
Why I am a Free Will Skeptic: The Free Will Advocate's Burden and Pride

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Though philosophers hold strong views about whether humans have free will and whether free will is compatible with determinism and mechanism, there is no universal definition of freedom of the will, perhaps to the detriment of the debate. *How free* does a will have to be—what type of freedom must a will have—to appropriately be called a free will? Many answer that a free will is free enough that the agent can be held morally responsible; having a free will is “just to satisfy the metaphysical requirement of being responsible for one's action.”¹ Yet this definition certainly would fail to capture the views of others. The existence of semi-compatibilists,² who believe moral responsibility is compatible with determinism but free will may not be, proves that when some philosophers discuss freedom of the will, they are employing a definition very different from this one.

Others might answer the definitional question by suggesting that freedom of the will is a property held only by a will that has *all of the sorts of freedom worth caring about*. This definition, I believe, is better than the first, yet an even better one can be given if we answer the question it leaves open: Which sorts of freedom are worth caring about? Daniel Dennett suggests we should care only about those sorts of freedom that are not “incoherently conceived blessings”—a freedom is meaningful and worth wanting only if we can conceive of beings with that freedom in some coherently possible world³ Thus, Dennett says, “guilty-before-the-eyes-of-God” responsibility,⁴ the impossible sort Galen Strawson calls “ultimate moral responsibility,”⁵ is not worth caring about. This freedom appears to require an incoherent sort of metaphysical determination of the will not represent-

ed by determinism, mechanism, agent causation, Kantian libertarianism,⁶ or any other imaginable metaphysical hypothesis about the will. On the one hand, just eternal suffering in hell seems to require that our transgressions aren't externally caused, yet it also seems to require that we act for reasons rather than nonrationally, in which case our reasons presumably would have some sort of causal—if not necessary—influence on our wills.⁷ Because the sort of freedom that grounds ultimate moral responsibility is incoherent, Dennett would say it is not worth caring about, so recognizing that we lack this sort of freedom should not lead us to be free will skeptics. Is he right to assert this as a general rule?

In this paper, I defend a definition of free will according to which a will is free if it has all of the sorts of freedom worth caring about. However, I attempt to refute Dennett's answer to the question of which freedoms are worth caring about. I maintain that a freedom can be worth caring about even if it is incoherent, i.e. even if it is not possible to imagine a world in which humans have it. I argue that Dennett's condition should be replaced by the following: A type of free will is worth caring about if (but not only if) one took for granted and cared about this sort of freedom prereflectively (before reflecting on the philosophical problems concerning free will). After defending this definition, I explain why it leads me to identify as a free will skeptic, despite the fact that I agree almost entirely with compatibilist accounts of free will like Hilary Bok's.⁸ As the reader might suspect, I defend my free will skepticism by arguing that although I possess many types of freedom worth caring about, I lack a certain type of freedom I took for granted and cared about prereflectively: the sort that would justify my feelings of *pride* in my achievements.

To make this argument, I review what I take to be a particularly strong compatibilist account, Hilary Bok's "standpoint compatibilism,"⁹ and explain why even it cannot completely salvage pride. I also suggest that the freedom required to salvage pride is incoherent and impossible in the same way that the free-

dom for ultimate responsibility is. I will not argue that for a rational agent, pride *to any extent* is impossible but only that pride *to the extent I may have felt it prereflectively* is. At the end of the paper, I briefly address a possible Strawson-inspired¹⁰ response to my argument, according to which pride is not to be justified by a certain metaphysical view of the will but, rather, is a natural response justified by the satisfaction of certain “internal criteria.”¹¹

I: Defense of the All-In Definition of Free Will

Previously I distinguished between the two definitions of free will. The first I will call the *traditional definition*. According to the traditional definition, to say that a will is free is to say that it satisfies the conditions for moral responsibility. The problem this definition faces, likely due to its antiquated nature, is a failure to recognize the scope of the threat imposed on our views about human agency by reflection upon the metaphysics of the will. When we reflect on how a will might come to be, it is not only moral responsibility that is threatened *prima facie* but other treasured aspects of our agency. Thus, Thomas Nagel says of a naturalistic view of human action: “That an account of freedom can be given which is compatible with the objective view... is not the case. All such accounts fail to allay the feeling that, looked at from far enough outside, agents are helpless...”¹² Although our wills are causally efficacious, as free will advocates tend to underscore, we are still mere links in a causal chain, not unconstrained authors of our lives as we imagine and cherish prereflectively. Surely related to this notion of authorship is our pride in achievements for which we prereflectively take ourselves to be ultimately responsible.

