluding, the resulting philosophy of freedom as self-government is synthesized, compatible with a broadly scientific framework and its view of our place in nature.

## Revisionism about free will

In a world governed by causes and physical laws, it is possible to conclude that there is absolutely no room for freedom (Kant 2012/1785; Van Inwagen 2003; Clarke 2005; O’Connor 2009; Kane 2024; Pereboom 2024; Vargas 2024; Libet et al. 1982; Hossenfelder 2022; Sapolsky 2023). However, Vargas (2015; 2024) argues that such an eliminative stance is unwarranted. His revisionist approach to free will rests on three key pillars that challenge the need to abandon the idea altogether.

The first pillar acknowledges that concepts can undergo significant revisions over time without being eliminated (Vargas 2024, p 132). For instance, water was once considered a fundamental element, but scientific discoveries revealed it to be a compound of hydrogen and oxygen. Similarly, whales were initially classified as fish but were later recognized as mammals. These conceptual revisions did not result in the negation of the existence of water nor whales. In the same way, Vargas argues, it is an option to revise the commonsense conception of free will—often understood as a libertarian, agent-causal power incompatible with determinism—without discarding it. He highlights how philosophical arguments reveal intuitions about free will’s incompatibility with determinism. Yet, he takes it that this agent-causal conception does not align well with the best scientific understanding of the world. Thus, Vargas advocates revising, rather than eliminating, the concepts of free will and moral responsibility, just as the concepts of water and whales were revised, as the scientific worldview has progressed (Vargas 2024, p 132–7).

The second pillar of Vargas’s revisionism is functionalizing free will. Instead of searching for some “essential conceptual content had by all free will thought and talk,” Vargas focuses on its “cognitive and/or social function” (Vargas 2024, p 137). He argues that our cognitive and social practices about free will play a crucial role in ascribing praise and blame, and particularly in the regulation of anger. In this view, anger serves to make wrongdoing costly, promoting social trust and enabling complex forms of coordination and cooperation essential for both personal and collective long-term aims. Anger, according to Vargas, enables trust and cooperation, like teamwork and the building of public infrastructure, as it motivates agents to avoid behaviours that damage others or undermine social trust. In sum, “agent-directed anger contributes to the stability of coordination and cooperation” (Vargas, 2024, p 143).

Vargas further notes that people have an interest in anger being limited in such a way that takes into account an agent’s motives, knowledge, and circumstances. To manage this, a “control rule” for ascribing blame is adopted, one which recognizes the agent’s ability to guide her behaviour in light of relevant considerations. This control rule allows people to judge degrees of freedom,

responsibility, and the proportionality of responses. Vargas concludes that free will is the situational ability to recognize and respond appropriately to normative considerations, enabling people to make moral responsibility judgments and establish the ecological foundations for trust and cooperation (Vargas, 2024, p 144–5).

The third pillar asserts that although free will is practice-dependent, it remains authoritatively real in a robust sense. For Vargas,

free will is a natural, genuinely robust phenomenon. Yet, it has important limitations. It is a function of how individuals are built, both by nature and enculturation, and it is further constrained by circumstances or opportunities. So, on this picture, free will is a kind of achievement that can be lost, undermined, or only intermittently available, depending on what happens to people and their ecologies of action. I take it that this picture is importantly at odds with some ways of thinking about free will, especially those that treat it as a power that makes its possessors radically independent of the rest of the causal, physical universe (Vargas 2024, p 160).

Ethical norms and free will, Vargas argues, are deeper and more enduring than mere social conventions like fashion or playing games. However, two concerns arise: first, that practice-dependence seems inconsistent with typical realist formulations, which require the object of realism to be independent of human interests and perceptions. And second, grounding free will in social practices like game-playing may seem to trivialize its significance and authoritative force. Vargas addresses these concerns by proposing that while free will and moral responsibility require certain concepts for recognition, their existence does not depend on the particular individuals who use or acknowledge these concepts.

Vargas's revisionism is appealing because it gears thinking about free will within the natural order, offering a philosophical framework in which people can recognize themselves as free within a scientific worldview. It also opens the door for further scientific investigation into the nature of free will, as well as the possibility of grounding personal and collective action to secure it. This naturalistic approach, unlike Kant's (1998/1781) example of the dove, which falsely supposed that it could fly better in airless space, does not suppose that free will would be exercised better in a world without lawful causation. However, this theory is not without challenges. In the next sections, the paper formulates some of them, which in turn motivate a re-working of these basic theoretical pillars. Unlike previous formulations, Vargas's 2024 formulation does not explicitly invoke the concept of self-government. The present paper re-introduces the idea of freedom as self-government to offer additional conceptual clarity and direction for the theory, while at the same time draw emphasis away from the revisionist aspect of the theory for reasons that will become apparent.

