



**THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MORAL
RESPONSIBILITY**

THE FEELING OF FREEDOM

“You stop, and it seems completely clear to you that it is entirely up to you what you do next. That is, it seems to you that you are truly, radically free to choose, in such a way that you will be ultimately morally responsible for whatever you do choose.”

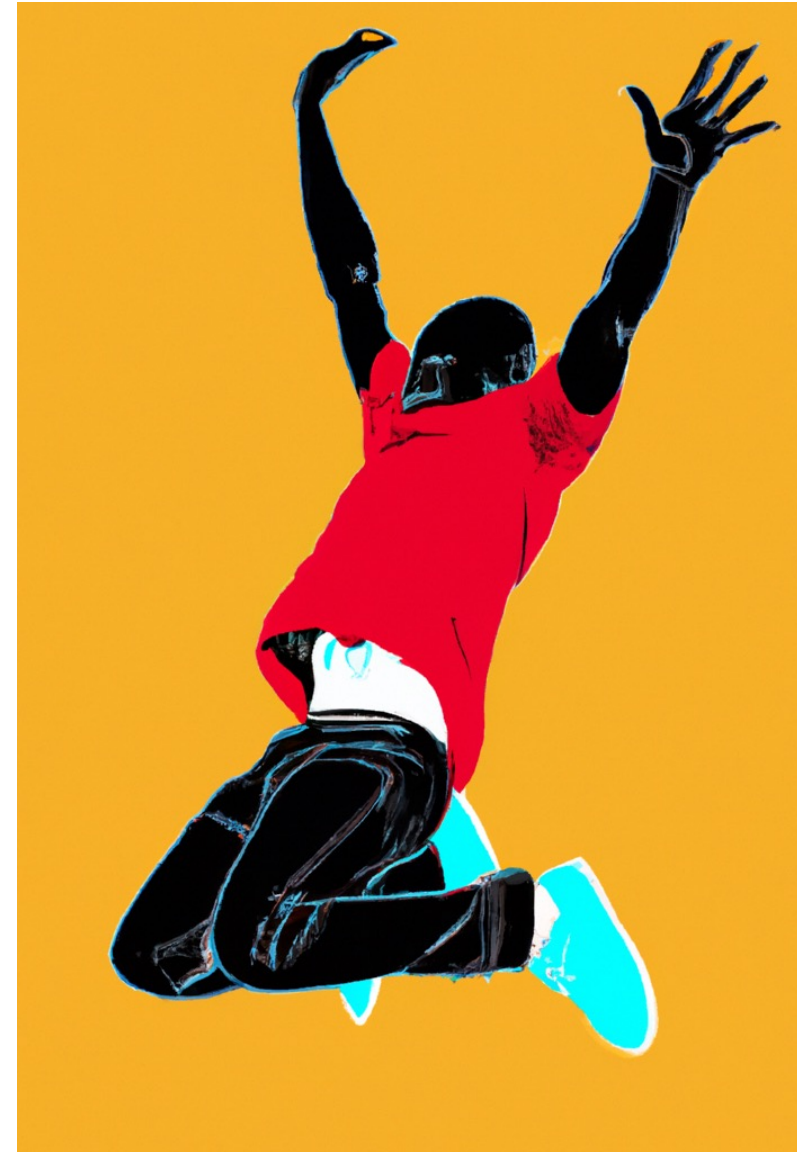
— Galen Strawson

“You say: I am not free. But I have raised and lowered my arm. Everyone understands that this illogical answer is an irrefutable proof of freedom.”

— Leo Tolstoy

“Sir, we know our will is free, and there's an end on it.

