

## *The Narrative of Moral Responsibility*

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### **Abstract:**

The goal of this paper is to suggest that theoretical thinking with respect to metaphysical determinations or indeterminations is not the appropriate realm for attributing moral responsibility. On the contrary, judgments that attribute moral responsibility (S is responsible for...) depend on the possibility that a rational narrative be built. Agents are capable of forging their future actions, as well as of reflecting upon past actions. With this it will also be shown how we assume control of our behavior because we ignore whether actions are the result of causality or chance. It is claimed that contexts determine the degree of causal demand in narratives that attribute moral responsibility. In order to construct this type of narrative one must focus on a specific link in the causal chain of explanations. If context alone is not demanding enough so as to require that theoretical reflections strive for the ultimate foundation of our actions, then the agent may be considered responsible for his behavior.

**Keywords:** moral responsibility, compatibilism, causal determinism, indeterminism, contextualism,

## 1. Introduction

At first sight, the problem of moral responsibility is based on two conditions:

- (a) Actions must be a product of the intentionality of the agent
- (b) It has to be known which action caused which consequences

Indeed, from a theoretical point of view it can be argued that for a person to be responsible for an action, said person has to have had some control over the consequence of the action. At the same time it is possible to establish which action caused which event. Both conditions find their axis in the problem of determinism, which consists in whether there is moral responsibility even when human actions are not free –that is to say, the agents not being able to choose between different options for their behavior. Compatibilist theories claim that moral responsibility is possible even though the determinism is true<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, incompatibilist theories claim that moral responsibility is not compatible with determinism<sup>2</sup>.

There are numerous arguments for and against both positions. Unfortunately, there is no room in this paper to even begin to recapitulate the extended and extremely convoluted discussion between compatibilism and incompatibilism. Fortunately, what matters for present purposes are not the details but rather the general character of the discussion: in what contexts can a cause be decisive when attempting to attribute moral responsibility? It is this that will be considered in the following sections.

This paper will argue that moral responsibility is constituted through a narrative of the human actions and not by means of a metaphysic of alternate possibilities. Furthermore, this paper will show that said narratives have some moral value given that these narratives could exclude the problem of our actions being metaphysically determined. Thus, the neo-Kantian

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Frankfurt (1971); Wallace (1994) or Fischer (2006)

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Inwagen (1983), Kane (1996), or Peremboon (2001)

thesis which states that there is a difference between regarding people from a theoretical perspective than from a practical one can be accepted. In a practical context agents can attribute moral responsibility because they assume that the metaphysical causes do not have a direct and significant impact on our way of being. However, the metaphysical causes are relevant when we examine philosophically demanding contexts on human behavior.

It can be suspected that if a person knew with certainty that our actions are causally determined, the relationship with the moral values would be completely different as to how we nowadays conceive it. However, this suspicion implies a respect for a hierarchy: that the moral sphere depends on the metaphysical sphere in such way that a change in the paradigm of one of them involves a change in the paradigm of the other. Anyhow, it is not necessary to delve further in metaphysical assumptions –especially if it is accepted that context decides how far back we ought to look for causes of an agent’s behavior<sup>3</sup>.

Waller (2011) has recently claimed that the present scientific understanding of human behavior does not leave space for moral responsibility, and that its abolition is sociologically and psychologically desirable and possible<sup>4</sup>. However, said opinion will be discredited indirectly throughout this paper. On one hand, it shall be argued that compatibilism is possible depending on a context of moral attribution. If the context is not demanding enough in such a way that the theoretical reflection goes in search for the final foundation of our actions, then the agent can be responsible for his acts. Thus, the attribution of moral responsibility will depend on rational explanations that refer to actions as being intentional. On the other hand, it shall be explained that the narrative aspect of judgments on moral responsibility helps to understand how it is possible that said responsibility be compatible with naturalism without considering, as Waller claims, that it is based on some miraculous power.

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr., Hawthorne (2001), to whom the same action can be both free and un-free (depending on the attributor’s context)

<sup>4</sup> See also: Waller (1990)

It will be not proposed that moral responsibility depends on whether there is an absence of control, but rather that a person is able to rationally create a narration from which the agent could be capable of both forging future actions and reflecting on past actions.