### The challenge from general autonomy

The idea of free will not only functions to attribute and regulate reactive attitudes, such as anger, but also serves to delineate the extent to which individuals, states, and corporations can interfere with a person's capacity to make choices. In the neo-Roman tradition, for instance, freedom identifies fields of autonomous action, allowing individuals to manage their own affairs (Van Gelderen 2022). It also identifies spheres of autonomy related to an agent's control over their own bodies and their ways of thinking and feeling, the ability to change habits, overcome addictions, have discipline, and steer toward the kind of life people want to live (Nahmias 2010). This autonomy spans both

crucial aspects of life—such as freedom from oppression—and seemingly trivial choices, like selecting an ice cream flavour. In the more significant spheres, demands for freedom often arise from oppressed groups suffering various forms of domination. Historical struggles for liberation, including movements against slavery, racism, sexual oppression, classism, apartheid, colonialism, and imperialism, illustrate this pursuit of freedom and have framed their objectives in those terms (Fanon 1963; Freire 1998; Mandela 1994; Davis 2012; 2016; Assange 2021). The language of freedom from domination is not only a hallmark of these movements but also provides conceptual grounds for oppressed individuals and peoples to understand their situations and work toward improving their conditions (Haugaard 2017).

The discourse around free will and moral responsibility aligns with the broader objective of non-domination, essential for leading a flourishing life under just conditions. Clear examples of domination—murder, slavery, torture, aggression, empire, and rape—are easy to recognize because of their frequency and impact. However, there are more subtle forms of domination, particularly ideological, that are less visible but equally impactful. Power groups often exploit voluntary cooperation from the population through covert, deep, and systematic psychological coercion, facilitated by institutions such as churches, media, schools, universities, and political-economic ideologies, also often conducive to the more overt forms of domination. Major theorists like Gramsci (1971), Bourdieu (1984), and Herman and Chomsky (2002) have analysed some of these forms of domination as hegemony, symbolic violence, and the manufacturing of consent, respectively. Such domination can be imposed by specific agents or through impersonal social structures (Kristjansson 1992; Shnayderman 2013; Haugaard and Pettit, 2017).

Theories of non-domination are instrumental in developing ethical frameworks that support freedom, autonomy, and moral responsibility. Two prominent theorists of non-domination, Pettit (1996; 2002; 2014) and Shapiro (2012; 2016), propose different approaches but share the goal of eliminating arbitrary powers that undermine the basic interests necessary for individuals to make free choices. Shapiro (2012; 2016) identifies four key interests that a system based on non-domination protects:

1. **Physical Security:** The need for personal safety and protection from violence or harm.
2. **Material Well-Being:** Access to essential resources like food, shelter, healthcare, and economic goods necessary for survival and thriving.
3. **Political and Legal Protections:** Safeguards against arbitrary power from the state, corporations, or individuals.
4. **Autonomy and Self-Determination:** Freedom from coercion or manipulation, ensuring that individuals can make decisions that align with their goals and values.

The violation of these basic interests subjects people to domination, a particular form of “unfreedom” (Shapiro 2012; 2016; Correa 2014). The challenge from general autonomy highlights the need for a more comprehensive systematization of the functional basis of freedom, the autonomy it requires, and the corresponding system of moral responsibility, beyond the management of anger and limitation of liability. Non-domination, aligned with liberation movements, offers a promising way for understanding the ways in which freedom acquires meaning and value personally and in society, and consequently provides information about how it can be undermined or promoted.

### The problem of equivocation

A central critique of the view that free will is compatible with determinism is the claim that it “changes the subject” (Harris 2012).

Physicist Sabine Hossenfelder (2022, p 129) seems to suggest that compatibilists may label something “freedom and moral responsibility,” but if the future is fixed except for uncontrollable quantum events, then they are merely redefining freedom without addressing the core concerns of the issue of free will. Harris (2012), Hossenfelder (2022), and Sapolski (2023) suppose that determinism rules out the possibility of any kind of freedom in the relevant discussion.