— Samuel Johnson



THE BIG BANG



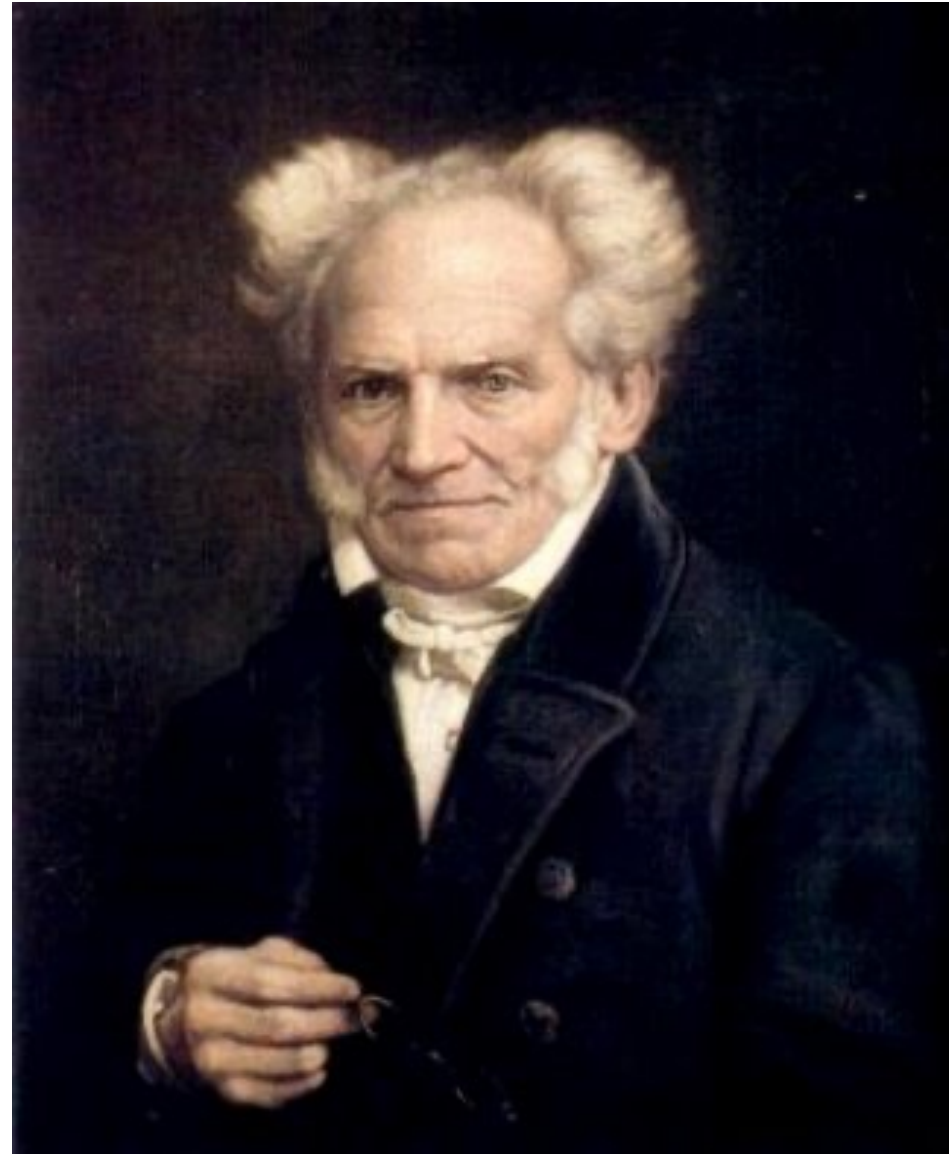
WHAT IS FREE WILL?

- The ability to exercise control over your actions.
- The capacity make choices that are not predetermined or compelled by external forces.
- The freedom to choose between alternative courses of action.
- The ability to do otherwise than we actually do.



SCHOPENHAUER

“Man can surely do what he wills, but he cannot will what he wills.”



STRAWSON'S THESIS

We cannot be truly morally responsible
for our actions.



CARROT CAKE



CLARENCE DARROW

(1857-1938)

“What has this boy to do with it? He was not his own father; he was not his own mother; he was not his own grandparents. All of this was handed to him. He did not surround himself with governesses and wealth. He did not make himself. And yet he is to be compelled to pay.”



JOJO THE DICTATOR'S SON

A famous example from Susan Wolf (1987: 63–64):

JoJo is the favorite son of Jo the First, an evil and sadistic dictator of a small, undeveloped country. Because of his father's special feelings for the boy, JoJo is given a special education and is allowed to accompany his father and observe his daily routine. In light of this treatment, it is not surprising that little JoJo takes his father as a role model and develops values very much like Dad's. As an adult, he does many of the same sorts of things his father did, including sending people to prison or to death or to torture chambers on the basis of a whim. . . . In light of JoJo's heritage and upbringing—both of which he was powerless to control—it is dubious at best that he should be regarded as responsible for what he does.



