

**Blameworthiness, Wrongness, and Luck**

The principle that blameworthiness-requires-wrongness (B0) is deeply entrenched in the literature on free will and moral responsibility. This principle says “one is blameworthy for an action only if it is wrong for one to perform that action.”<sup>1</sup> Many people find this principle intuitively compelling. The principle is important for another reason: it underpins one seemingly compelling argument (the “Deontic Argument”) for the incompatibility of determinism and moral responsibility. I aim to argue that (B0) is false, and in so doing, also show that the Deontic Argument cannot sustain incompatibilism.

To understand (B0), it is important to distinguish among different sorts of moral appraisal. In particular, among other varieties, such appraisals can be of the deontic, aretaic, and responsibility-involving variety.<sup>2</sup> Most simply, responsibility appraisals have to do primarily with *agents*— they involve assessing agents as either praiseworthy or blameworthy.<sup>3</sup> They differ from deontic appraisals which have to do primarily with the assessment of actions as right,

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<sup>1</sup> Haji, Ishtiyaque. 2009. *Incompatibilism's Allure: Principal Arguments for Incompatibilism*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, pp. 110.

<sup>2</sup> In more detail, deontic appraisals assess the moral rightness, wrongness or obligatoriness of *actions*. We are not primarily assessing the agent in this instance, and so we are not looking to attribute, for example, praise or blame to any party. We merely judge the action as a right one, a wrong one, or an obligatory one. Aretaic appraisals have to do with judgments concerning the character of persons, their virtues and vices. These appraisals should not be confused with responsibility appraisals, although the difference can seem very small. It is possible for agents to have a character trait that has no bearing on moral responsibility and, conversely, an agent can be morally responsible for something in a way that has no impact on that agent’s character. These would be cases in which we would say “she acted in a way that was completely out of character.” And lastly, of course, responsibility appraisals *do* attribute praise or blame to a particular agent for performing a given action.

<sup>3</sup> There are at least two different views about the concept of moral responsibility: the ledger view and the Strawsonian view. On the ledger view, when we say that an agent is morally praiseworthy we mean that his or her moral record is positively affected in light of some fact about this agent. To be morally blameworthy, an agent’s moral record is adversely affected by some fact. This metaphorical device, the ledger, acts as a means of tallying the facts that, in turn, reflect the moral worth of the agent. Another competing view is derived from Peter Strawson’s landmark article “Freedom and Resentment” in which he proposes that agents are morally responsible based upon their “reactive attitudes.” On Strawson’s view, to be morally responsible is to be an appropriate object of the reactive attitudes. These attitudes include things such as love, gratitude, resentment, anger, indignation and so forth. They encompass our *reactions* to ill will or good will expressed in certain actions and so act as our evaluative compasses to assess the responsibility of agents.

wrong, or obligatory; and they are different from aretaic assessments which are concerned with an agent's character.

Returning to (B0)— an agent is blameworthy for an action only if it is wrong for the agent to perform that action— this principle is one that links responsibility concepts with deontic concepts. It says agents can be blameworthy (a responsibility appraisal) *only if* they perform a wrong action (a deontic appraisal). To be clear, in this principle ‘action’ refers either to a mental<sup>4</sup> or a physical action. For many people this principle is intuitively compelling; you might wonder how one can be blameworthy for something that is not wrong. A case in which this intuition is elicited is the following: imagine you are taking an evening stroll and you happen upon a group of children playing baseball in a field. You walk up to the child at bat, snatch the bat from her and beat her until she is lifeless. Clearly you have done something *wrong* and you are *blameworthy* for the child’s injuries or death.<sup>5</sup> Many people think that these appraisals (blameworthiness and wrongness) do not, and cannot, come apart (in the right direction): there is no blameworthiness without wrongdoing.

Recall, (B0) is significant partly because it plays a fundamental role in an argument for the incompatibility of determinism and moral responsibility, the Deontic Argument. In my view, the argument stands or falls with (B0). The Deontic Argument is just one argument among several for incompatibilism.<sup>6</sup> It attempts to derive the conclusion that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility,<sup>7</sup> by way of assuming that determinism does not leave room for an agent’s ability to do otherwise. Essentially, the argument’s thrust is that without free

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<sup>4</sup> For my project I am including things like intentions or choices as mental actions.