## 2. Compatibilism and Incompatibilism

There exists an ancient skeptic dilemma that claims that subjects cannot be responsible for their actions. The dilemma is the following:

1. If our acts are causally determined, then we are not responsible for them.
2. If our acts are not causally determined, then we are not responsible for them.
3. In consequence, we are not responsible for our acts.

Since the conclusion seems unacceptable, this reasoning has been addressed by accepting the first premise and disambiguating the second premise in such a way that the idea of "cause" does not imply an absolute loss of the freedom to act (e.g. Chisholm, 1966). According to Inwagen (1983), moral responsibility requires that our actions be, at some point, undetermined. Therefore, actions must be voluntary for a person to be responsible for them. Were determinism true in two possible worlds ( $M$  and  $M'$ ) in which the same laws of nature are true, then  $M$  would be exactly equivalent to  $M'$  in any given  $t$  moment, and in *any* future moment regarding  $t$ . For the determinist, acts are conditioned counterfactually, meaning that the laws and the early history of the world are enough to determine the later history<sup>5</sup>. Given that a person is not responsible for what happens before birth, a person will not be responsible for what will happen in the future. Since there is an unavoidable future in regards to moral responsibility there is neither the best nor the worst of the possible worlds.

However, the first premise implies that the agents could choose between alternative acts and that, facing equal acts, those agents can be projected successfully by different

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<sup>5</sup> As states by Lewis (1983): for every historical fact  $F$  and any starting point in the world, there is a true proposition  $H$  about the history of  $S$ , and a true proposition about the laws of nature  $L$ , in such way that  $H$  and  $L$  strictly imply, together,  $F$ .

possible worlds. This position is represented by the following principle: an agent is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done it in any other way; *S* is responsible for an act *A* if he had the option of not doing *A*. In the same way, a person is responsible for not doing a determined act only if he could have done it, since the conditions of moral responsibility are connected to both acts and omissions<sup>6</sup>.

It is not a proposition shared by the philosophers that moral responsibility excludes determinism, especially in cases of metaphysical constraint. There exists, then, another strategy to address the aforementioned dilemma, which consists of directly denying the first premise. Consider the cases of the *Frankfurt Style*. A mysterious scientist secretly implants a chip in John's brain so as to supervise and control his actions. Among the things the scientist supervises, there is the taste for the products of a certain brand (*X*). So, if John decides to purchase an item of any other brand (*Y*), the scientist is prepared to intervene by means of sophisticated equipment that he has designed to alter the conduct. On the contrary, if John decides to purchase the items of *X*, then the scientist does not intervene and the equipment keeps on supervising without affecting John's decisions. Now, assume that John decides on his own (as he would do without the intervention of the scientist), to buy an item of the brand *X*. John would be, then, morally responsible for that choice, even if he could not have chosen anything else<sup>7</sup>.

Similar cases add up to the compatibilist position<sup>8</sup>. Compatibilists claim that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism, insisting that neither the advance of natural science nor metaphysical perspectives represent a problem for moral responsibility. Starting

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<sup>6</sup> In this case, indeterminism is taken as a synonym of libertarianism, meaning that the earlier is based on the latter in a way that, according to both theories, it is necessary some sort of control over our decisions for there to exist morally responsible acts (Cfr., Berofsky, 1995, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> So as not to drift away from the objective of the paper, I will leave aside the numerous critics that have aroused this type of cases.

<sup>8</sup> Traditional compatibilism is defined by the conjunction of the following three theses: 1. Free will is essential for moral responsibility; 2. Free will requires that there exist alternative possibilities when carrying out an act; 3. Moral responsibility is compatible with determinism.

from this idea, Fischer (2006) has differentiated the regulative control of actions from guidance control<sup>9</sup>. The former encloses a genuine metaphysical access to alternative possibilities, while the latter is based on the capacity of the agent to be able to act under certain limits. Should moral responsibility obey uniquely to regulative control, then a person could expect life to be either a succession of fortunate experiences, or some sort of Greek tragedy –even if determinism does not necessarily imply that we have ‘destinies’, meaning that our choices are inconsequential.