If we think the types of free will required for ultimate authorship of or pride in our actions are worth caring about (or even that it is conceivable that free will is worth caring about for reasons other than the fact that it grounds moral responsibility), then we should reject the traditional definition of free will. If we take free will to have a biconditional relationship with moral responsibility, as the traditional definition does, we must think moral responsibility is so central to who we are as humans that

no other freedom could conceivably be worth wanting. I find the traditional definition thus evidently absurd and endorse as its replacement the *all-in definition* of free will: We have freedom of the will if and only if we have all of the sorts of freedom worth caring about.

II: Which Freedoms are Worth Caring About?

This definition raises a further question: Which types of freedom are worth caring about? Much as they have done with the traditional definition of free will, some philosophers have limited themselves to types of freedom that seem wholly arbitrary. Dennett asserts that we should not care about types of freedom that are “inconceivable blessings.”¹³ Upon learning that we lack a certain kind of freedom, we should only be tempted by free will skepticism if we can “conceive of beings whose wills are freer than our own,” Dennett says.¹⁴ If Dennett were right, my argument would fail, for as I will suggest later, the kind of freedom implied by the pride we prereflectively take in our accomplishments is incoherent and thus inconceivable. However, I argue that we should reject Dennett’s rule.

Although Dennett remarks throughout his book that certain types of freedom are inconceivable, he never supports his rule by telling us why we should not care about them. This rule faces a problem bigger than a lack of argumentative support, however. Imagine what it would mean in the following hypothetical scenario. If, in some hypothetical world, we one day realized that the freedom required for *any* form of moral responsibility was impossible—from consequentialist moral responsibility to the expression of reactive attitudes to Galen Strawson’s ultimate responsibility—Dennett’s rule would require us to still believe firmly that we had all the free will we needed. This would be true even if moral responsibility had been as integral to our interpersonal relationships and societal institutions as it is in this world. One day we had never thought to question whether these practices so central to our lives were justified; the next day we realized we were wrong to endorse these “inconceivable

blessings"; yet Dennett would have us believe that nothing had been lost—that we still had all of the freedoms worth wanting. Another absurd consequence of Dennett's rule is that impossibilism about free will is not even a coherent position; as soon as we determine a freedom to be impossible, it somehow loses its meaningfulness and desirability.

Based on the preceding hypothetical scenario, I suggest the following rule as a replacement: A type of freedom of the will is worth caring about if (but not only if) one took for granted and cared about this sort of freedom prereflectively. Even if a prereflectively cherished freedom of will is, upon philosophical reflection, incoherent, to still recoil at free will skepticism is to deceive oneself into the comforting belief that nothing has been lost—that our increased understanding of the world and of our minds has not revealed to us that we are not as free as we once supposed.

III: Our Prereflective Views and Pride

Over the last few hundred years, as scientists and philosophers have come to have a better understanding of our world, causation, and the will, the truth has often been disconcerting—at least, at first glance. For the most part, philosophers have focused on the threat to moral responsibility. Some have argued that because we are mere products of causal history, unable to deviate from our predetermined course unless by randomness, many of our moral practices—like praising and blaming ourselves and others for their actions—ought to be called into doubt,^{15, 16} and countless others. Later I will argue that moral responsibility is not threatened, but as the rule I have established dictates, we would be wrong to terminate our inquiry here. Our wills might thankfully be free enough for moral responsibility, yet the *modern understanding* of causation and of our wills may still reveal to us a loss of something substantive.

My prereflective view of my choices is one strikingly at odds with every reasoned, careful view that I can conceive of my will. My first-person, introspective experience was almost unquestionable evidence that I had unconstrained control as the

ultimate author of my life. My choices were things I made—as they still are even in light of this new understanding—but they were not also things that *happened to me*. Never did I imagine my actions could be fully explained as products of the remote past before I was born and the laws of nature¹⁷—that though my choices are causally efficacious, and my past choices can cause my future choices, they are all “the necessary result of the state of the universe... say, at a moment in the Cretaceous period...”¹⁸ As long as we imagine that the will is caused with some probability by neural events, no admission of indeterminacy will bring the modern view in line with my prereflective one. The suggestion that my actions are entirely products of the remote past before I was born, the laws of nature, and randomness is no more comforting. Perhaps I—i.e. whatever metaphysically mysterious entity can appropriately be called my *self*—cause my choices, and my causing my choices is itself uncaused, so that we need not trace my choices to things external to me.^{19, 20}