<sup>5</sup> Unless you are insane!

<sup>6</sup> Incompatibilism is the philosophical thesis that determinism is incompatible with free will, while compatibilism is the thesis that moral responsibility and free will *are* compatible with determinism. Determinism is the view that a complete statement of all the nonrelational facts of the world at a certain time, in conjunction with a complete statement of all the laws of nature, entails all truths, including truths regarding human choices, decisions, or actions.

<sup>7</sup> Haji, Ishtiyaque. 2009. *Incompatibilism's Allure: Principal Arguments for Incompatibilism*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, pp. 103.

will, agents will not be blameworthy despite performing wrong actions. In addition to (B0), the Deontic Argument requires the plausible principle that “ought” implies “can”: if one morally ought to do something, one can do it; and if one ought not to do something, one can refrain from doing it. Much of my discussion of the Deontic Argument could easily translate into an argument against praiseworthiness. This variation would appeal to the principle that praiseworthiness requires obligatoriness or permissibility (P0), but for simplicity I focus solely on blameworthiness.

The Deontic Argument can be summarized in this way: If one is blameworthy for performing some action, it is wrong for one to do it (given (B0)). If it is wrong for one to do some action, one ought not to do it (because “wrong” simply amounts to “ought not”). If one ought not to do something, one can refrain from doing it (as “ought not” implies “can refrain from”). Therefore, if one is blameworthy for doing something, one can refrain from doing it. Since determinism rules out our being able to do otherwise, the upshot of this argument is that if the world is deterministic, then no one is blameworthy for any of one’s actions.

On my view, (B0) is mistaken, and because the Deontic Argument relies upon this principle, that argument should be rejected. I adopt a two-fold strategy to show that (B0) is false: First, I give counterexamples against (B0) which invoke the suberogatory, cases in which it seems that an agent is to blame for a certain action even though that action is not wrong. Second, I introduce considerations of moral luck motivated by Michael J. Zimmerman that tell against (B0).

There are plausible cases which seem to show that one can be blameworthy without doing wrong; or, indeed, one can do wrong and fail to be blameworthy, although the latter sorts of case are uncontroversial and will not be addressed any further (that there are excuses—cases

in which one has done wrong but is not blameworthy—is generally accepted).

I invoke suberogatory acts as a counterexample to (B0). Common-sense morality recognizes the moral category of the suberogatory. As a first stab, suberogatory acts are “bad to do, but not forbidden.”<sup>8</sup> These are precisely the type of actions which successfully show that blameworthiness does not require wrongness. Mowing your lawn at 6:00AM on a Sunday morning or taking the last seat on the train that could accommodate a pair of starry-eyed lovers are suberogatory acts. Although an agent may not do anything wrong when performing such actions, they fall short of decency. On the traditional account of suberogation, a suberogatory act is morally optional (that is, it is neither morally wrong nor morally obligatory), its performance is blameworthy, and its omission is not praiseworthy. Cases of suberogation cast doubt on (B0) because suberogatory acts are not *wrong*, but agents can be *blameworthy* for performing them. In this way, the suberogatory supports the view that (B0) is mistaken.

Next, against (B0), I begin with the principle that degree of responsibility cannot be affected by what is not in one’s control; in short, degree of blameworthiness cannot be affected by luck. Taking my cue from Michael J. Zimmerman’s “Taking Luck Seriously,”<sup>9</sup> I will endeavour to establish that (B0) is false in light of examples that show that an agent can be blameworthy even if he did not do *anything*, never mind doing something wrong.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on the following sequence of cases involving moral luck clearly brings out the divide between agent appraisals and the deontic ones at issue in (B0).

- (i) Intending to kill Henry, George-1 throws a dagger that pierces Henry’s heart. (ii)
- George-2 throws a dagger to kill Henry, but a bird takes the hit, sparing Henry’s life. (iii)

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<sup>8</sup> Driver, Julia. 1992. “The Suberogatory,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70:3, pp. 286.