Continuing with the case of the mysterious scientist, his presence does not make any action unavoidable in a world that is completely indeterminist, while in a determinist world the presence of the mysterious scientist is superfluous. In this way, and to put it in Fischer’s words, the *Frankfurt Style* cases show that moral responsibility does not require regulative control. For that reason, even when there were no such regulative control, there would still be guidance control that does not require alternative possibilities such as when a person turns to the right with his car, even if he could not, due to technical problems, turn to the left.<sup>10</sup>

If determinism excludes regulative control, but does not exclude guidance control, that is because moral responsibility is based on the capacity of the agents to control their acts: both in the capacity to answer to the acts of other agents, as well as the conducts that imply mechanisms of rational deliberation. In the same way, John is responsible for many of his choices even though he is causally determined by the mysterious scientist. Indeed, guidance control refers to the mechanisms inherent to the agents to carry out an act, since it consists in

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<sup>9</sup> Strictly speaking, Fischer is a semi-compatibilist, given the fact that he is a compatibilist in what respects to the relationship between moral responsibility and determinism; and an incompatibilist in what respects to the relationship between determinism and relevant alternatives. In this text, he is taken as a compatibilist since, all in all, semi-compatibilism is simply the affirmation of causal determinism being compatible with moral responsibility, apart from if causal determinism eliminates the access to relevant alternatives.

<sup>10</sup> Consider also the classical example of Locke (1992): suppose that a man is moved to a room while he sleeps. When he wakes up he sees a person he wants to see and with whom he wants to speak. Suppose, also, that he was locked up without his noticing, in such way that he cannot get out. When he wakes up, he will be happy to find the desired company, with whom he will decide to stay. That is to say, he will prefer to stay in there instead of going out. Locke wonders: Is this stay voluntary? And he answers that nobody will doubt that it is voluntary, even though, considering he has been locked up, it is evident that he has no freedom to decide whether he stays or leaves.

a type of counterfactual dependency of the actions over reasons or motives. And, according to Fischer, a person can find reasons or motives even in a determinist world.

Fischer's ideas are based on the capacity to perceive oneself and to do things *in one's own way* –after all, guidance control is some sort of valuation of one's expression. For example, consider the moment before facing death –of course, if the world is deterministic, the *way* in which we die is determined as well as our reactions towards it. If one agrees with Heidegger (1977) and considers death as the last possibility, then it is not difficult to speculate over certain existential compatibilism, like Fischer. Death is the last possibility and we are causally determined to face it, but there is not one only way to do so. How it is done relies on the authenticity and autonomy of the agent. In this way, one is not responsible for his own death, but is responsible for the way in which he reacts before it<sup>11</sup>.

However, the change of perspective that ranges from alternative possibilities to discourses over authenticity does not cover all the cases. Consider the psychological process of someone who is an addict against his own will, e.g. someone who wants to quit smoking but cannot do so. A smoker struggles against his addiction because he is aware of the health problems that it brings with it. But, in some point in his struggle, he stops trying to quit. He decides that he cannot keep on struggling and becomes an addict to his own will. So he starts to think that, even though his addiction is detrimental to his health, it is not worth to live without it and keeps on smoking. Is it possible to say that, after losing the desire to escape his addiction, he has now acquired the freedom and the responsibility to continue smoking? Therefore, there are times in which living life according to each one's intentions or ways does not guarantee that one is responsible for his actions.

### 3. Betty and Benji cases

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<sup>11</sup> In this order, here could be considered cases that range from the different ways in which ill people react to a terminal disease, to the Socratic reaction that has been expressed in the dialog *Phaedo* (leaving aside, of course, the issue of the suicide).