If we circumvent this problem common to event-causal views, however, we only trade one problem for another. Prereflectively, and still now, I am so sure that I act for reasons—that I will choose whichever alternative I believe I have most reason to choose—but my ordering of alternatives must be causally determined. As long as my choices are intelligible in terms of character traits I have and reasons I find compelling, my choices will have external causes, and I will lose the ultimate authorship I believed in prereflectively. However, I have not yet explained why the freedom implied by ultimate authorship is worth caring about. If we are to be free will skeptics on the grounds that we lack the freedom for ultimate authorship, we first ought to establish why this is a meaningful freedom, a task to which I now turn.

Some might consider *pride* an ignoble thing to care about. I, on the other hand, will insist that pride is something we tend to care about immensely and is rather important to a well-lived life. In order to do this and dispel any misconceptions the reader might have, I think it will be most useful to precisely character-

ize the kind of pride I have in mind. By pride, I mean roughly what the first definition of in the New Oxford American Dictionary describes: “a feeling or deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one's own achievements.” For me, however, pride does not entail what is described by this same dictionary's third definition, the definition responsible for pride's negative connotation: The pride to which I refer is not “the quality of having an excessively high opinion of oneself or one's importance”; it is not vanity, nor is it ostentatiousness. It is not the sort of self-centered concern with one's achievements that would motivate him to ignore his duties to others in pursuit of his own interests. This pride is merely the satisfaction one derives from feeling accomplished and exceptional. If I perform exceptionally on an exam, become a very successful business owner after years of hard work, or am admitted to an excellent graduate program, I feel pride not because this achievement is a step toward a better future but simply because I find satisfaction in my being exceptional in itself.

I hope that at this point, the reader agrees that this sort of pride in one's achievements is, for most of us, very important to a well-lived life. Perhaps the most admirable of those among us are driven to succeed in their hobbies, academic pursuits, and careers *only* because this success is a means to some other end like helping others, providing for those they care about, or building the sorts of futures and lives they want to have. However, most are motivated to a considerable extent to succeed by a desire for the feeling of pride—because we want to feel as though we are excellent at whatever it is we enjoy. Though pride may be far from the most important part of lives, if the modern understanding of causation and of our wills were to take it from us, it would be absurd to suggest that nothing substantive had been lost.

Prereflectively, I never questioned the rationality of feeling pride. I believed that somehow, I acted for reasons, yet my decisions and my efforts were not caused, instead originating largely within me. A wise decision to stay up late working on a project or good performance on an exam could be traced back

along the causal chain to me—as they still can in light of the modern understanding—but no further, and certainly not to the beginning of time or the occurrence of a random event. If they could, they would appear, though largely attributable to my character, to be matters of luck—of having been “dealt a good hand” — since they are ultimately products of factors outside of my control. Free will advocates have argued extensively that this does not threaten our freedom of will, but I will argue that they have been successful only in salvaging the freedom required for moral responsibility—not that required for our feelings of pride. To do this, I examine Bok’s account of freedom and responsibility as the compatibilist account with the most promise.

IV: Where Free Will Advocates Have Succeeded: Responsibility and Blame

Bok’s account is often called *standpoint compatibilism* because it takes freedom of the will to arise naturally from the standpoint of practical deliberation.²¹ Bok argues that when we are engaged in practical deliberation, it is both unavoidable and rational to regard as possible courses of action not solely what we will be caused by natural laws to do but also all of those alternatives we would do if we chose to do them.²² Some actions may not be among my alternatives because they are beneath consideration or impossible, e.g. traveling to the moon.²³ Nevertheless, because while an agent deliberates “it is impossible...for her to predict the outcome of her choice...” from the *practical standpoint* she has reason to regard herself as free to do any action she would perform if she chose it.²⁴ At this point, the incompatibilist may wonder how this seemingly superficial freedom could be sufficiently robust to justify moral responsibility; it seems one’s will is free solely due to one’s epistemically limited standpoint. Bok’s answer is simple but compelling.

