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Responsibility, Control, and Expression

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ABSTRACT

The philosophical tradition has assumed the existence of a close relationship between moral responsibility and freedom. Freedom can be understood as a capacity of control over our decisions and actions. On this traditional perspective, freedom (control) is necessary for moral responsibility. However, the question of moral responsibility has recently acquired an increasing independence from the problem of freedom. Some important steps in this direction have been taken by Peter Strawson and Robert Adams. The development of this alternative point of view has given rise to what is sometimes called “attributionism”, according to which one can be morally responsible for actions, and even for attitudes, without having control over them. What makes someone responsible for such things is not that they are had or performed freely, but rather that they are expressions of certain mental features of the agent. On this approach, the truth or falsity of determinism becomes almost irrelevant to moral responsibility. In this paper, I present these two views of moral responsibility as well as a way of reconciling them in a unitary conception that retains advantages of both approaches while hopefully avoiding their main difficulties.

KEYWORDS: *Moral Responsibility, Freedom, Control, Expression, Peter Strawson, Robert Adams, Angela Smith, Gary Watson.*

RESUMEN

La tradición filosófica ha supuesto la existencia de una estrecha relación entre la responsabilidad moral y la libertad. La libertad puede entenderse como una capacidad de control sobre las decisiones y las acciones. Desde esta perspectiva tradicional la libertad (control) es necesaria para la responsabilidad moral. Sin embargo, la cuestión de la responsabilidad moral ha adquirido recientemente una creciente independencia del problema de la libertad. Algunos pasos importantes en esta dirección han sido dados por Peter Strawson y Robert Adams. El desarrollo de este punto de vista alternativo ha dado lugar a lo que algunas veces se ha denominado “atribucionismo”, de acuerdo con el cual uno puede ser moralmente responsable de acciones, e incluso actitudes, sin tener control sobre ellas. Lo que hace que alguien sea responsable de tales cosas no es que las tenga o las lleve a cabo libremente, sino más bien que sean expresiones de ciertos rasgos mentales suyos. Desde este enfoque, la verdad o falsedad del determinismo se convierte en algo casi irrelevante para la responsabilidad moral. En este artículo presento esos dos puntos de vista sobre la responsabilidad, así como un modo de reconciliarlos en una concepción

unitaria que retenga las ventajas de ambos enfoques a la vez que, como espero, evite sus principales dificultades.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *responsabilidad moral, libertad, control, expresión, Peter Strawson, Robert Adams, Angela Smith, Gary Watson.*

I. MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, FREEDOM, AND CONTROL

The philosophical tradition has closely connected moral responsibility and freedom. There are important reasons for this connection. To be responsible for an action implies having a particularly close relationship with it, so that that action can be attributed to me as its genuine author, thus making me a possible target of various reactions of reproach, reprobation, or sanction (or, alternatively, of praise, commendation, or reward). According to this tradition, the relationship of responsibility between the action and the agent requires that the agent performs it freely, in the exercise of her freedom. Freedom, on the other hand, constitutes a capacity for dominion or control over decisions and actions. Only through the exercise of this capacity does the agent acquire the quality of author and responsible for her decisions and actions. Two constitutive aspects of freedom, which Aristotle already considered in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, are voluntariness or volitional control and awareness or cognitive control. Thus, according to the Aristotelian conception of moral responsibility in that work, there are two types of factors that exempt from moral responsibility and that can be used by an agent as valid excuses that allow her to get rid of blame for some morally questionable action she has carried out, namely involuntariness and (non-culpable) ignorance.¹ An agent is not morally responsible for an action she has carried out involuntarily, and neither is she for an action that she (non-culpably) ignored that she was carrying out. It follows that, if an agent is morally responsible for something she has done, she has done it voluntarily and knowingly. Voluntariness and knowledge or awareness are, therefore, according to the Aristotelian conception, necessary conditions of moral responsibility for an action. Doing something voluntarily and consciously contributes to generating that close link with the action that underlies authorship and responsibility for it. Excuses, involuntariness and ignorance, act by breaking precisely that link of authorship between the agent and the action, turning it into an accidental or chancy relationship. Although in fact I carried out the action, I, as an agent, am detached from it and it cannot justifiably be attributed to me as its genuine

author, because I performed it unintentionally or because I was not aware that I was performing it, or both.

Freedom also includes, in the philosophical tradition, the idea of option or choice between alternatives, the ability to choose between two or more ways of acting, to avoid what was done or to do something different. This aspect of freedom has tended to be identified with freedom itself, which is sometimes understood simply as the ability to opt or choose between alternative courses of action.²

This connection between freedom and moral responsibility has permeated philosophical reflection on these two questions. One consequence of this has been that the problem of the relationship between determinism, on the one hand, and freedom and moral responsibility, on the other, has occupied a central place in this reflection, since, if determinism excludes any of the constitutive features (or necessary conditions) of freedom, and then freedom itself, and if freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, then determinism excludes moral responsibility as well. Thus, the question of the compatibility or incompatibility of determinism with freedom and moral responsibility has been at the center of the debate for many years.