An underlying question on this matter is whether freedom and moral responsibility require the power to do otherwise—the ability to choose or act differently given the entire history of the universe and its laws. The Principle of Alternative Possibilities posits that an agent A can choose or do otherwise at time *t* only if, given the full history of conditions up to *t*, A could have made a different choice (O'Connor and Franklin 2022); Thyssen and Wenmackers, (2021). In this view, freedom implies independence from all antecedent conditions, which seems impossible in a deterministic world. To define freedom in any other way, critics argue, is to change the subject, and Vargas's revisionary approach may be seen as simply redefining “free will” rather than addressing the original question.

However, why should the incompatibilist idea of freedom hold a monopoly on what counts, “by definition,” as genuine free will and moral responsibility? Three sources can inform the bounds of the debate, before which it can be declared that a participant has changed the subject: the general population, current professional philosophers, and historical lineage. If a significant portion—and, *a fortiori*, a majority—of participants from these sources conceive of free will as compatible with determinism, then that is strong evidence that compatibilism is not a change of subject, even if it in no way proves that compatibilism is correct. Fortunately, this is evidence that is available for inspection.

With respect to the view of the general population, one study which considered participants from across the globe (China, Colombia, India, and the US) suggests that while most people believe that human action is the nomological exception to determinism (a view hard incompatibilism rejects), most (61%) of those who do not posit this exception to the laws of nature, were compatibilists (Sarkissian et al. 2010). Further, with respect to the views of professional philosophers, according to the most comprehensive survey of professional philosophers in the English-speaking world, most philosophers (59.2%) are or lean toward compatibilism about free will (Bourget and Chalmers 2023).

Lastly, with respect to historical lineage, varied conceptions of free will have been proposed for millennia, many of which are compatible with determinism. Compatibilist thinking has historically come in two primary forms: internalist and externalist. On the internalist side, which emphasizes psychological conditions, Plato (1997) theorized a free person as one whose soul is in harmony and governs himself through reason rather than being ruled by passions or pleasures (Hecht 2014). In contrast to such a person, in *The Republic*, Socrates describes a tyrant whose reason is impotent as “enslaved” and “not free” (Plato 1997, 577d–e). Hecht (2014) finds Plato's views to be in significant agreement with Augustine.

In terms of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, Plato's idea of freedom suggests that freedom is not independence from all causes, but rather from domination by passions and pleasures. This view highlights that a person enslaved by pleasure, like the famous neuroscientific case of Phineas Gage (Harlow 1868), who after a traumatic brain injury lost his capacity for rational self-regulation, lacks freedom. Neuroscientific evidence shows that areas of the brain, such as the prefrontal cortex, are crucial for deliberation, planning, and self-control. When these areas are impaired, as in Gage's case, freedom diminishes. Recent naturalist compatibilists, like Bunge (2010), have pointed to the prefrontal cortex as the material locus of freedom. A sleepwalker, for

instance, whose dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is inactive during sleepwalking (Arnulf 2018), does not act freely because their capacity for deliberation and self-control is “turned off”.

Dennett (2017) also adopts a naturalist compatibilist view, arguing that freedom lies not in being uncaused but in the ability to respond to reasons and deliberate without being overwhelmed by irrational forces, such as coercion and lack of access to reliable information. In this framework, freedom involves choosing among alternatives based on rational deliberation, undetermined by passions or other internal constraints or impulses. This explains why addicts or individuals with phobias act unfreely—they are dominated by internal compulsions that undermine self-governance.

On the externalist side, Hobbes analysed freedom as “the absence of all the impediments to action that are not contained in the nature and intrinsic quality of the agent” (Hobbes 1999/1654, p 38). For Hobbes, an agent is free when she can act without being constrained by external forces, such as coercion, falling down a building, or being held in a straightjacket. If this is applied to the ability to do otherwise, freedom means being able to act differently from how one would under external compulsion. Someone who is enslaved or forcibly restrained lacks freedom because external conditions dictate their motions. This perspective is consistent with theories of domination, where circumstances deprive individuals of autonomy (Shapiro 2012; 2016).

In both internalist and externalist frameworks, freedom does not require independence from all causes. Instead, it requires the absence of certain conditions—including domination by passions or external forces—and the capacity for reasoned deliberation and consequent action. Compatibilists thus reject the notion that free will necessitates being a cause without a cause. Rather, they argue that free will entails the ability to choose and act deliberately, without being overwhelmed by internal compulsions or external conditions. This view of freedom has roots in ancient philosophy and continues to be developed in modern thought. It also finds resonance in common thinking about free will and moral responsibility (Nadelhoffer and Monroe 2023).