Consider the following case, extracted from Mele (1995). Betty was a six year old girl who was scared of the basement of her house, especially when the lights were out. She did not understand why she was scared, since she knew that nothing bad was going to happen to her. Then, she believed that her fear was childish and developed a strategy to overcome her fear: to go down to the basement periodically until she was not scared anymore. Betty was in control of herself. That allowed her to have a strong personality that helped her whenever she had to make choices in her life. Betty is now in charge of a position with a lot of responsibility, in which all decisions depend on her. According to Mele, Betty's course of action built her character in such a way that she became the person she now is, if we presuppose that there are causal chains that start with the intention of the agents. Betty was autonomous, since she went down to the basement intentionally as a consequence of her own decision. Therefore, and according to Mele, Betty is responsible for not being scared of basements nowadays, as well as for her strong personality. Of course, Betty was a child and, as every other child, she was influenced by her parents. But her parents' influence minimizes neither autonomy nor merit to her attitude. Similarly, the addict to tobacco also plans a strategy to overcome his addiction. The success of the strategy will depend on his persistence and self-control. The attitude of the addict is, at the beginning, anarchical in an Aristotelian way –i.e. his intentional conduct opposes a better judgment– and, for that reason, he does not have control over himself. He tries to change it, puts his effort in it, even though he fails by falling back into his addiction. As times goes on, he starts to resign himself, to lose faith in himself. His judgments start to change in such way that he ends up considering his addiction as something that has to be enjoyed in life. All in all, his judgment and course of actions coincide. And again, can one say that the addict is now in control over himself? When one is capable of making up reasons for which one considers oneself responsible for one's actions, one is also capable of making up reasons for which one does not consider oneself responsible.



So, this statement seems to suggest that we choose whether to be morally responsible or not according to the discourse or story we build of ourselves.

It can be considered that, in Betty's case, there is a begging the question because she already had a strong personality at the age of six. Waller (2011) compares this case with that of her twin brother Benji. Unlike Betty, Benji did not carry out any strategy to overcome his fear. Benji was less sure of himself and, either consciously or unconsciously, avoided going to the dark basement. Nowadays Benji has a weak character and a weak personality. He usually avoids responsibilities, since he had much less resources to face them than his sister. Perhaps Mele is right and such choices have affected them in their subsequent choices in life; perhaps a Freudian psychoanalyst sees in it the reason of many of their current attitudes. However, and comparing both stories, the problem does not lie in that each one of them had the personality that made them be who they are, but in why Betty did overcome her fear and Benji did not. Stating why leads to further causes, where Betty's capacity to face circumstances similar to Benji ends up being a matter of luck. In this way, Waller concludes that Betty and Benji already had several differences before assuming different positions to the same problem. She is not responsible for her strong character –like Benji is not responsible for his weak character– without her choices miraculously transcending their own causal histories. The differences in their developed characters can be recognized without appealing to any miraculous transcendence, assuming that they were the product of earlier differences, with respect to innate capacities as well as influences that are out of control and for which nobody is morally responsible.

The investigation of the past as an explanation of the present may result valuable to modify conducts or to understand why we do what we do. But, we have to take into account that we can always find a reason to be how we are. This is due to the large number of cooperating causes that go unnoticed and that are more important than what they seem to be.

Furthermore, those who exclude cooperating causes, by means of explanations, so as to focus on a principal cause, do so according to some interest. In this way, someone arrives to a last word by excluding many possible last words (Laera, 2011). The main reason why Betty and Benji have different characters is referred to as being the product of certain narrative constructions that try to explain –according to certain explicit or implicit interests– why someone acts the way he does. This kind of reductionism is unavoidable.

The story told is always more a simple listing in a serial or sequential order of events, because the narrative organizes them into an intelligible whole that can excuse or blame someone for their actions and attribute moral responsibility. For example, there are stories that defeat presumptions of responsibility. These narrative constructions or stories can be called excuses and can apply in some cases but not in all. To be plausible, excuses must be found as socially acceptable. A murderer cannot evade his responsibility by telling a story about his genes. In these contexts the biological implication, as well as metaphysical implication, are irrelevant. Thus, agents can claim responsibility –or a lack of responsibility– for their actions depending on their relevant history, and this constitutes what we grasp simply as being responsibility.

It could be objected that all social narratives entail certain metaphysics. Suppose that the narrative mentions counterfactual situations: “When Betty was seventeen years old, she could have gone to Brandeis, but she chose to go to Harvard”. How are we going to interpret such counterfactual claims? We have to bring in some metaphysical idea of possibilities, to make sense of the narrative. However, the use of the subjunctive form does not imply the reference to metaphysical possibilities, and much less a hierarchy between moral narrative and metaphysical accounts. It can still conceive metaphysical possibilities as a mode of narration and establish a hierarchy with a moral narrative depending on the attribution context.