The freedom that arises from the practical standpoint is exactly the kind necessary for moral evaluation, blame, and improvement.²⁵ When we are engaged in practical reasoning, Bok explains, we must employ “some conception of the kinds of actions we wish to perform or to avoid, the kinds of persons we

wish to be, the kinds of characteristics we wish to have or to avoid having, and so forth.”²⁶ “The collection of considerations that an agent regards as giving rise to reasons for action” Bok calls the agent’s “standards.”²⁷ Anyone who engages in practical reasoning as means of governing his behavior, whether his standards are those of a moral saint or of a “world-class terrorist,” must believe he ought to do everything he can to live up to those standards, for the better he lives up to his standards the closer he is to the person he ideally wishes to be. We do not translate our standards into action with perfect reliability, however. “Our *character* affects the extent to which we live up to our standards of conduct, and the extent to which we perform those acts that, if asked, we would claim that we have most reason to perform... If I lack the confidence to act on my own judgments when others disagree with me, or the strength to resist what I take to be temptations, then I will often fail to act as I think I should,” Bok explains.²⁸ Because any person who engages in practical reasoning has both standards and a character, she has, “in virtue of that fact, an interest in improving her character.”²⁹

From this fact also arises the need for and justification of *blame*. If an outcome that is, according to my standards, suboptimal issues from one of my character traits, I have reason to *blame myself* for that outcome. If my character had been different, this outcome would not have occurred, and I would have lived up to my standards. As Bok says, “The fact that I failed to do something that I could have done [in the sense of *could* relevant to the practical standpoint] and should have done...must reflect something about me; and therefore any point at which I failed to apply my standards correctly must reveal some flaw in my character that I have reason to try to correct.”³⁰ Guilt for my transgressions is a natural occurrence, Bok says, because I care deeply that the world comes into line with my standards and I recognize that it is because of my character, over which I have practical control, that in this instance it did not.³¹ On the other hand, when I live up to my standards, I have reason to praise myself and find satisfaction in the fact that I have the kind of character that allows me

to live and do as I think best. For responsibility and blame, the fact that I can trace along the causal chain from my transgressions all of the way to events in the remote past and thus beyond my control is irrelevant; as long as the causal chain does pass through my character, a point at which my choices to improve my character can make a difference, I have reason to hold myself responsible. Bok's account is very successful in salvaging moral responsibility, but is pride thus salvaged as well? I will argue that it is not.

V: Where Free Will Advocates Have Failed: Pride

In the last section, I said that on Bok's account, if I live up to my standards, I have reason to praise myself and find satisfaction in the fact that I have the kind of character that allows me to live and do as I think best. It might seem at first that Bok has salvaged pride or something very similar, for what this describes is a feeling of satisfaction derived from the recognition that one is living in the way he takes to be most successful. However, this feeling is in reality not the sort of pride I described earlier. When one derives satisfaction from the fact that he is able to live up to his standards, it is because he cares deeply that the world comes into line with those standards; this is not the same as pride, a satisfaction derived from the fact that one feels ultimately responsible for his excellence. Let us take for example an agent whose standards tell him it is best to meet those who are mean to him with kindness. He will be satisfied when he has the character that allows him to do this consistently because he cares deeply that mean people are treated with kindness, and he recognizes that in shaping the good character he now has, he has done all he can do to promote these good outcomes. This feeling of satisfaction is very distinct from a feeling of pride, which I take to be a feeling of satisfaction with one's *own* achievement. The former type of satisfaction stems from the obtainment of what one cares about, whereas the latter is a satisfaction with one's own excellence, for which, I suggest, one feels ultimately responsible.

Bok's account shows that we are responsible for our actions in virtue of our ability to improve our characters, but it cannot show that we are ultimately responsible for our characters themselves. It is my character that leads to my academic achievements, for example. To what extent can I feel pride in these? The answer depends on how thoughtfully I reflect on the modern understanding; on the fact that my character is not self-created and it as well as my achievements can be fully explained as products of things completely outside of my control; and on the fact that while my achievements are things I do, they are also things that *happen to me*. When I attend to these facts, I feel significantly less pride than when I do not. Perhaps we could say that when I choose not to attend to these facts so that I can feel pride, I deceive myself by ignoring facts that upon careful reflection would change my views; I shield myself from the ugly truth. Can we really say that the modern understanding has not revealed to us any significant loss if I have to ignore certain facts to feel pride to the extent I once felt it? The modern understanding has revealed to me that I lack what I take to be a rather important freedom: the freedom of will required to *rationally – upon rational reflection* – feel the pride I did in my prereflective stage. It is worse than this, however. Even when I do not actively reflect upon this newfound understanding, I now feel significantly less pride than I did prereflectively. The recognition of how my will really comes to be affects my conception of my successes even when I divert my focus.

