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Nomy Arpaly: Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage

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Introduction

IN *HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE*, Dale Carnegie suggests that when trying to get an angry person to change her ways, you can improve the situation immediately by telling the person something along the lines of, “I understand your position. If I were in your shoes, I would want exactly the same thing.” In case the reader is concerned that this might be a bald untruth, Carnegie offers the assurance that following this policy never involves lying. After all, if you had your interlocutor’s genetic makeup and life experience, you would act, and think, exactly like her. The only reason that you are not a rattlesnake, Carnegie says by way of example, is that your parents were not rattlesnakes.

There is something tricky about the way Carnegie uses his analogy. The situation Carnegie has in mind is something like this: John is mad at me because I sent him a mistaken report, and were I sent a mistaken report, I would also have been mad. Being sent a mistaken report is a circumstance. On the other hand, being born to rattlesnakes is not the sort of thing that we ordinarily call a ‘circumstance’. There are things I would do in some circumstances and things a rattlesnake would do in the same circumstances. We might say, “If I were a rattlesnake, I would enjoy this weather,” but this is, generally, saying that if I were a different individual (in this case, a very different one, from a different species, genus, family, order, and class), I would enjoy being in the same circumstances (very hot weather) that I (a human being named ‘Nomy Arpaly’) am in. At other times, we might use “if I were a rattlesnake” to mean “if I had some qualities the rattlesnake has”—for example, tolerating very hot weather. Tolerating very hot weather can be naturally treated as a circumstance. Similarly, I can say, “If I were Russell, I would itemize deductions on my tax return,” but mean, essentially, “If I had Russell’s accounting skills, I would itemize deductions on my tax return.” Having accounting skills is usually treated as a circumstance, but being Russell is not.¹

¹ I am assuming that simply acquiring the heat tolerance of rattlesnake or taking an accounting course would not, jokes and hyperboles aside, put my personal identity at risk.

Those of us who think that determinism² poses no problem for moral responsibility, praiseworthiness, or blameworthiness are likely to hold, with commonsense thinking about circumstances and against Carnegie, that at some point, identification with the blamed person's point of view can go too far: if we interpret being in a person's circumstances so broadly as to include all of the person's beliefs and desires and circumstances and so on, eventually we will simply be saying that if we were exactly like him then we would act exactly as he does, which is no more interesting than the claim that if my parents were rattlesnakes I would be one as well. I might exempt a person from blame if I were to discover, say, that he was under duress, and explain it by saying, "If I were in the same circumstances, I would have acted in the same way." But what we mean by that is something like "If I, or you, or other people who are fairly decent and have a reasonable concern for the good and the right, were in the same circumstances, we would act the same way. Of course, in more comfortable circumstances, only a wicked person would act in this manner, but these were not comfortable circumstances." In other words, even if one is a creature of circumstances, there must be some point at which the creature is treated as separate from the circumstances that created her. Your parents might have created a saint, a person who is full of good will for his fellow human beings, while your neighbor's parents created a monster, a person who wants to do nothing but hurt her fellow human beings. But now that the creating has been done, you and your neighbor are full-blown moral agents, and you are a saint and she is a monster, which means that you and she would choose to act quite differently in what can legitimately be called "the same circumstances." After all, circumstances created both me and the rattlesnake, and still I am I and the rattlesnake is a rattlesnake. The rattlesnake and I are not comparable agents, subject to differing fortunes only because of fate and circumstance.

Some find this type of argument compelling, and some do not. Those who are not convinced might point out that while we hold people blameworthy or praiseworthy for their actions, even those of us who, like most nonphilosophers, are willing to talk about nonhuman animals acting do not hold them morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for their actions. We would not make this distinction between human and nonhuman actions,

² Throughout this work I will talk about determinism as though the doctrine were well known and unproblematic, but of course there is a literature on understanding just what determinism amounts to, and it is complex and interesting in its own right. Nothing I say, however, will prejudge the correct understanding of determinism.