Vargas's reflections are useful in directing attention to the fact that there are more legitimate possibilities for thinking about free will than incompatibilism would suggest. In the present theory of freedom as self-government, however, the emphasis is not on the possibility of revision, but on the conceptual and dialectical resources already entrenched in the meaning of free will, as seen in thinking about it since ancient Greece to the present. To claim that compatibilists are changing the subject would overlook the history and contemporary theoretical landscape of compatibilist conceptions of freedom, which address a relevant set of concerns. Compatibilists are not redefining free will arbitrarily; they are drawing on a well-established tradition whose main concern is not general determinism, but certain selections of causal conditions that prevent or enable a species of valuable freedom. The essence of compatibilist thought is to recognize that agents are a part of the causal order, and that they can exercise a relevant form of self-government and moral responsibility within it. Far from changing the subject, compatibilists are engaging with a deep, historically grounded semantic tradition about what it means to be free. Harris may disagree with compatibilism, which is legitimate, but evidence suggests that his claim that compatibilists change the subject lacks awareness of the logic of inquiry on free will and falsely asserts a semantic monopoly his position does not have.

### The problem of the causal origins of free will

While Manuel Vargas favours a light metaphysical analysis of free will and moral responsibility, some might find this insufficient.



Functionalization, while useful as an initial approximation, may not fully address traditional concerns surrounding free will and moral responsibility. The image of Laplace's demon, who famously predicts all future events, based on his precise knowledge of past physical facts and the laws of nature, does not seem to admit of freedom. Building on this, Van Inwagen (1975; 2003) formulated the Consequence Argument, which claims that if determinism is true, actions are the inevitable effects of physical laws and past events. Since people cannot alter the past nor the laws of physics, people cannot have freely chosen actions. Appeals to miracles or quantum randomness offer little comfort, as even quantum events introduce randomness rather than control (Cf. Lewis 1981; Pereboom 2024).

Gebhardt (2020) argues that even if choice operates at a higher level, as List (2014) suggests, determinism at lower levels would still imply determinism at higher levels and the lack of alternative possibilities. Further, if quantum randomness is true, agents still act according to the probabilistic laws governing these events, which means that choices are still not under their control, but rather are the consequence of deterministic causes in the distant past plus stochastic coin-flips. This leads to hard incompatibilism—the idea that people do not possess the control necessary for freedom and moral responsibility.

However, the Consequence Argument can also be applied to genuine consent: if all states of the universe are determined by past conditions, and genuine consent requires the capacity to choose freely among alternatives, then true consent is impossible. By these lights, there is no real consent when the person could not have chosen a metaphysically open possibility to deny consent. But this would imply that no decision, contract, or relationship could be consensual. Consent would thus be indistinguishable from real cases of coercion or manipulation. However, this conclusion seems highly implausible. Consent exists in many real-world situations by selectively focusing on certain causes and conditions that distinguish genuine consent from coercion, manipulation, and fraud. To deny the difference takes down important defences against domination.

A similar line of reasoning applies to the Manipulation Argument (Mele 2021; Pereboom 2024). Consider the thought experiment involving Sally and Chuck: scientists manipulate Sally's brain to replace her virtuous values with those of a criminal, while Chuck, the criminal, is reprogrammed with Sally's values. The next day, Sally commits murder consistent with her new values, while Chuck engages in philanthropy. Intuitively, neither Sally nor Chuck are morally responsible for their respective actions. Hard incompatibilists argue that people are all like Sally and Chuck, as naturally occurring factors such as genetics, environment, and brain structure shape actions in ways beyond people's control, similar to the possible intervention of scientists (Mele 2021; Pereboom 2024).

To address such cases, a system of rules for assigning moral responsibility must take into account not just the internal psychological factors involved in decision-making, but also how these states were caused (Mele 2021; Nadelhoffer and Monroe 2023). As technological advances in brain manipulation and reproductive interventions become more available, philosophical explorations of these issues grow increasingly relevant.

The framework of freedom as self-government offers a way for thinking about such cases and their treatment that does not begin with the self-defeating idea that fundamentally all choice is unfree anyway, prevents useful distinctions, and undermines emancipatory action. By contrast, the self-government model allows the consideration of both internal and external conditions when evaluating free will and moral responsibility. Just as specific internal and external conditions are required for genuine consent, the same selective approach to free choice is applied. Under the

self-government framework, cases of near-term manipulation are ruled out because they violate basic interests in autonomy and self-determination.