THE BASIC ARGUMENT

- (1) Nothing can be *causa sui* -- nothing can be the cause of itself.
- (2) In order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects.
- (3) Therefore, nothing can be truly morally responsible.

PREMISE 2

Why think that in order to be responsible for one's actions, one would have to be the cause of oneself?

- To be responsible, we must be free.
- When we act freely, we tend to act for reasons.
- When one acts for a reason, it is because of the way one is mentally speaking.
- So if I am responsible, how I am mentally must be up to me.



TWO REACTIONS

"I have encountered two main reactions to the Basic Argument. On the one hand, it **convinces almost all the students** with whom I have discussed the topic of free will and moral responsibility. On the other hand, it often **tends to be dismissed, in contemporary discussion of free will and moral responsibility**, as wrong, or irrelevant, or fatuous, or too rapid, or an expression of metaphysical meglomania."



THINKING AND SPEAKING

“A thought comes when it wishes, and not when I wish it.”

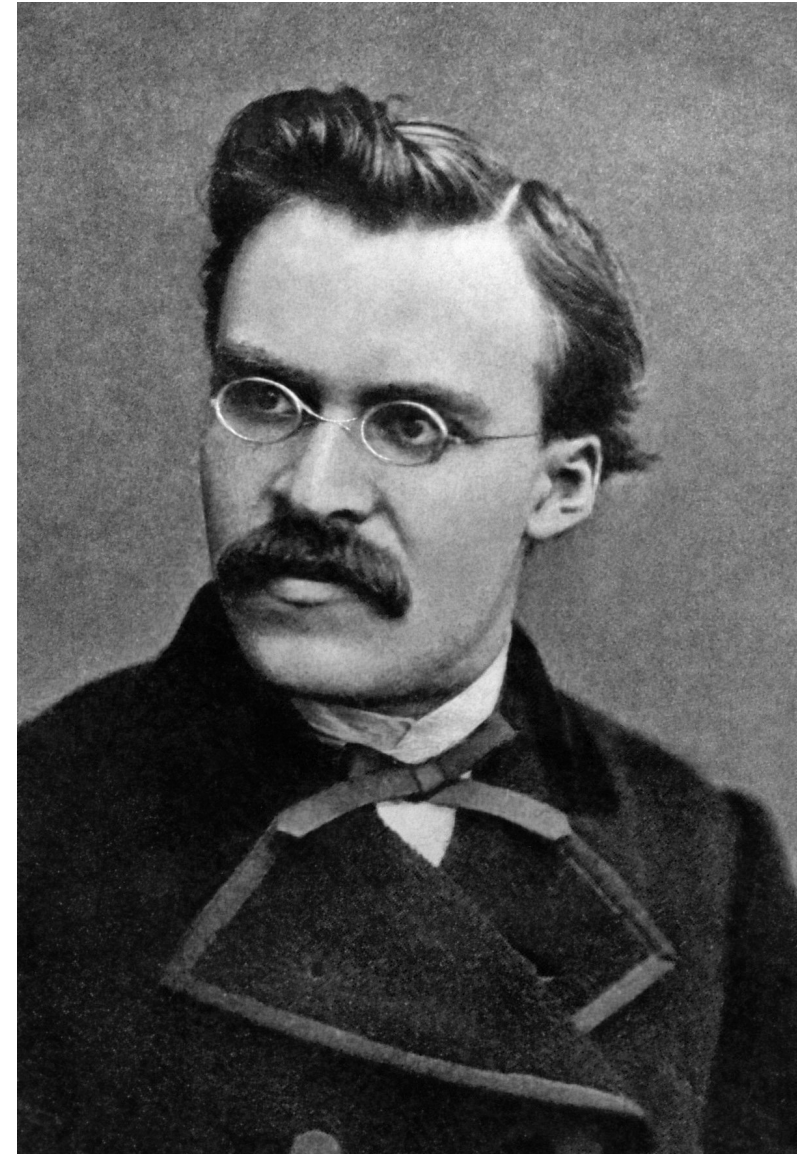
- Nietzsche



FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

“We laugh at him who steps out of his room at the moment when the sun steps out of its room, and then says: “I will that the sun shall rise;” and at him who cannot stop a wheel, and says: “I will that it shall roll;” and at him who is thrown down in wrestling, and says: “here I lie, but I will lie here!” But, all laughter aside, are we ourselves ever acting any differently whenever we employ the expression: “I will”?”