one might continue, if we did not believe, rightly or wrongly, that there is some way in which human beings are quite different from other animals. It is not at all reassuring to compare the thought that if I had Hitler's genes and environment, I would be evil to the thought that if my parents were rattlesnakes I would be a rattlesnake, because our belief that people are blameworthy or praiseworthy is based on the assumption that people are not, in this way, like rattlesnakes. It is true that an individual rattlesnake is different from the parents that gave birth to it, but from human beings we expect an additional kind of independence or individuality which a snake cannot have. Had I been in Hitler's exact genetic and environmental circumstances, I might still not have chosen to act as he did, some think. Or, if it turns out that I am as much a creature of circumstance as the rattlesnake, then I am somehow demoted, a thing instead of a person, an object instead of a subject. If we are all like rattlesnakes in a relevant sense, then some unique feature of human beings turns out to be an illusion—and with it, moral responsibility.

And perhaps not only moral responsibility: consider, for example, types of admiration other than the moral. I admire Lance Armstrong, and one of the things for which I admire him is the impressive drive and single-minded determination through which, despite much disbelief and discouragement, he turned himself into the world's greatest cyclist, even after cancer had nearly killed him. If Armstrong's achievements were merely the result of his being a superhuman physical prodigy from birth, I would not be quite as impressed: his excellence would seem more a matter of luck than of personal grit. I would still be impressed by the way he accelerates uphill with seeming effortlessness, but this seeming effortlessness means a lot more to me knowing that it is the result of a truly astounding effort. What, however, if determinism turned out to be true? Would that mean that suddenly we would have to treat such qualities as drive and determination as pure matters of luck, on a par with such things as being born a physical prodigy, and therefore no more significant?

Again, some people would think that the answer is obviously "yes," while others would ask "Why? It's still *his* drive and *his* determination. If he did not have them, he would be a different individual. And naturally, a different individual would not do remotely as well under the same circumstance, because a different individual wouldn't have had the spirit."

The same type of disagreement arises even when it comes to types of merit or value that one would not automatically associate with will or motivation. Those who fear that, if determinism is true, things like virtue and things like ambition are matters of luck, can equally fear that many other

things are a matter of luck, things like love, or like intellectual and artistic talents. Presumably some of us think so already, judging by the fact that even atheists use terms like ‘artistic gifts,’ without being disturbed. But reading Oliver Sacks’s book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* might make us wonder whether we perhaps ought to be disturbed by the specter of artistic or intellectual determination. Sacks (1987, chap. 1) describes a person—the man after whom the book is named—who has been an amateur painter for years, and whose wife explains to Sacks that her husband has entered a new artistic phase, characterized by less realism and more abstraction. Sacks, however, knows that the man has a brain tumor that severely disturbs his grasp of the visual world while making it the case that the patient himself is not aware that anything about his visual perception has gone amiss. Knowing this, the man’s embrace of abstract painting does not seem like an artistic phase anymore: it looks like something that, unbeknownst to him, the tumor has caused him to do. If determinism is true, is all art like that? Does it mean its meaning is lost? The same questions have been asked about love and about intellectual achievements. If determinism is true, is a person’s love of you no more than a pleasant mental illness? Is it just luck that someone happened to come up with a mathematical theorem?

Here is where our intuitions get even more complicated. Many artists, lovers, and intellectuals have proudly declared that they never chose their loves, artworks, or insights. “The book had to be written,” says the writer or poet. “*Exactly* this book had to be written.” “I don’t like her work,” an artist might say of her fellow artist. “It seems so . . . *willed*.” “It *had* to be you!” says the romantic lover. “I *can’t help* falling in love with you.” Mathematicians have been known to say that the truth imposed itself on them or showed itself to them in a dream. And so on. All of these people seem to find it a point of pride that, in some way or another, they did not choose their meaning-creating life moments, but that these moments “chose them.” And while we think about that, we might recall that sometimes even moral admiration uses the language of what I will call *romantic necessity*. “I cannot tell a lie,” says the young George Washington in the famous if apocryphal story, and we assume he cannot because he is too virtuous to do otherwise. And here too one can mention Dennett’s (1984, chap. 6) famous example: the case of Martin Luther declaring, as he risks his life for his principles, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” How does it happen that in some cases we see necessity as a demeaning, dehumanizing thing, while at other times we present it as admirable, even ennobling?