Although a comprehensive account of moral responsibility that addresses all hard cases is a pending task for the theory of freedom as self-government, existing legal and personal norms already provide useful inputs for identifying freedom and responsibility. These include mental health, intelligence, cognitive functioning, and freedom from coercion or domination by external forces, whether they are of state, private, or personal actors. Within this framework, manipulated agents like Sally and Chuck are not considered free or morally responsible because their autonomy and basic interests—such as physical security, legal protections, and self-determination—have been violated.

Relative to all preceding causes governed by physical law, it might well be true, as the Consequence Argument suggests, that no one is free. However, this does not imply that in all frames of reference all people are unfree, nor that the frame of reference encompassing all causal factors is the most appropriate. A useful analogy can be drawn from Galilean and Einsteinian ideas of relative motion. In modern physics, the speed of objects is always relative to the chosen frame of reference. There is no ontologically privileged or universal stationary frame against which all motion is measured (Einstein 1916: p. 69; Bunge 2010; Gray 2022).

Take the case of an agent, Serena, a world-champion sprinter and astronaut. If one adopts Serena as the frame of reference, she is motionless, regardless of how fast she runs or flies. Relative to her own reference frame, she cannot move; she is, by definition, stationary. According to modern physics, she is “unfree” to move relative to herself because motion requires an external frame of reference. However, this does not imply that Serena cannot move at all. Relative to the Earth, for instance, she clearly moves—indeed, by hypothesis, she runs faster than everyone else and could fly off to Mars. From the Earth's frame of reference, she is free to run and travel into space.

While in modern physics no frame of reference is ontologically superior, one might ask which is more relevant for determining whether Serena moves, how fast she runs, or whether she travels through space. Is it the frame of reference where she is immobile (her own), or the Earth's frame, where she is mobile? In most contexts, the Earth's frame is the more relevant one for answering these questions.

The same reasoning applies to the question of Serena's freedom. Relative to the totality of the causes of her choices—assuming determinism—she may be unable to choose otherwise, implying she is not free. But this is not the only frame of reference, nor necessarily the most appropriate one. Consider Serena in contrast to Phineas Gage, who, after his accident, lost self-control, reason, peace, and health. Serena, on the other hand, is thoughtful about her decisions, is not enslaved, is well-nourished, has shelter, material resources, love, and a fulfilling, healthy life. In terms of the causal determinants of her choices, she may be seen as unfree, but in terms of self-government, she possesses significant freedom—freedom she would lack if her basic needs were compromised or if she suffered an incapacitating accident like Gage.

Just as Serena's motion is better understood through the Earth's frame of reference rather than her own, her freedom is more plausibly framed in terms of self-government, rather than the deterministic framework that renders her choices unfree. Both frames are valid, but the present argument suggests that in most cases, the reference frame that renders her mobile in the first instance and free in the second is the more relevant one.

### The issue of degrees of freedom and responsibility

Various approaches have been proposed to explain the connection between freedom and moral responsibility (Rossi and

Warfield, 2016). Some theorists argue that freedom is not a prerequisite for moral responsibility (Audi 1974; Fischer 2024), while others maintain that an agent can only be morally responsible for actions performed freely (Kant 2012/1785; Van Inwagen 2003; Clarke 2005; O'Connor 2009; Kane 2024; Pereboom 2024; Vargas 2024). The guiding idea in the latter view is that agents are not responsible for events beyond their control—such as the weather—because they lack the freedom to change them. Conversely, an agent may be morally responsible for actions within their control, though the degree of responsibility may vary based on the circumstances. For example, addicts are typically considered less free than non-addicts, and the tortured or impoverished are less free than those not under such conditions. Like motion, freedom would come in degrees within the frame of reference of freedom as self-government. A robust theory of free will and moral responsibility should account for degrees of freedom relative to the difficulty or ease of making choices and the moral significance of those choices when they are morally significant.

A useful idea for thinking about degrees of freedom is Beebe's (2016) concept of wide capacities, which considers both an agent's internal capacity (such as the ability to ride a bike) and the external opportunity (such as the availability of a bike). The distance between an agent and the realization of wide capacities determines how difficult it is to perform a particular action. At one extreme, the action may be easy, and it may be unqualifying said that the agent is free to choose X. At the other extreme, it may be impossible, because of how far the agent is from the required internal and external conditions, and it may be said without qualification that the agent could not do Y. Many choices lie in between the extremes and are those about which an agent has varying degrees of freedom.