At this point the reader may offer a response in the spirit of P.F. Strawson's *Freedom and Resentment*.³² Could pride, like resentment and gratitude, be a feeling immune to the sort of rational scrutiny to which I have subjected it? If resentment is a natural response to ill will to be justified by the truth of its propositional content – that someone really has demonstrated malicious intent – rather than by a metaphysical picture of the will, perhaps pride is similarly justified only by some "internal criteria"³³ such as one's actually having achieved something.

Whether this response works, I suggest, may differ from

person to person. It is a question to be answered by one's own experience. I admit that if one feels the utmost pride simply in virtue of the fact that he has achieved, despite that achievement's causal origins, then he does not have good reason to call himself a free will skeptic. Though the modern understanding has revealed to him that he is not the ultimate author of his life, it has not revealed an unfreedom worth caring about. However, drawing upon my personal experience, I can say that this Strawsonian response fails in at least some cases. For those whose rational reflection on their freedoms and unfreedoms of the will strips from them a feeling they once took for granted and cared about deeply, we cannot say the type of freedom they now realize they lack is unimportant. With these particular cases in mind, we must acknowledge that if we accept the all-in definition of free will, we cannot say that free will and any sort of metaphysical hypothesis about the will are *objectively* compatible.

VI: Closing Thoughts

I call myself a free will skeptic not because the modern understanding has revealed to me that meaningful agency was only a delusion. Compatibilists have been extremely successful in salvaging some of the most important aspects of our agency: the possibility of deliberation; the significance of deliberation and efficacy of the will; and many of the most common forms of moral responsibility. Nor do I call myself a free will skeptic because I no longer feel any pride at all. Because pride is rooted in humans' psychological nature, remnants remain even after rational scrutiny has done its best. I cannot deny, however, that this rational scrutiny has taken a significant toll on something I once took for granted and cared about deeply. When I call myself a free will skeptic, I am not supposing that the modern view of my will has shown me to be dismally unfree. I have many of the important freedoms of will that make human agency special. But when I say that I am a free will skeptic, I acknowledge that this new way of understanding my character, my actions, and my accomplishments has led me to a undeniably regrettable re-

alization: Something I took for granted and cared deeply about in my prereflective stage is now gone, and I am not as free as I once unquestioningly supposed myself to be.

 Notes

1. Timothy O'Connor, *Free Will*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2013).
2. This term was originally coined by John Martin Fischer, I believe, although I've only encountered it in conversation.
3. D. C Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1984).
4. *Ibid.*, 166
5. Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic* 75 no. 1/2 (1994).
6. Robert Kane, *Responsibility, Luck, and Chance*, 2 ed., Trans. Array Free Will (New York: : Oxford University Press Inc, 2011)., 299-321
7. Hilary Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)., 92-198
8. This insight comes from a lecture by Dr. Hilary Bok
9. Michael McKenna, *Compatibilism*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2009)., 98
10. P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment* (London,1962).
11. Gary Watson, *Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme, Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004)., 4
12. Thomas Nagel, *Freedom*, 2 ed., Trans. Array Free Will (New York: Oxford University Press Inc)., 231
13. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting.*, 172
14. *Ibid.*, 172
15. J.J.C Smart, *Free Will, Praise, and Blame*, 2 ed., Trans. Array Free Will (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2011)., 69-71
16. Derk Pereboom, "Determinism Al Dente," *Nous* 29 (2014).
17. Peter van Inwagen, *An Argument for Incompatibilism*, Trans. Array Free Will (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2011).
18. Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility.*, 3

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19. Timothy O'Connor, *Agent Causation*, 2 ed., Trans. Array Free Will (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2011).
 20. Randolph Clarke, *Toward a Credible Agent-Causal Account of Free Will*.
 21. Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility*., Ch.3
 22. *Ibid.*, 114
 23. *Ibid.*, 106
 24. *Ibid.*, 108
 25. *Ibid.*, Ch.4
 26. *Ibid.*, 126-7
 27. *Ibid.*, 127
 28. *Ibid.*, 136. Italics added.
 29. *Ibid.*, 136
 30. *Ibid.*, 138. Bracketed comments added.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*.
 33. Gary Watson, *Responsibility and the Limits of Evil, Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004)., 4

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