The consideration of freedom as a necessary condition of moral responsibility has very important arguments in its favor. First, moral responsibility ascriptions can have a major effect on our self-esteem, our psychological state, and our relationships with other people. Therefore, it is perfectly understandable and reasonable that we want to have control over our actions and, with it, over the moral responsibility we may have for carrying them out. Second, it is the exercise of freedom in acting that seems to establish that close link between the agent and the action that underpins her moral responsibility for it and that explains our conviction that, at times, the agent deserves blame, reproach, or sanction for such action or, alternatively, praise, commendation, or reward. Having acted freely, that is, having carried out her action voluntarily and consciously, and having been able to avoid it, contributes to turning the agent into the author, creditor, and genuine deserver of the indicated reactions and their variants, which, following Strawson, philosophers tend to call nowadays “reactive attitudes”, such as resentment and indignation or, on the positive side, gratitude and commendation.

We can find this conception of moral responsibility in different versions and in multiple authors. The following text by Mario DeCaro (2004), p. 7, is very representative of this perspective: “Agents are held responsible for their actions (from the legal, moral and political point of

view) only if they have carried them out *freely*: the conceptual link between responsibility and freedom is, therefore, of absolute philosophical centrality”. And, in a recent paper, Taylor Cyr (2021), p. 1 writes: “Free will (in the sense at issue in this paper) is the freedom necessary for moral responsibility”. Not very informative, to be sure, but a good sample of the close relationship it is still nowadays presupposed by many philosophers between free will and moral responsibility.³

II. DETACHING MORAL RESPONSIBILITY FROM FREEDOM

Recently, however, the question of moral responsibility has acquired more autonomy and independence from the problem of freedom. The need of freedom for moral responsibility has ceased to be a little less than obvious assumption. If freedom is not necessary for moral responsibility, the incompatibility of freedom with determinism does not simply result in the incompatibility of moral responsibility with determinism. This reconfiguration of the conceptual field has generated a new and rather complex situation in the debate on moral responsibility, where we find few points of consensus. In a recent article, David Shoemaker (2020) has distinguished up to 28 different types of theories of responsibility: a big difference with respect to the relatively simple traditional classification into four or five types of theories (libertarianism, hard determinism, compatibilism, skepticism ...)

The path to independence of the problem of moral responsibility with respect to freedom and determinism begins, in my opinion, with Peter Strawson’s lecture, “Freedom and resentment” [Strawson (2008)/(1962)]. Because of its content, the title “Responsibility and resentment” would have been more appropriate. In this enormously influential work, Strawson proposes a change of perspective in the traditional debate about the compatibility or incompatibility between freedom and moral responsibility, on the one hand, and determinism, on the other. According to Strawson, in contrast to the traditional conception, moral responsibility and the notions associated with it are independent of the truth or falsehood of determinism, as well as of belief in such truth or falsehood. They rest on reactions to the good or ill will of others towards us or towards other people; these are natural, spontaneous reactions that accompany our social interactions and that are there whether determinism is true or false. We can, thus, characterize moral responsibility without resorting to freedom and its constitutive features such as volitional or plu-

ral control. Since our practices of ascription of moral responsibility rest on the expression (voluntary or not, conscious or not) of good or ill will towards us or other people and on our reactions to it, and since these aspects are independent of the truth or falsity of determinism, the problem of determinism becomes virtually irrelevant to the question of moral responsibility.

For my part, I have doubts about certain aspects of Strawson's argument in favor of this central thesis. Throughout his work, Strawson always refers to determinism as a general and abstract thesis on the nature of reality, and opposes it to the concrete, natural, and familiar attitudes with which we react to the attitude of others towards us and on which the ascriptions of moral responsibility are grounded. Certainly, belief in such a general and abstract thesis seems to be too far removed from our familiar practices linked to responsibility to be able to threaten them. How could something as deeply rooted in our nature as our reactions to the good or ill will of others toward us (i.e., our ascriptions of responsibility) depend on the truth or falsity of such an abstract general doctrine? Can we reasonably conceive that we would cease to ascribe responsibility if we became convinced that as general a doctrine as determinism is true? However, I think there is an error here. Determinism is not present in our practices of attribution of responsibility in the form of an abstract general thesis; in fact, many people would find the standard definitions of determinism too complex or difficult to say whether they believe it is true or not. But that does not mean that the question of the truth of determinism is not part of the conceptual fabric that underlies our practices of moral criticism and attribution of responsibility. That question intervenes in such practices in much simpler and more concrete ways, for example, as the assumption that, in an attribution of blame, that person should not have acted in that way and in fact she should and, therefore, could have avoided what she did or acted differently. I dare say that, if people were to sincerely believe that this assumption is false, this would significantly affect their belief in moral responsibility and the meaning and justification of the practices associated with it.