The relationship between freedom and moral responsibility may be scaled: the freer the agent is to perform a morally significant action, the more morally responsible they are for that action. Conversely, the less free an agent is, *ceteris paribus* the less morally responsible they may be. Both legal and everyday practices reflect that freedom and responsibility often come in degrees, contingent upon how difficult it is to do the right thing and avoid wrongdoing (Kant 2012/1785; Korsgaard 1996; Edwards 2012; Coates and Swenson 2013; Blöser 2015).

Libertarians and hard incompatibilists struggle to account for these degrees of freedom and responsibility, as their frameworks tend to operate in binary terms: all agents are always either fully free or all are not free at all; everyone is fully responsible or not responsible at all. In these views, there is in fact no difference in the freedom of one who is enslaved and one who is not, and the movement for emancipation is quite illusory. From the position of freedom as self-government, this implication signals a problem for these views, for they fail to recognize the vitally significant difference in freedom and moral responsibility between states of being enslaved, tortured, poor, addicted, injured, and manipulated, and not.

The more freedom and control an agent has the more responsible they are for doing the right thing, and the more blameworthy they are if they fail. This proposition aligns with the intuitive idea that positions of freedom and power confer responsibility to those that have it (Chomsky 1967; 2002). Conversely, the less control an agent has, the less morally responsible they are. This reasoning also aligns with the ethical principle that "ought implies can," which suggests that one can only be responsible for doing what one can do and not for what one cannot do. Correspondingly, the degree of responsibility depends proportionately on the degree of freedom. The control rule, which suggests that moral responsibility is proportional to the degree of control an agent has over her ability to do right, supports this view.

A pending task for the theory of freedom as self-government is to fully map out the terrain in which the relationship between degrees of freedom and degrees of moral responsibility takes place. All else being equal, while people may be more morally responsible for good choices the easier they are, they also deserve less merit than for harder ones. Easy choices reflect a greater degree of control, which increases the agent's moral responsibility to choose rightly. However, difficult moral actions—though harder to perform—seem to confer a higher merit. Agents who perform extraordinarily good actions at the limit of their capacities may be fully deserving of moral merit, which shows that being morally responsible and deserving moral merit are distinct (King 1963). Otherwise, agents who perform extraordinary moral feats at the limit of their power, would count as less morally deserving.

Similarly, doing evil things when it would have been easy not to do them deserves more blame, while agents facing significant pressures to do wrong may be at least partially excused in some circumstances. Being morally responsible and deserving of moral merit are consequently different. There is a distinction between moral responsibility and basic moral merit, which would seem to be a fundamental alternative ground for praiseworthiness and blameworthiness (Cf. Pereboom 2024).

This fairness in the application of moral responsibility—reflecting how difficult or easy it is for an agent to do good or avoid wrongdoing—disappears when the debate is framed solely in the general terms of absolute freedom and absolute moral responsibility, in the context of alternative possibilities in a deterministic or indeterministic world. The theory of freedom as self-government, by contrast, offers a parsimonious way to understand degrees of freedom and responsibility, rooted in how much control agents exercise over their choices with respect to a relevant set of circumstances, while recognizing the various conditions under which freedom may be strengthened or weakened. It provides an alternative way to think about, and better explain, the real-world phenomena of freedom, power, moral responsibility and fundamental moral desert.

### The problem of conformist functionalism

Had the Nazis won World War II, figures like Adolf Eichmann might have been celebrated as everyday heroes. Eichmann, a banal and seemingly ordinary man, as Arendt (1963) described him, might have received medals for what would have been considered "exceptional contributions" in the Nazi regime. The reader may identify real publicly rewarded and praised examples of mass murderers and criminal organizations in today's world, that operate under the banner of "freedom" (Losurdo 2005; Sachs 2020; Chomsky and Robinson 2024). These examples demonstrate how discourse about freedom and social systems of moral responsibility can go profoundly wrong. A pressing question arises: can the functionalist methodology, which grounds free will and moral responsibility in societal cognitive and practical realities, escape conformity to evil social structures? At first glance, it may appear that it cannot, as it proceeds by reference to realized norms. If societal norms change, then the standards for free will and moral responsibility shift as well—someone considered morally responsible for evil by one set of standards might be seen as morally responsible for good by another.