There are many reasons to be interested in the philosophical debate over the possible significance of determinism, and, I suspect, many reasons for which people actually participate in it. My own interest in the question stems from my interest in a broader question: if it turns out that human beings are natural entities, just as subject to the laws of nature as anything else, is there anything to regret about this state of affairs? Suppose it turns out that determinism is true, and that everything, including human beings, is part of a deterministic natural world: is there anything about this state for one to be sorry about?

The answer I wish to sketch is bittersweet. I will argue that unless one is ready to defend some problematic positions about the mind-body problem, there is no reason to think that determinism is incompatible with the existence of moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, or with the existence of meaningful love, art, science, or other reasons to admire people. I say “existence” partially because my view is not based on Peter Strawson’s (1962) idea of the reactive attitudes. I do not only think that in a deterministic world, we would still be rational to blame people or to love them. They would, in a stronger sense, merit the blame or the love. However, there is still something that we do not have in a deterministic setting, and that thing is something that can with full justice be called ‘freedom’. Some of us wish, understandably, for a sort of control or command, if not of our fates, then at least of our own mental states, beliefs, desires, concerns, values, emotions, intentions, and so on. We want to be able not only to do what we want, but also to want only things that we choose to want. We want, in a way, to be able to decide who to be. In a deterministic setting, I will argue, freedom of this sort is the spiritual equivalent of the ability to pick oneself up (literally!) by one’s own bootstraps or to find the secret of perpetual motion: an impossibility, and yet something that a sensible person might well wish for, even, in some circumstances, desperately.

That we often wish for an impossible freedom is, I think, part of what makes the human condition uncomfortable at best and tragic at worst, but uncomfortable or even tragic lives are by no means any less meaningful, and the human condition is still very unlike the condition of the rattlesnake. The difference between us and the rattlesnake is not in freedom but in the ability to *respond to reasons* (including, but not limited to, moral reasons). An incompatibilist might argue that reason responsiveness *requires* freedom, and so if we do not have freedom, we do not have reason responsiveness. Compatibilists might argue that essentially, reason responsiveness *just is* freedom, and so if we have it, we have freedom, and we need not find anything at all uncomfortable with the idea of determinism. In this respect,

both the compatibilist and the incompatibilist would be mistaken. Some things, like my belief that two and two equal four, are both reason responsive and yet not free, and in fact, seeing reason responsiveness in terms of freedom obscures some of its important features. In a deterministic setting, we would be reason responsive, but not free. We would still have meaningful lives and produce meaningful achievements, and we would still be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for our actions, but it would not be unreasonable for us to regret the absence of freedom. When Luther cried “Here I stand, I can do no other,” he was not shrugging off moral responsibility, nor was he denying the meaningfulness of his quest. However, it is not unreasonable to imagine him saying to his image in the mirror, “Alas, I can do no other.” In fact, tradition provides us with a fuller version of Luther’s statement: “Here I stand, I can do no other. *God help me!*”

In the pages to come, chapter 1 sketches a theory of moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in which their existence is compatible with a world in which we cannot do otherwise. The theory does not rely on the reactive attitudes because, as I will argue, the incompatibilist is right when she demands an account not only of the reasons we might have to praise and blame people in a deterministic world, but an account of what might make people truly blameworthy or praiseworthy in a deterministic world independently of our practices. Strawson was wrong to treat the question of whether people are truly praise- or blameworthy as equivalent to the question of whether we have good reason to embrace our reactive attitudes: we have a reason to praise the person who says, “Praise me, or I’ll kill you all!” but this is not a person who is *praiseworthy*. Taking its cue from my account of moral worth in *Unprincipled Virtue* (Arpaly 2003), my account of moral responsibility will rely on notions of good will and ill will, moral concern, and moral indifference. On my account, to have these qualities of will is to respond to moral reasons.³