Daybreak



NIETZSCHE AGAIN

“The causa sui is the best self-contradiction that has ever been conceived. It is a perversion of logic. But the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for ‘freedom of the will’ in the metaphysical sense, which still holds sway in the minds of the half educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions and oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involve nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* ... to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.”

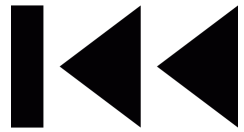
Beyond Good and Evil



HIT REWIND

- Imagine we could rewind time like a movie.
- You go back to an important decision.
- Everything is exactly as it was the first time.
- **Would you do anything differently?**





THE “ROLLBACK” ARGUMENT

Alice must decide whether to lie or tell the truth.

Suppose her decision to lie is undetermined.

God then reverts the universe to precisely its state one minute before her decision to lie.

He replays things 1000 times. Alice lies 508 times and tells the truth 493 times.

What should we think about Alice's 1001 decision?

MARTIN LUTHER

"Here I stand, I can do no other."



THE IRRELEVANCE OF DETERMINISM

Strawson says,

"It makes no difference whether determinism is true or false."

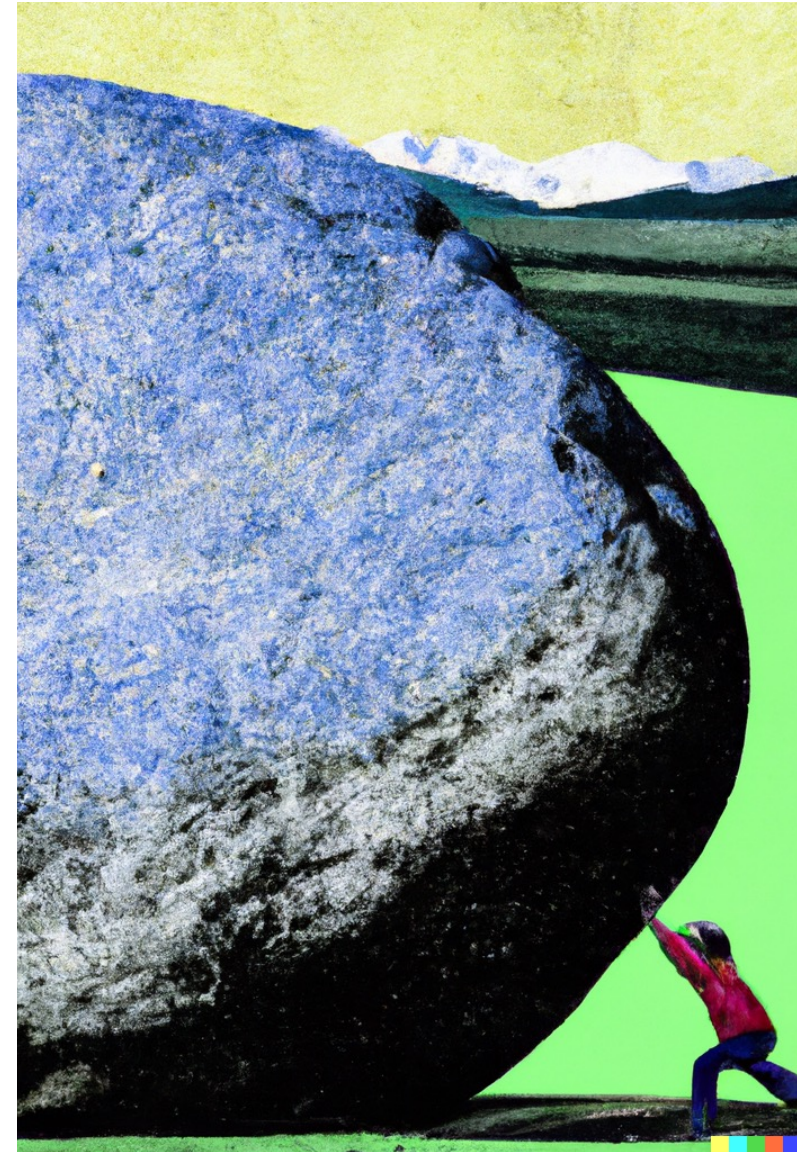
1. To be morally responsible, we must be the ultimate source of our action.
2. But ultimate responsibility is impossible, *whether determinism is true or not*.
3. Thus, determinism is not the real threat to freedom and responsibility.