The narratives that imply moral responsibility can be built by focusing either in the third person or in oneself. It is possible to support Mele's inner indeterminism by creating narratives focused in the intentional capacity of the agents in connection with their autonomous being. But it is also possible to take into account other cooperating causes to conceive them as principal causes, so as to focus the narrative in the environmental conditions and minimize the importance of the characteristic of being autonomous. Characterizing moral responsibility as a way of narrative explains why the reasons of an action are so versatile. Being versatile means that, hermeneutically, there is an intentional orientation when one is looking for responsibilities: a request is not a request, nor is a demand a demand; one can opt to say no.

Assume that somebody builds a narrative that includes the assumption that social order determines the conduct of the agents. According to this conception, if *S* was to commit a crime, the reason will not lie in the individual who executed the action, but ultimately in circumstances that do not depend on the agent –this could even serve as an extenuating circumstance. Now, another person changes the hermeneutic context and takes into account more proximate causes, such as the hate that the murderer felt for his victim. Of course, both are in disagreement, since they have different criteria of responsibility. One is a narrative going back to the criterion that the origin of every action is outside the agent –where the ultimate cause of committing a crime can be social injustice, inequality of possibilities or the personality of the agent, etc. The other resorts to a criterion that takes as an origin the autonomy of the agent to decide for himself. For such disagreements to be epistemically authentic, they have to share the same conceptual frame. That is to say, they have to share the subject they are referring to. The point in common is that both are inscribed within the frame of a narrative that includes, either explicitly or implicitly, judgments of moral responsibility.

When there are disagreements, the context of epistemic evaluation plays a decisive

role for one narrative to prevail over the other. The evidence that supports propositions in which *S* is morally responsible (e.g. “John knows that *S* is responsible for...”) answers to recognition of the reason of the action. To the extent that, the final causes, the ones which exempt the agent from any moral responsibility, do not have a major influence. For instance, in criminal law: even though the agent is, to a large degree, determined by social order, he is also morally responsible for his actions. Even if the murderer were morally incorrigible, some moral evaluation would be attributed to him. However, these conditions have a binding influence if anyone attempts to explain the cause of the actions through psychology or sociology. And this is possible due to the fact that we have the large capacity to interpret the phenomenon of moral responsibility as a unit that entails reductions in contributory causes<sup>12</sup>.

Nevertheless, not only does the reduction in causes require a conceptual frame in keeping with the past circumstances, but it also requires a narrative process oriented towards possible future circumstances and towards the power of prediction. One knows that the murderer who does not repent from his crime will probably kill again, because stories of him murdering someone may be created and they can be conferred a certain degree of truthfulness. When the degree of truthfulness is too high, i.e., that there is a great expectation for him to kill, then the story becomes a prediction about the future. But, to what extent can we predict the result of our actions? Betty foresaw that she would overcome her fear of darkness in the basement with the strategy of going down periodically. Yet Betty could not foresee what kind of person she would be when she made that decision, just as Benji could not foresee the long term consequences that would arise from ignoring the problem. Therefore, even when Betty and Benji shaped themselves when they were six years old, they did not have the intention of being who they are now. Consequently, they seem not to be responsible for that. Bearing this in mind, the search for responsibilities is measured with a double standard: when the story

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<sup>12</sup> Cfr., Willaschek (2010)

resorts to history, a precise fact which is distant in time is usually found as causally important in order to explain why things happen; on the other hand, when there is an attempt to find out the future consequences of the actions, the practical reason is often limited to paying more attention to the short term effects than to the long term effects.

As seen in Betty's case, a story is built about responsibility in which the challenge of the basement *was* the key to shaping her personality, but a story is not built about responsibility in which the challenge of the basement *will be* the key to shaping her personality since, in the latter case, there is nothing similar to a deliberate intention. In fact, if it is argued that in a deterministic universe we ought to blame people who blame others, we thereby assume compatibilism since it could not be fair to blame the blamers otherwise.