This challenge reflects two broader problems faced by naturalistic philosophies. First, in realist metaphysics, naturalism confronts the issue of mind-independence: if best scientific theories show that mind-immanent beings arose recently in the universe, with specific cognitive, perceptual, and emotional faculties, can naturalism still assert that nature is mind-independent? The naturalistic response is to adjust realism to

acknowledge the existence of minds, which in turn make theories about them true or false (Restrepo Echavarría 2023; 2024). Under this updated metaphysical realism, it becomes possible to assert realism about free will and moral responsibility by recognizing mental facts necessary for their existence. These include elements like consent, knowledge, decision-making, purpose, suffering, utility, and happiness—facts used by ethical theories to ground their normative force.

However, this is not enough to eliminate the concern about blind conformity to authority in any system of free will and moral responsibility, regardless of how immoral the system may be. For the functionalist approach to avoid justifying evil systems, it must rely on moral realism as well as realism about the social conditions for moral responsibility. Certain morally neutral conventions, like driving on the right or left side of the road in different countries, are fine because they aim to facilitate freedom of movement without significant harm. In contrast, the Eichmann case highlights systems in which moral responsibility is so deeply flawed that they justify egregious harms.

Vargas (2015; 2024) suggests that the fundamental conditions for moral responsibility must be justified by their promotion of cooperation, coordination, and moral improvement. These benefits bring about social goods such as peace, stability, and personal flourishing. However, while the justification of moral responsibility systems is forward-looking, their application is often backward-looking—focused on whether norms have been broken, without immediate reference to the broader justification for those norms.

This framework provides a critical resource for resisting over-conformity to authority. While figures like Eichmann may be erroneously lauded in certain systems of moral responsibility, these systems must be justified by reference to universal moral goods. When a particular system profoundly violates the very goods it is supposed to secure—such as by promoting war, aggression, or mass murder—it ceases to be a legitimate system of moral responsibility. Nazi Germany and other regimes that promote widespread harm directly oppose the core moral goods that justify any system of moral responsibility. Ultimately, the diverse systems of moral responsibility observed across history and geographical locations, can themselves be grounded and evaluated in terms of universal ethical standards consistent with moral realism (Sayre-McCord 2023). It is by reference to those standards that the ethics of different implementations of systems of moral responsibility can be evaluated and the risk of conformist functionalism can be mitigated.

By grounding functionalism in moral realism, a safeguard against possible moral systems that instead embody systems of domination is introduced. A system of moral responsibility that produces widespread violations of universal goods—such as physical security, material well-being, political and legal protections, autonomy, and self-determination—loses its claim to legitimacy. Thus, functionalism can avoid the problem of uncritical conformity by appealing to the universal moral goods that all moral responsibility systems must aim to secure.

### Freedom as self-government: a synthesis

The present theory of freedom as self-government is prompted by Manuel Vargas' revisionist approach to free will and moral responsibility. A first key idea suggests that freedom is pivotal not only for grounding moral responsibility, but also pertains to autonomy in spheres of choice that are central to an agent's legitimate personal affairs. Freedom as self-government, emphasized in liberation movements, requires abolishing forces of domination that undermine basic physical security, material well-being, political and legal protections, autonomy, and self-determination.

A second idea is that some aspects that appear as essential to free will—such as its incompatibility with determinism—can be denied without losing relevance to the subject matter. While the hard incompatibilist tradition posits that free will cannot coexist with determinism nor probabilistic quantum mechanical laws, there is a well-established tradition of compatibilist thinking. This compatibilism is exemplified by philosophers from Plato to Hobbes, whose ideas remain alive and relevant today. Plato's internalist compatibilism focuses on the capacity of free agents to act rationally, without being dominated by the pursuit of passions and pleasures. In contrast, Hobbes provides an externalist view, emphasizing freedom as the ability to act without external compulsion. Thus, freedom as self-government, which recognizes internal and external conditions, is neither more nor less revisionist than other forms of compatibilism, as it draws on an entrenched philosophical lineage. However, it is also not more revisionist than incompatibilism, as it does not deny the common idea that we can be free in a world of lawful causal mechanisms. *A fortiori*, the claim that compatibilism changes the subject is inconsistent with the historical and contemporary dialectical evidence.