IMPOSSIBILISM

Free will is not just false, it is *impossible*.

It *doesn't matter* whether determinism is true or not.

Some think the very idea of free will is *incoherent*.



IF DETERMINISM IS
IRRELEVANT, WHAT IS
RELEVANT?

It is about the forming and shaping of our character,
which is the source of our actions.

Strawson is interested in the origins or sources of our
motives.

THE DETAILED ARGUMENT

(1) You do what you do because of the way you are.

(2) To be truly responsible for what you do, you must be truly responsible for the way you are (at least in certain crucial mental respects).

But

(3) You cannot be truly responsible for the way you are, so you cannot be truly responsible for what you do.

Why can't you be truly responsible for the way you are?

THE DETAILED ARGUMENT (CONT'D)

(4) To be truly responsible for the way you are, you must have brought it about that you are the way that you are, and this is impossible.

Why is it impossible? Well, suppose it is not. Suppose that. . .

(5) You have somehow intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are, and that you have brought this about in such a way that you can now be said to be truly responsible for being the way you are now.

For this to be true,

(6) You must already have had a certain nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are as you now are.

THE DETAILED ARGUMENT (CONT'D)

But then

(7) For it to be true you and you alone are truly responsible for how you now are, you must be truly responsible for having had the nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are.

So

(8) You must have intentionally brought it about that you had that nature N, in which case you must have existed already with a prior nature in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you had the nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are...

Here one is setting off on a regress.

PLATO'S HEAVEN

Suppose you are presented with different types of characters, sets of values, interests, preferences, and so on, and given a magic pill which will make you into whatever kind of person you want to be.

How do you choose?



CHOOSING WHO YOU WANT TO BE

- You might flip a coin, but then you are not in control of your new persona.
- You must choose on the basis of who you already are – your reasons, values, principles, etc.
- But you are the ultimate cause (or “self-making”) only if you caused yourself to have the reasons (values, etc.) you already have.
- This is impossible, on pain of infinite regress.



ANOTHER VERSION

1. At least some of the actions for which an agent is responsible have to be actions that are free, actions that are up to the agent.
2. The free actions that ground one's responsibility must be rational actions, at least in the sense that they are performed for reasons, even if not very good reasons.
3. When one acts for a reason, one does what one does because of the way one is mentally.
4. Hence, if what one does when one acts for a reason is to be up to one, then how one is mentally, in some respect, must be up to one, in such a way that one is responsible for how one is mentally, in that respect.

ANOTHER VERSION (CONT'D)

5. But in order for how one is mentally, in some respect, to be up to one in this way, one must have freely chosen to be this way mentally, and this choice must be one that was made for some further reason.
6. But then, since one will have made this choice because of some further way that one was mentally, one's being this further way mentally must be up to one.
7. One must then have freely chosen, for a reason, to be this further way mentally, and have freely chosen, for a reason, to be some yet further way mentally, and so on, ad infinitum.

ANOTHER VERSION (CONT'D)

8. One must, in short, have completed an infinite series of choices of how one would be mentally, in certain respects.
9. The completion of such a regress of choices would make one *causa sui*, at least with regard to how one is mentally, in certain respects.
10. But this is impossible.
11. Hence moral responsibility is impossible.

THIS UNDERMINES RESPONSIBILITY

One does what one does because of the way one is,
and one is in no way ultimately responsible for the
way one is.