#### **4. Story and future consequences**

Strawson (1994) suggests that there is a requirement of ultimate responsibility that cannot be met and that is an essential condition in order to establish that actions are morally responsible. According to Strawson, actions entail true responsibility when they are performed by virtue of a reason of the agent that causes them. If causal chains –which range from our desires, beliefs and values, up to our interactions– were built at random, without a basis of rules or epistemology whatsoever, nor by virtue of some kind of control that is external to the agent, then there would be no place in which to search for any kind of responsibility. Yet, if actions and reasons depended on the agent's own abilities, they should be chosen by principles for which, in turn, he should be responsible by other means of choice, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

The deterministic idea, as well as the idea of a complete indeterminism, rests on the fact that, if the series of causes should be followed until their ultimate source, it would be

clear that our interactions are out of our control<sup>13</sup>. The moral determinists and indeterminists conclude that it is unfair to punish some and congratulate others only because of their behavior. Ultimately, the abilities for good/bad behavior are the result of either a transcendental future or of the goddess of fortune, which gives no grounds for moral justification. However, this conclusion presupposes certain compatibility since it would be pointless to talk about justice: both punishment and merit would also be determined by causality. Assuming one is not dealing with an extreme determinist nor with a complete indeterminist but with a skeptic, maybe like Strawson, then the construction of moral stories that attribute responsibilities may be arbitrary. Arbitrariness consists of the establishment of where in the causal chain one stops searching for responsibilities. If moral responsibility is to be thought in proximal terms and in a specific context, it is only because certain punishments are fair or unfair only when one disregards the ultimate source of all blame. One may blame someone for not going to work because he fell asleep, but one cannot blame someone for not going to work because he is sick. Falling asleep does not depend on one's free will, just as being sick; however, responsibilities are very different in one case and the other. Someone may argue that he should have gone to sleep earlier the night before and that he should have set the alarm, but it is more intricate to build a story in which one should have avoided the disease. While both cases and elements are out of the agent's control, the story about responsibility will have the same shape: "had he done such thing and such other thing, then...", the difference is that, in the case in which one falls asleep it works, but in the case of the disease it is more difficult for it to work.

If neuroscience or the laws of nature identify the descriptions of responsible actions with a more basic type of description, then one could very well eliminate the story of moral responsibility in favor of another kind of story, whose vocabulary will be comprised by the

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<sup>13</sup> See Keane (1996)

physical properties of the brain. The problem with such eliminativism is whether it is possible to find said identification and, even if it is found, whether both stories serve the same function –assuming also that one is able to specify which function corresponds to moral responsibility.

Disregarding the eliminativist thesis, it is still difficult to estimate up to which point one should investigate in the causal chain, since one may investigate enough as to commit to the explanation of moral responsibility of our behaviors, just as one may investigate enough as to leave it aside. It is a matter of whether one should arrive to the sources that are out of one's control or not when causal explanations are sought. Imagine that Betty goes to the casino and she wins a lot of money, and then she decides to give half of that money to charity. Betty's decision may be said to be worthy of praise since she could have very well kept the money; and, at the same time, it may be said that it is a matter of luck, since she could have not won and she could have not had the possibility to give anything to charity. Therefore, there is a difference between, for instance, not being able to stop smoking and choosing to light up a cigarette for the first time. This difference persists even in a deterministic world. In the first case there is no control over the behavior; in the second case, one is assumed to choose. Regarding lighting up a cigarette for the first time, one can of course ask, to what extent is it really a choice? Lighting up a cigarette for the first time may be the consequence of peer pressure among colleagues (especially if one is talking about a teenager) plus a weak personality, etc. The answer to this kind of question is based on the idea that one is responsible for one's actions to the extent that, in the story that was built, some responsibility is taken, whether for oneself or for others.

Think about Milgram's (1963) famous experiment in which responsibility may lie in the authority of the scientist as well as in the "master" applying the discharge. Whoever applies the discharge may build a story that may exempt him from responsibility, while an

observer may arrive to the conclusion that his behavior is immoral. The "master" may claim that he was only obeying orders and that he trusted the authority of the scientist; he could also affirm that "they know what they are doing." However, the observer may claim that, in spite of the pressure of the scientist, the person applying the electric shock, as an autonomous being, should have behaved, ultimately, in a different way. Beyond the surprising results that arose from the experiment, the idea behind this point is to indicate that one may justify one's actions in many different ways and that responsibility is not a matter that is independent from the story.