Third, a central challenge to free will is the problem of causal origins, which questions whether individuals can be free and morally responsible for actions that are determined by factors beyond their control, like physical laws or past events. The Consequence Argument claims that if determinism is true, people's actions are predetermined, leaving no space for genuine choice. Furthermore, the randomness introduced by quantum mechanics does not solve the issue, as randomness does not confer the necessary control. However, if this reasoning were applied consistently, genuine consent—a cornerstone of interpersonal relations and contracts—would have to be eliminated also, as all decisions would be subject to forces beyond agents' control. The framework of freedom as self-government addresses this by distinguishing between free and manipulated agents based on both internal and external conditions. It asserts that freedom, moral responsibility and consent depend on an agent's ability to choose under specific conditions. The present theory does not deny that there is an identifiable frame of reference in which all the causes and laws that apply to a choice render it unfree, but argues that like the case of physical motion, this is not the only nor the most relevant frame of reference. Instead, it suggests the validity and relevance of the frame of reference of self-government, which by contrast recognizes genuine differences in consensual and non-consensual relations, valid contracts, and other relevant human phenomena, where freedom of choice is important.

A fourth key aspect of this theory is that moral responsibility depends on an agent's ability to choose freely, which is not always binary but can exist in degrees. Admittedly, at the extremes, where choices are quite easy or impossibly hard, agents can be said to be unqualifiedly free or unfree with respect to those choices. Agents are not free nor morally responsible for events outside their wide capacities, such as changing the weather, but are responsible for actions within their sphere of influence. Furthermore, the degree of freedom an agent has grounds their degree of moral responsibility. For instance, a person under slavery, with severe trauma, or a person under duress has less freedom and is therefore less responsible for their choices compared to someone not under such conditions. In contrast to libertarianism and hard incompatibilism, which treat freedom and moral responsibility as always either fully present or absent, this theory recognizes the difference in freedom in such cases and allows for the varying degrees to which a person may or may not be free. Following Kant, common sense, and legal practice, the theory posits that easier, freer choices entail greater moral responsibility, while harder choices—where freedom is more



limited—less so, even if they confer greater moral merit when the right action is taken. Thus, moral responsibility is proportional to the degree of control an agent has over her choices, which involves both internal and external factors. Such distinctions about real world cases, unlike for libertarianism and hard incompatibilism, are parsimoniously understood within the framework of freedom as self-government.

Finally, the theory confronts the problem of conformist functionalism, which is raised by immoral systems of moral responsibility. If moral responsibility is grounded purely in *de facto* societal norms, there is a risk that these systems will justify morally reprehensible behaviour. To avoid this, an idea the framework must incorporate is moral realism, which recognizes universal moral goods that moral responsibility systems must aim to secure. When a system generally violates these goods, it loses its legitimacy as a moral responsibility system. By grounding functionalism in moral realism, the theory of freedom as self-government avoids conformity to evil systems, and instead promotes systems that foster cooperation, coordination, and moral improvement. The principle of non-domination closely aligns systems of moral responsibility with fundamental ethical standards that underpin all morally significant practices.

In sum, freedom as self-government suggests an adapted approach to free will and moral responsibility, integrating the need for individual autonomy with just societal norms, while safeguarding against the risk of moral systems that justify evil. It makes the relevant distinctions incompatibilist alternatives do not make and provides guidance for removing impediments to freedom, realizing enabling conditions, and improving moral practice.

## Conclusion

The theory of freedom as self-government reunites metaphysical considerations from the philosophy of mind and metaphysics with those of political philosophy and ethics. It seeks to bridge the divide between metaphysical and political freedom, which characterizes much of the current debate. This reintegration offers a vision of freedom that does not require stepping outside the natural order of cause and effect, while recognizing that the key elements of freedom and moral responsibility are properties of cognitive agents embedded within a social and ethical framework.

Freedom as self-government offers conceptual tools to understand and promote freedom, responsibility, and meaningful living in a world where determinism or quantum indeterminism might hold true. It does not demand that freedom be uncased but instead acknowledges that freedom, like other socio-cognitive conditions such as intelligence, reasons, motivations, capabilities, opportunities, and consent, can exist even within a deterministic or probabilistic universe. The theory characterizes freedom as the ability of self-governing agents to make choices informed by internal capacities and external opportunities, free from domination. In this framework, self-governing agents have moral responsibility based on the degree of control they have over their actions, with an overarching ethical objective: the universal emancipation of people from domination.

## Data availability

No data was generated nor analysed for this study.

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## Author contributions

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