<sup>9</sup> Zimmerman, Michael J. 2002. “Taking Luck Seriously,” *Journal of Philosophy* 99 (November), 553-576.

<sup>10</sup> I just want to make a note that (B0) is not Zimmerman’s target in his article. My project involves an application of his luck cases to show that (B0) is false.

George-3, about to throw the dagger at Henry, is overcome by paralysis and falls to the ground; again Henry walks free. The first case serves as our benchmark, in which it is uncontroversial to assume that George is responsible for killing Henry. But George-2 could be said to be just as responsible as George-1. The circumstances were exactly the same as those in the case of George-1 to every extent possible, aside from the bird's interfering in the dagger's path. The relevant factors in appraising responsibility are those that are in George-2's control. It seems fair to judge George-2 to be just as much of a morally reprehensible agent as George-1, given the same circumstances (which include the agent's deliberation). In this way, George-1 and George-2 seem on a par as far as blameworthiness is concerned, given that they both decided to kill, and they both made the attempt—the passing bird seems irrelevant in appraising them for blameworthiness. Both are equally responsible, despite being responsible for different things. But there is a counterfactual that is true in the case of George-2: had the bird not intercepted the dagger, George-2 *would have* killed Henry-2. Outside factors beyond his control do not diminish the blameworthiness of George-2.

It seems plausible that George-3 is also just as blameworthy as George-1, although the case strikes many as controversial. My opponents may deny responsibility in this case because George-3 did not perform any action. He didn't *do* anything, so he didn't do any wrong—and so, it appears, he is not blameworthy *for* any action. Lest the judgment that George-3 is responsible, just as much so as George-1, strike one as implausible, one should be careful to distinguish between the scope of responsibility (roughly, the things for which one is responsible) and degree of responsibility (roughly, how responsible one is for what, if anything, one is responsible for). George-1 is responsible for more things than George-3, but they are equally responsible. Scope of responsibility for George-3 has fallen to naught, but I contend he is just as

blameworthy as George-1. The relevant factors in appraising responsibility are those that are in the control of the agent. An interfering bird or a sudden bout of paralysis are not factors which are relevant to assessing responsibility in any of the cases. Despite being overcome by paralysis, the following counterfactual is true of George-3, just as a counterfactual was true of George-1 and George-2: had he not been paralyzed, he *would have* thrown the dagger to kill Henry. To further strengthen the case of George-3, we can appeal to a principle of control, call it the “luck principle”, which states that what is beyond one’s control cannot diminish one’s degree of blameworthiness. As Zimmerman puts it, “luck is irrelevant to degree of moral responsibility”.<sup>11</sup>

But now consider the case of George-4. (iv) George-4 also wants to kill Henry-4, but he does not even have access to a dagger (or any other means to murder). And yet, the following counterfactual is still true of George-4 (or so we may assume): had the circumstances cooperated (i.e. if George-4 had access to a dagger), he *would have killed* Henry-4. In the cases of George-1, George-2, George-3 and George-4 it is plausible to suppose that each of these agents is equally morally blameworthy even if they performed no wrong action (as in the last two cases).

Zimmerman proposes that the degree of blameworthiness is to be distinguished from the scope of blameworthiness. Recall responsibility appraisals are of agents or at least primarily of agents. All the Georges are equally responsible given that they could be said to be something like the same type of agent— by this I mean that when we look to the “moral ledger” of each George, they match up exactly.<sup>12</sup> The judgment that George-1 but not George-4 performed a wrong action is a deontic one. Again, this is distinct from the responsibility judgement which is an appraisal (principally) of the *agent*. My primary conclusion from such cases is straightforward: If George-3 and George-4 can be blameworthy, but not blameworthy for

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<sup>11</sup> Zimmerman, Michael J. 2002. “Taking Luck Seriously,” *Journal of Philosophy* 99 (November), 559.