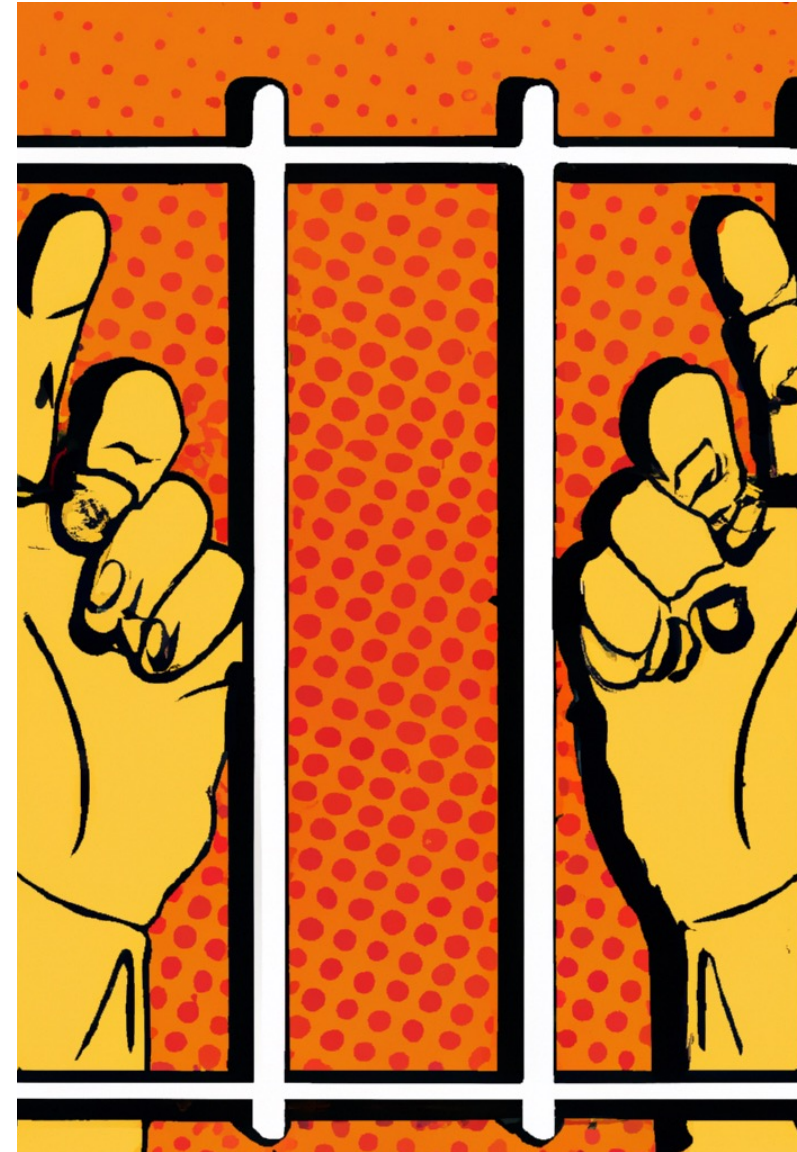
*So how can one be justly held responsible for anything
one does?*



PUNISHMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY

What implications does this have for punishment, reward, and responsibility?

- “There is a fundamental sense in which no punishment or reward is ever ultimately just.”
- “It is exactly as just to punish or reward people for their actions as it is to punish or reward them for the (natural) color of their hair or the (natural) shape of their faces.”

