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Author(s): BRUCE N. WALLER

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**HARD DETERMINISM AND THE PRINCIPLE  
OF VACUOUS CONTRAST\***

BRUCE N. WALLER

This essay will give a straight answer to an embarrassing question: what would you *count* as genuine moral responsibility? That doesn't sound, on the face of it, like a very embarrassing question. But to hard determinists (determinists who reject moral responsibility as incompatible with determinism) it is like being asked about that long ago night at an undergraduate party: we should prefer the question were not asked.

Hard determinism draws fire from many quarters, and many of the attacks result from misunderstanding the hard determinist position. But one attack combines a correct understanding of hard determinism with a principle (the principle of varuous contrast) that most hard determinists acknowledge. It is that challenge to hard determinism, and the embarrassing question it poses for hard determinists (What would you *count* as moral responsibility?) that this essay will face.

A child is abused at an early age, grows up in a violent home, lives in an area in which crime is rampant, and suffers one bad influence after another until he or she emerges a hardened criminal. Such cases are grist for the hard determinist mill: how can you say that such an unfortunate *deserves* blame for his/her vicious character and criminal acts? But that is a standard opening, and the counterattacks are almost automatic: what about the child from a similar environment, with an equally disadvantageous family life and the same constant exposure to crime and poverty, who perseveres and triumphs and becomes (pick your favorite) a banker or barrister or priest? And the book response is parried with the standard answer: the cases may appear similar, but in fact they are crucially different. The individual who escaped the cycle of crime and poverty had an extra measure of intelligence or special drive or fortunate positive influence (the proverbial kindly priest or sensitive teacher or dedicated coach) which the other individual lacked. But the criminal is surely not to be blamed for having less intelligence (whether that is genetic or the result of early environmental influences such as malnutrition or stimulus deprivation) nor for having less drive (due to an unfortunate early schedule of reinforcement) nor for failing to encounter an opportune good influence. Neither deserves credit or blame for good or bad fortune.

But the anti-child-determinist may counter with a tough argument; very well, the slum-child-turned-banker may be only lucky rather than morally

\* Thanks to members of the Elon College Center for Renaissance Studies (John G. Sullivan, Anne Ponder, Will Mignuolo, Russell Gill, Martha Smith, Bill Rich, and Gregg Pappendick) for valuable discussions.

responsible. But if you refuse to count *that* individual as morally responsible, whom would you count? You hard determinists bandy about claims that individuals are *not morally responsible*, so you apparently think that the notion of moral responsibility makes sense (it is not like denying that an individual is frumious). By the principle of vacuous contrast a term is meaningful only if one can specify contrasting cases in which it does and does not apply. Thus if it is meaningful to claim that an individual is *not* morally responsible, it must be possible to specify at least *some* (contrasting) case in which an individual *is* morally responsible. Or failing that, one must admit the hard determinist enthusiasm for general absolutism is gibberish.

Now that sort of attack wedges the hard determinist between a rock and a hard place. Hard determinists are rightly reluctant to abandon the principle of vacuous contrast; but any admission of moral responsibility abandons hard determinism. Admitting the bare possibility of intelligible nondetermined "contra-causal free will" leaves sufficient space for sophisticated libertarians (like C. A. Campbell) to build up enough moral responsibility to satisfy the most guilt-ridden soul; and to allow that an individual may be responsible for completely determined behavior is to give up the game to soft determinists (compatibilists).

The answer to this formidable dilemma will show how broad is the gulf which divides hard determinists from their opponents. What would a hard determinist count as morally responsible behavior? Nothing. But that is not an admission that the hard determinist is guilty of violating the principle of vacuous contrast, because the principle of vacuous contrast is an intrasystematic principle which does not apply across competing systems of thought, and the hard determinist regards moral responsibility as an element of an alien thought framework.

If we are operating within a naturalistic system it is incumbent upon us—by the principle of vacuous contrast—that we be able to specify what would count against the existence of some subatomic particle we are proposing; and if we deny the existence of positrons we must know what positrons are and how to recognize one should we unexpectedly stumble over it. I do not believe that the Loch Ness monster exists; but if reputable biologists should capture a thirty foot slinky sea creature from Loch Ness and place it on public exhibit in an aquarium then I would acknowledge the existence of Nessie. The notion of a creature thought to be extinct but surviving in Loch Ness is certainly meaningful to me, even though I think it very unlikely. But nothing could convince me of the existence of a gorgon. Should someone report the existence of a woman whose scalp grows snakes instead of hair (leave aside the bit about turning all who behold her to stone) I would attribute the report to a hyperactive imagination. Were the observer a reliable friend I would suspect drugs or drink or overwork. If I myself saw the gorgon I would believe it an elaborate hoax or see a psychotherapist or perhaps become a teetotaler. I know that there are people who invest enormous resources and energy in perpetrating hoaxes (Barnum and Bailey Circus recently

toured the U.S. with a “unicorn”); and I can also imagine that I might go a bit batty and begin to “see” all manner of strange creatures; but *nothing* could convince me of the existence of a genuine gorgon. Belief in such a creature is in direct conflict with my system of basic beliefs. Adding a gorgon to my taxonomy is not like adding Nessie. There is a niche for Nessie, however unlikely it is to be occupied; but the gorgon would shatter the system. To acknowledge the existence of a gorgon would require giving up my basic beliefs about biology, destroy my confidence in scientific inquiry, breach my distinction between myth and reality, undermine all my assumptions concerning what is reasonable and what is preposterous. In short, belief in gorgons is part of a system of thought and belief which I reject. I can understand (at least some of) the elements of such a system, but nothing—or nothing short of shattering my current way of thinking—could convince me to accept one of those alien beliefs.