<sup>12</sup> I want to be clear: here I am not making any sort of character (aretaic) judgement when I say that the four Georges are “the same type of agent.” This comment is meant to point out that their ledgers are identical in relevant respects.

any action (choice, decision, etc.), it follows that although they are blameworthy, they are not blameworthy for having done wrong. So, blameworthiness does not require wrongness.

There are several ways in which one might want to overturn the views concerning luck and responsibility I have outlined. For instance, one might raise questions concerning the scope versus degree of responsibility distinction. Or one might be concerned whether the notion of responsibility at issue when I claim (agreeing with Zimmerman) that George-3 and George-4 are responsible, but *not for* anything is the same as the notion of responsibility at issue when, for instance, I say that George-1 is responsible for killing the innocent person. Or one might worry about the practical consequences of appealing to luck to see whether or not people are responsible for their deeds. Or one may even worry that my account is insufficiently sensitive to consequential worries. I will briefly address the first two of these concerns in the remainder of this paper.

By degree of responsibility, what is meant is something like the extent to which the moral record of each agent is affected in some negative way (perhaps in exactly the same way) whether or not the outcomes of their actions are realized or whether or not these actions are performed. Scope concerns the things for which an agent is responsible. As the cases of George-3 and George-4 illustrate, scope can dwindle to nothing and *still* an agent can be morally responsible. This seems like an important feature of moral responsibility that is simply not captured by (B0). If luck is irrelevant to moral responsibility, it seems plausible that wrongness cannot be necessary for blameworthiness. The cases of the four Georges reveal that it is *not* true that an agent is morally blameworthy for performing an action only if it is morally wrong for the agent to perform that action.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> One may think that the antecedent of this conditional is false in the cases of George-3 and George-4. But by looking to the counterfactuals as I do to attribute blame, this worry is dodged.

My view is that although the scope versus degree of responsibility distinction is a genuine one, it is not necessary to sustain my point that George-3 is responsible. Rather, responsibility may be imputed to him by virtue of the following sort of counterfactual being true: had luck not intervened, he would have killed. My position is that this sort of counterfactual sustains the view that one can be blameworthy without doing wrong. I think it is stronger to rely solely upon the counterfactual in attributing blame, and by doing so one can avoid the scope-degree objection. Zimmerman hangs on to the distinction, but I think you can successfully account for the equal moral responsibility by appealing to the counterfactual alone.

At least one philosopher<sup>14</sup> has judged the scope-degree distinction to be suspect. Domsky notes:

“If I can be responsible for an additional thing without being more responsible, this means that this thing I am responsible for adds zero degrees of responsibility to my net degree of responsibility. This implies that I must be zero degrees responsible for the additional thing. How, though, can I still be responsible *for* something if I am zero degrees responsible for it? Imagine watering house plants this way. The scope of your watering can increase – you can buy more plants – but somehow you never need to buy a bigger watering can, since the degree to which you water need not change. One way or another, this story only ends one way: with some number of dead plants.”<sup>15</sup>

Domsky’s concern is this: you cannot be responsible for more things without being responsible to a greater degree. I think that this concern is unpersuasive. First, keep in mind that Zimmerman subscribes to the ledger view concerning moral responsibility—degree of responsibility concerns a negative fact about the agent that affects that agent’s ledger. These facts can be true of agents whether or not they perform an action. It is enough that they *would*

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<sup>14</sup> Domsky, Darren. 2004. “There is No Door: Finally Solving the Problem of Moral Luck,” *Journal of Philosophy* 51 (September), 445-464.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 453.

perform some wrong action. Coupling this with the scope-degree distinction, the degree to which you are responsible does not change if luck is irrelevant to responsibility because it is counterfactually true of George, for example, that he would murder Henry had factors beyond his control cooperated. Using Domsky's plant analogy, it is not the case that one simply adds more house plants and expects to continue to use the same amount of water to nourish all of them. Instead, the number of house plants— whether in George-1's or George-4's house—is the same, and the amount of water is enough for all the plants in each setting. On this analogy, I think Zimmerman's point may be put in this way: some of the plants (or all of them) found in George-4's house are *hidden*,<sup>16</sup> but this does not mean that his watering can will not do the job. So Domsky's objection remains unpersuasive because it disregards the crucial point about counterfactual truths which make it fair to judge agents as equally morally responsible.