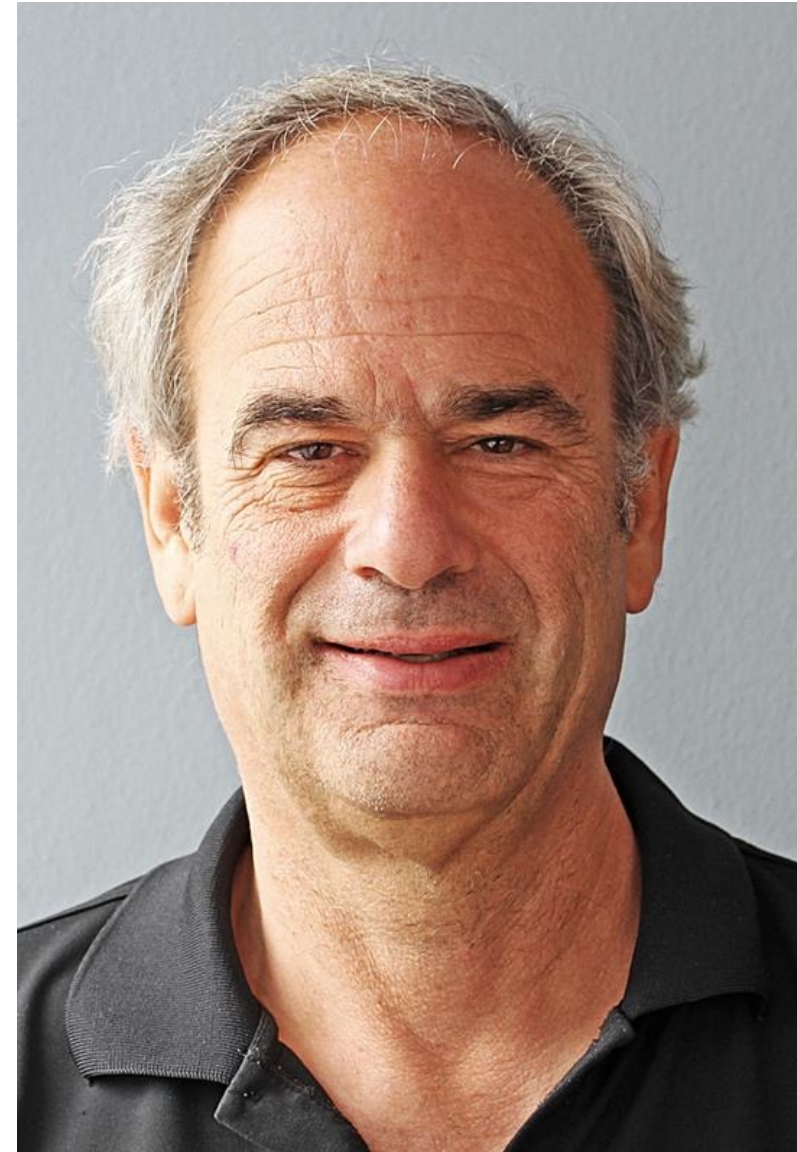


TOO DEMANDING?

Is the demand for “self-creation” legitimate?

John Martin Fischer says,

We should scale down the inflated demands for “self-creation”, “origination” or “ultimate sourcehood”.



COMPATIBILIST FREEDOM

The idea that a free agent "could have done otherwise" is a key element in the free will argument.

G. E. Moore argued in 1912 that one could do otherwise, but *only if one had chosen to do otherwise*.

The fallacy lies in supposing that when we say "A could have done otherwise" we mean that A, being what he was and being placed in the circumstances in which he was placed, could have done something other than what he did. But in fact we never do mean this.



ARM RAISING FREEDOM

Suppose I raise my arm to demonstrate that I freely raised my arm.

I want to raise it, and I do so quite consciously.

If I hadn't wanted to raise my arm, I wouldn't have done so.

A paradigmatic kind of freedom.



SHOULD WE REJECT SUCH FREEDOM?

Strawson would say,

“But I didn’t choose to want to raise my arm”.

The crux of the issue:

Does it or does it not matter, for the purpose of moral responsibility, whether we have chosen our mental states?

A problem for Strawson, or not?



THE ROBBERY

You're given the option: "Your money or your life."

The person is not free because they are *compelled*.

The person is free in a sense, because they freely chose the option that *matches their preferences*.

Perhaps this case brings out *two senses of freedom*?



CAUSATION VS. CONSTRAINT

A.J. Ayer,

“We began with the assumption that freedom is contrasted with *causality*... But this assumption has led us into difficulties and I now wish to suggest that it is mistaken. For it is not, I think, causality that freedom is to be contrasted with, but *constraint*.”

What does he have in mind?



EXAMPLES OF CONSTRAINT

- Compelled by another person (e.g., gunpoint)
- Hypnotism
- Drugged against will
- Threats
- Making an “offer one can’t refuse”
- Psychological conditioning
- Kleptomaniac vs. thief



THREE OPTIONS

Skepticism

Accept the “inflated” notion of self-creation and jettison a belief in free will and moral responsibility.

Heroic Libertarianism

Accept the “inflated” notion of self-creation and show that we in fact meet it.

The Deflated View

Reject the “inflated” notion of self-creation in favor of something more reasonable.

WHICH IS THE COMMONSENSE VIEW?

Two options

1. The “inflated” demand is endorsed by common sense but utterly impossible to fulfill.
2. The “inflated” demand is obviously and straightforwardly impossible to fulfill, so cannot be the picture endorsed by common sense.