This is a common phenomenon. What would a noncognitivist count as an intuition of objective values? What would a modern physician count as demon possession? What would an atheist count as a miracle? Nothing, nothing, and nothing. The “evidence” cannot even begin to get a purchase, since it will be interpreted in terms of an alien system. Thus the noncognitivist A. J. Ayer believes that “. . . the experiences which some philosophers want to describe as intuitions, or as quasi-sensory apprehensions, of good are not significantly different from those that I want to describe as feelings of approval” (Ayer 1954); the patient’s impassioned reports of demon possession are interpreted as part of his or her illness; the miraculous cure is the perfectly natural remission of the disease.

Demon possession and gorgons and miracles are not meaningless; but they are elements of alien systems of thought. Belief in miracles would require a complete restructuring of my thought processes: literally a conversion experience. I cannot say under what circumstances my entire belief system would crumble, but my inability to state what I would acknowledge as the occurrence of a miracle does not entail that my rejection of miracles is vacuous.<sup>1</sup>

Moral responsibility is part of the miraculous belief system, and hard determinists therefore reject it. As an indication of the vast differences between the systems of thought, consider the position of Roderick Chisholm on free will and moral responsibility. Chisholm maintains that moral responsibility requires that one have the power to do or refrain from doing some act; and that implies that:

If we are responsible . . . then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we really act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain events to happen, and nothing and no one, except we ourselves, causes us to cause those events to happen. (Chisholm 1964, p. 395)

<sup>1</sup> Among the more interesting discussions of competing systems of beliefs are Wittenstein (1969), Hare (1955), and Quine (1969).

So this particular view of moral responsibility is at home in a system of Western religious thought which countenances a God and/or human souls with extraordinary powers. It is not surprising that Martin Luther (and many other theologians) ascribe such powers only to God. Nor is it surprising that those (such as Nietzsche and Sartre) who want to reclaim God as "man's best creation" emphasize such radical autonomous choice as an essential human characteristic. But both the Christian and the existentialist views are fundamentally different from the hard determinist system. As Chisholm notes, if one adopts his view then: "This means that, in one very strict sense of the terms, there can be no complete science of man." (p. 396) In stark contrast the typical hard determinist view assumes that humans, like all other natural phenomena, are appropriate subjects for science and that there are no inherent limits on the power of science to deal with such a subject matter.

And this brings us to the moral of the story. Obviously hard determinists reject the compatibilist account of moral responsibility (that is what makes them *hard* determinists). But it does not follow that their denials of moral responsibility are vacuous. Rather, hard determinists are claiming that moral responsibility is part of an obsolete system of thought: a system which can accommodate spirits, deities, autonomous beings, self-moved movers, and moral responsibility. Among the miracles moral responsibility is quite appropriate. It may be that moral responsibility can be attributed only to God—as Luther argued; or it may be that moral responsibility can be attributed to humans who have taken on the attributes once reserved for God—as Chisholm, Nietzsche, and Sartre maintain; but in either case, moral responsibility fits snugly into that system. And hard determinists maintain that notions of moral responsibility are vestiges of such systems: vestiges that can no more fit into the determinist world view than gargoyles can be harmoniously added to Bauhaus architecture. The proper response to the compatibilist claim that *some* sense must be made of moral responsibility is that *no* variety of moral responsibility can be accommodated within the determinist-mechanist system.

This paper obviously does not establish the truth of hard determinism. I have not given arguments to prove that compatibilism is false, and that is certainly a vexed question. And one might oppose hard determinism on the grounds that a different system of science and scientific explanation—a system which rejects determinism and accommodates autonomy and moral responsibility—is preferable. For example, R. S. Peters (1958) recommends "his reason" explanations which reject a determinist-mechanist system in favour of a purposive-autonomous model. But arguing the relative merits of competing scientific paradigms is also beyond the scope of this essay. The present purpose is merely to explain how hard determinists can be saying something meaningful when they deny moral responsibility and claim that it is not possible for anyone to be morally responsible. The hard determinist denial of moral responsibility is just as meaningful and significant as is the contemporary physician's refusal to consider demon possession as a diagnosis.

Thus hard determinists should not be intimidated by the demand that they must recognize *some* sort of moral responsibility, that they must specify what they would *count* as moral responsibility.<sup>2</sup> The hard determinist answer is that we have no need of that hypothesis, nor any room for it.

*Elon College*  
*Elon College, NC 27244*  
*USA*

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Hook (1958) and Dennett (1984, especially chapter 7).