No one knows if we are causally determined and, even if we are, the truth is that we behave and evaluate ourselves morally as if we were not. This is so even if the systematic approach of determinism, whether metaphysical, naturalistic or environmental, were believable<sup>14</sup>. For example, a drunken person behind the wheel has no control over his actions, but that does not mean that he is not responsible if he hits another person, even if the source of his alcoholism were child abuse. Regarding blame and punishment, the degree of control over our actions is supported by a close responsibility that is vital for evaluative attitudes. If responsibility depends on the rational construction that conceives the actions of the driver as intentional, it is due to the fact that said construction entails the desire of truth in a counterfactual judgment: "he could have avoided drinking when he was supposed to drive." In such cases, responsibility lies in rules that seek to guarantee people's safety. Therefore, it does not entail the search for an ultimate level of control; in the end, completely indeterministic conclusions are considered in this search.

Moral responsibility is not only a product of the construction of the story of past actions, but also the ability to teleologically evaluate, as correct or incorrect, possible future actions. To a certain extent, one can know the future, inasmuch as possible worlds may be

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<sup>14</sup> In this respect, I agree with Hoyos (2009), for whom the subject of human freedom is mainly relevant in the scope of social philosophy and not in metaphysics.



represented and, from that, actions may be morally judged. Likewise, moral responsibility is also settled in the motivation of actions when they serve as a starting point for stories that predict future consequences with a certain degree of probability. This hope of achieving practical results that have been predicted guides most of our decisions. However, the ultimate consequence of our actions is a complete uncertainty, just as it is the ultimate cause of our actions.

Nevertheless, human behavior may be retrospectively evaluated by virtue of results that were not predicted by the agent and past explanations and causes may be constructed through actions or omissions so as no reproaches may arise, whatever the result may be. In fact, evaluative expressions may be justified inasmuch as they are characterized as intentional, even if they are not. Following Frankfurt (1969, 1971), there are circumstances in which coercion does not limit the responsibility of the agents. Frankfurt maintains the general idea that someone is capable of being morally evaluated, whether negatively or positively, for his performance, even if it was neither intentional nor deliberate.

The actions not only include direct personal behavior, but also the results and the consequences of what was directly done. For instance, by pulling the trigger of a gun, one can predict a bullet shall be fired, and that it may kill someone. In that case, direct personal behavior consists of moving the hand and the finger with which one aims the gun and pulls the trigger. In fact, this may be the only event one tries to deliberately produce: one may not want to fire the bullet or that someone may be reached or fatally injured by the shot. However, the direct personal behavior of aiming the gun and pulling its trigger represents only a part of what, in fact, was done. There is another part that has to be taken into account and that refers to not analyzing the mediate or immediate future consequences of the action of holding a gun. When someone has a gun in their home he is responsible of omitting, as a future pertinent possibility, the fact that said gun may be accidentally fired.

The story of moral responsibilities for actions or omissions is associated with the control over future consequences since, when the success of predictions is pointed out, the unspoken agreements with other agents that made it possible is omitted. The circumstances that condition the state of future things are trimmed in order to make the intention of the subject of the action more relevant. Therefore, taking the above mentioned example into account, one is responsible of not performing the action of considering as a future pertinent possibility the fact that the gun may be accidentally fired, even though that judgment is made *a posteriori*, since the person making that judgment constructs a story in which the subject of the action should have controlled the consequences of his actions.

Given that there are expectations that arise from the deliberation about future consequences, one may narrate the counterfactual aspects of one's actions and attribute intentionality to them. Consequently, *S* is responsible for a future action when he has the possibility to choose alternate actions that lead to other actions. Or he may rethink said action based on actions in order to arrive to the state of things: *S* is responsible, through one or several present actions, for a future state of things, when the consequence of the choice of his action is considered to be a relevant alternative. For instance, people who unload toxic waste into the catchment area of a river, even when it can be avoided, are responsible for the contamination of said catchment area in the future, if this consequence is considered to be, in the story, as a relevant alternative to the action (Campbell, 1997).