Building a compatibilist theory of moral praise- and blameworthiness on the notion of response to moral reasons raises an absolutely central question: Can there really be responsiveness to reasons in a deterministic

³ My view is similar to the view of Fischer and Ravizza (1998) in the following respects: it allows for “semicompatibilism”—compatibilism about moral responsibility that does not depend on compatibilism about freedom, and it presupposes an important role for the notion of reason-responsiveness. It is different from theirs in that my view not only does not depend on a concept of freedom but also has no fundamental place for a concept of control, and in other ways that I hope will become apparent.

world? Chapter 2 takes on this question directly, and comes to the conclusion that if there is an incompatibility between determinism and reason responsiveness, then there are necessarily flaws in standard materialistic accounts of mental causation in which mental content plays an important role. While not wading far into this debate, I have more confidence in the materialistic philosophers of mind than in the incompatibilist intuitions that challenge them, and so am left with some confidence in the positive sketch I give of reason responsiveness in a deterministic world. In the course of arguing for this, I tackle the topic of romantic necessity raised earlier—the fact that we sometimes think it a wonderful thing that once two people met, their love *had* to happen, or that an artist's doing a particular sort of work was *inevitable*, while at other times we take to be a depressing, sobering thought that one's love or art is the result of an inevitable causal process. I sort out the sorts of responses to the world that leave meaning intact and distinguish them from those that do not.

At this point, my positive project has been largely completed. I have offered a theory of what it is to be praiseworthy or blameworthy that relies on responsiveness to moral reasons, and shown that reason responsiveness in general is compatible with determinism, so long as standard materialist theories of mind can make good on some of their most basic commitments. But this sort of positive theorizing will inevitably leave many incompatibilists unsatisfied. Admiring much of what other philosophers have said about the compatibility of determinism and meaningfulness (in both moral and nonmoral domains), and having made some particular arguments on this topic myself (Arpaly 2002), I have elected not to spend this work going over familiar arguments and puzzle cases in detail. Instead, I use chapter 3 to strike out in a somewhat different direction in attempting to answer the critics. If there is a fundamental intuition driving incompatibilism about moral responsibility, it is the idea that 'ought' implies 'can', and that in a deterministic universe, there is no appropriate sense in which one can do what one does not. Chapter 3 attacks this fundamental intuition directly, arguing that 'ought' does not imply 'can'. The argument takes us into another corner of reason responsiveness: that of responsiveness to epistemic reasons. While epistemic norms clearly exist, responding to epistemic reasons is never a matter of choice, and so the connection between 'ought' and ability is not as so often conceived. In the course of this discussion, I make clear the difference between freedom and reason-responsiveness, a difference compatibilists tend to overlook as much as incompatibilists. I also explore further what it is that we mean by 'freedom', looking for clues in the patterns which pre-theoretical (or, at least, undergraduate classroom)

disagreements about free will tend to follow. This is followed by an interlude of sorts in which I discuss examples involving induced beliefs and desires (such as beliefs and desires induced by nefarious neurosurgeons).

In the final chapter, chapter 4, I argue that despite all of the above, there is still something sad about our being as much a part of nature as the rattlesnake. Of course, how sad one should be about it depends on many things—some of us seem to crave freedom more than others—but compatibilists about responsibility, reason-responsiveness, and meaning in life stretch their luck when they suggest that reason responsiveness gives us all the freedom we want. I will argue that those who see freedom in the “right” kind of causation—who argue, for example, that if you are acting out of your own deepest values, then you are essentially free—are mistaken, in that what they offer are only free will substitutes, agreeable to some people under some circumstances but not to others. In the course of this, I will defend the view that there is a way in which it *does* sometimes make sense to wish for the impossible, or at least to regret that it does not obtain.

When I was beginning this project, Arthur Applbaum of the Center for Ethics and the Professions at Harvard asked me what I was working on. I said, “Free will.” To that he replied, “Free will? Surely you mean *cheap* will. Nothing is *free* in this world.” All in all, I think he is right, but I nonetheless aim to show that the absence of truly free will does not cheapen our lives.