With respect to the second objection—that different notions of responsibility are being conflated—I argue that careful attention to the nature of responsibility will show that this objection is not on target. Zimmerman does employ the notion of responsibility *tout court*: agents are not responsibly *for* anything, they are just responsible, *period*. On first entertaining this notion, it may seem bizarre. To return to the description of the moral ledger view of moral responsibility, recall that an agent's "ledger" is either positively or negatively affected in virtue of some fact about the agent. The same sort of relevant fact is true of George-4, despite his not being responsible for anything, just as it was true of George-1: had George-4 had the cooperation of certain features of his environment, he would have freely killed Henry in just the same way that George-1 did. In the end, it does not seem problematic to employ the *tout court* form of responsibility. This is because it is not really a different notion. It is simply meant to capture the important element of the ledger view of responsibility, and to draw out the importance of

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<sup>16</sup> I say "hidden" to capture the counterfactual actions I have provided in my argument against (B0).

assigning the same germane facts that bear on responsibility to all four Georges, who despite being responsible for different things or nothing at all, are still identical in terms of moral standing. Again, by this I mean that if we were to review the germane entries in their ledgers, all four, in these respects, would appear identical. This is what justifies a judgement of equal degree of blameworthiness, and also shows that despite committing no action, and so committing no wrong, an agent can still be morally blameworthy.<sup>17</sup>

It seems many of the objections to my position are motivated by a feeling of discomfort regarding the idea of being blameworthy *right now* for actions that you *would* perform. This is indeed my position, but I would like to add that a little philosophical discomfort does not warrant the judgement that the position is incorrect. I think it is plausible to conjecture that the grounds for rejecting my position are motivated by the view that, for instance, George-4 deserves the same punishment as George-1, the murderer. But I have not made any claims whatsoever about punishment— that would require an entirely separate project. Blameworthiness is one thing, punishment something quite different. My claim that agents can be equally blameworthy, despite being blameworthy for different things, can withstand this feeling of philosophical uneasiness.

It is very common to maintain that (B0) —a person is morally blameworthy for performing an action only if it is morally wrong for her to perform this action— is true. This principle is false on several accounts. There are, for example, cases in which an agent is blameworthy for an action that is not wrong. Further, (B0) fails because it has been shown that

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<sup>17</sup> It seems one problem many people have with my position is this: I say there is no *wrong* to point to in the cases of George-3 and George-4, but my opponents say “wait a minute, what about the wrongness in the intention, or the wrongness in holding a certain disposition?” To this I respond as follows: pointing to these things on the “list of things which the agent is responsible *for*” is perfectly alright. But my claim is that despite performing different actions, or not performing any of the same actions agents can still be *equally blameworthy*. I could press further and give a case of George-5: he has no desire to kill Henry— he doesn’t even know a Henry— but it is *still* true of him counterfactually that *had* he encountered Henry he *would* kill him. So here the scope of action is zero, but he is still equally responsible as George-1 because George-5’s moral ledger is affected in exactly the same way given this counterfactual fact about him.

agents can be morally blameworthy even if they perform *no action at all*. In very simple terms, Zimmerman's view correctly captures the intuition that having any of George-2, George-3 or George-4 freely roam the streets is as much of a risk to society as it is for George-1 to roam free. It is much like the famous catch-phrase at the end of a Scooby-Doo episode: "And I would've gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids!"—well, if it weren't for my (and Zimmerman's) meddling, George-2 through -4 would also be off the hook regarding moral responsibility.

Appraisals of moral responsibility are *agent-focused* and assess an agent based upon the relevant entries in that agent's relevant "moral ledger". Individuals can either adversely or favourably affect their moral status by performing right or wrong actions or, as illustrated in the George cases, be the type of agent who *would* perform an action had the circumstances cooperated. (B0) simply does not capture these important aspects of both agent appraisals and deontic appraisals. Such appraisals can and do come apart.

Finally, since the Deontic Argument relies upon (B0), and (B0) is false, there is ample reason to reject that argument.

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