One is not able of teleologically evaluating every variable of one's decisions, although it is presumed that one is able of evaluating the more relevant ones. However, if this was so, should one not also be responsible for what one considers to be relevant?<sup>15</sup> While ramifications of the effects of the action always exceed the foreseeable consequences, we are willing to apply intentional properties to unpredictable long term consequences. Therefore,

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<sup>15</sup> One may even think of Kant, and that the impossibility of a correct evaluation of every effect of an action, that is to say, the impossibility of a complete teleological evaluation, gave rise to the categorical imperative.

the relevance of the possible consequences will also depend on the degree of interest of the agent in his counterfactual deliberations, without excluding that the particular values and the ability of the calculations may always lead to something unexpected (Cf. Mulligan, 2006)<sup>16</sup>. Consequently, due to the fact that there is no ultimate control over what is done since every action is not more than the development of a *given* thing, there is no moral responsibility in the profound sense of the term<sup>17</sup>. However, while the lack of an ultimate control of our actions and the degree of interest of the agent in predicting relevant future consequences cannot be defined, the story of moral responsibility assumes a compatibility that is partially inevitable since said stories are centered in the near control that *should have been* considered to be relevant. Even though a hardly profound type of responsibility is worth saving, the moral experience works because it is not based on theoretical reflections about its nature.

## 5. Overall conclusions

Personal responsibility regarding one's own future, in order to achieve certain purposes, entails the responsibility regarding the future of others. Yet, even if one cannot control how others influence one's decisions, this does not mean that one is not the owner of or responsible for the success or failure of one's own decisions. Our stories about moral responsibility are fundamentally compatibilist since judgments on the attribution of responsibilities are based on the ability of producing counterfactual statements. In this sense, throughout this paper certain ambiguity among the distinction between the rules and moral responsibility can be noticed. However, this leap between one aspect and the other occurs since the evaluations on the description of *what is* is determined by the context, just as the evaluation or the acceptance of *what must be*. The reason for this is that moral reasons, whether they constitute a description or an evaluation criterion, are context-sensitive. In

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, Nagel (1991) defended the notion that agents may be morally responsible for those actions they inadvertently produce or those actions that do not have an explicit intention.

<sup>17</sup> Such as Smilansky (2003) has maintained.

certain contexts, narratives concerning the ultimate causes of a piece of behavior are constructed. In other contexts, other narratives or stories with a more limited range of causes are built and interpreted. Thus, certain moral responsibility judgments are incompatibilist while others are compatibilist.

Different stories, some about *what it is* and about *what must or should be*, imply considerations, inquiries, and different depths when it comes to the evaluation of moral responsibility. Therefore, inquiries about the responsibility of the principal agent of the case reach deep speculations about his past, his genes, or whether he is determined to act in a different manner or not and, in other occasions, these depths are not reached; the responsibility is rather attributed only based on certain considerations about the will of the agent, his efforts and the recognition of the action as his own. Then, there are stories that place the subject in the place of someone who complies with certain normative standards in order to be responsible and there are stories that do not in spite of the action being the same<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, on the one hand, when it comes to looking for responsibilities, the causal chains stop at the near causes, both in relation to the reconstruction of the past and in relation to future consequences. The search for profound or long term causes is a matter of theoretical activity that has nothing to do with prizes and punishments in practice. On the other hand, if determinism were true, it would be possible to have enough knowledge so as to predict the shape of the future without failing. Yet, human beings lack the pertinent knowledge and the necessary intellectual abilities, which means that the fact that we are not able to predict the future constitutes no evidence of the falseness of determinism. It does evidence the possibility of compatibilism since, as the future is unknown, stories around the

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, Sher (2009) has suggested that one is sensitive to the attributions of moral responsibility if the agent is conscious of the moral value of the action at the time in which he acts or not. On the other hand, others consider that it is his training or education and if those prevent his autonomy or not (e.g., Haji and Cuipers, 2008).

agent's non-executed possibilities can be established, even if such speech is also determined.

The story with judgments on moral responsibility depends on the context of attribution. Like so, in a philosophical or theoretical context where the ultimate sources of our actions are sought, Betty may consider herself as not being responsible for her success, but in the practical context of our relationship with the world, Betty is responsible for her success. Therefore, if this notion is followed, moral responsibility is compatible with determinism. So, is it fair that Betty is rewarded for her decision? Is it fair that Benji is punished for his decision? The answer to both questions depends on the causal story one builds. If the causal demand is high, that is to say, that one tries to reach the ultimate source of the action, then it is possible to reach an explanation in which neither of them is responsible for the way they are. But this demand seems to be more philosophical or theoretical than practical. In the context of everyday life, the attribution of responsibility is quite simple whereas in more specific contexts, the search for responsibilities becomes more complicated. As one approaches the ultimate sources of responsibility, it dissolves among skeptical reflections.

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