An additional step towards the independence of moral responsibility with respect to freedom was made by Robert Adams (1985) in his remarkable and influential article "Involuntary sins". Adams rejects in this work the need for voluntariness or volitional control (and even cognitive control) for moral responsibility, the thesis according to which "we are responsible only for what is within our voluntary control" [Adams (1985), p. 7]. We can commit unintentional faults and be responsible for

them. Uncontrolled anger, self-righteousness, certain desires and beliefs, ingratitude, are examples of involuntary attitudes for which we can be responsible. Thus, Adams writes: “Your ingratitude ... is not a voluntary action; but if you take responsibility for it, you also do not see it as something that just happens to you, like a toothache or a leak in your roof. You see it as an opposition that you yourself are making, not voluntarily but none the less really, to the generosity of the other person...” [Adams (1985), p. 15]. Since voluntariness or volitional control is a constitutive aspect, a necessary condition of the exercise of freedom, to hold that we are morally responsible for involuntary attitudes or actions is to deny that freedom itself is necessary for moral responsibility.

Another stage in the process of decoupling responsibility from freedom is the reflection and debate on the intriguing phenomenon of moral luck. Apparently, there are situations in which a person’s moral responsibility is affected by external factors beyond her control, so that her responsibility can be subject to good or bad luck. If these situations really occur (and not everyone agrees with this) responsibility is not limited to the area that is subject, at least in part, to the will and the capacity of choice and decision of a person. Again, if this is so, freedom does not seem necessary for moral responsibility.⁴

III. FREEDOM AND CONTROL STRIKE BACK

However, the so-called “Control Principle”, according to which a person is morally responsible only for what she has control over, maintains its important intuitive plausibility, and speaks in favor of the traditional connection between moral responsibility and freedom. Initially, it offends our sense of justice to judge an agent morally responsible for something she carried out or originated without the help of her will, or without being aware that she was doing it, or without being able to avoid it or, in general, without having control over it.⁵

The Principle of Control and the connection between moral responsibility and freedom can be preserved in some cases that seem to contradict them, in which the agent is morally responsible for something he does not perform or bring about freely. Let’s look at these examples:

RUNNING OVER. After having drunk excessively, James drives home and, due to the lack of reflexes caused by alcohol, fails to dodge a pedestrian and runs him over, causing him serious injuries.

It seems quite clear that James runs over the pedestrian neither voluntarily nor freely. However, we blame him for running over the pedestrian and the injuries caused to him.

LIFEGUARD. Paul, in need of a job, although he barely knows how to swim, lies about his skills, and is hired as a lifeguard in a swimming pool. At one point, a child falls into the pool, in danger of drowning. Despite his efforts, Paul fails to save the child, who eventually drowns. In such a case, we blame Paul for the death of the child, even though he did not let him die voluntarily or freely.

The traditional conception is not defenseless in these cases. Someone can argue that the agents' responsibility for what they did or originated involuntarily derives from a previous act they carried out voluntarily and freely: in the first example, James' beginning to drink while knowing he had to drive and, in the second, Paul's lying about his skills.

But there are other situations in which this strategy based on derived moral responsibility does not seem to work. Attitudes such as ingratitude or self-righteousness, mentioned by Adams, as well as certain cases of negligence, carelessness and forgetfulness are not voluntary or conscious, but we can be responsible for them. Nor are psychological attitudes such as beliefs or desires exercises of freedom, and yet sometimes we judge that some persons deserve moral reprobation for those attitudes. Consider, for example, the moral disapproval we feel, and can eventually express, toward a person who holds xenophobic, racist, homophobic, or supremacist beliefs. In all these cases, it does not seem possible to trace and find any prior voluntary and conscious act that substantiates the moral responsibility of the agent.

To the extent that, in this series of cases, we judge agents responsible for their actions or attitudes even if they have not performed or possessed them voluntarily or consciously, and with it freely, it does not seem that freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. In Adams' words, there are involuntary sins.

IV. RESPONSIBILITY AND EXPRESSION

Our judgments on the above examples seem to show that what grounds an agent's moral responsibility for an action, an outcome, or an attitude is not necessarily the exercise of freedom. What, then, is it that

closely connects the action, omission, outcome, or attitude with the agent so that we tend to attribute moral responsibility for those things to her? Following the suggestion of authors such as Thomas Scanlon or Angela Smith, perhaps it is the fact that these actions, outcomes, or attitudes express or manifest some central aspects of the personality, character, or values of the agent. It is this relationship of expression or manifestation what closely links the action or attitude with the agent, thus making her author and responsible for them and opening her to reactions such as reproach or sanction.

In this approach to moral responsibility, whose beginnings we have placed in authors such as Strawson and Adams, the consequences of determinism for moral responsibility lose importance. Whether determinism is true or not, people have psychological qualities, values, objectives, and commitments to different positions and ways of facing life that make up their agential and moral structure. By expressing in actions, voluntarily and consciously or not, those factors that constitute their personality, agents become responsible for them and for the actions that reveal them. As John Dewey noted, “We are responsible for our conduct because that conduct is ourselves objectified in actions.”⁶ What makes us morally responsible for our actions is the fact that they are genuine objectifications or expressions of ourselves and our goals in life, and not their voluntary and conscious character. This character is important only to the extent that a voluntary action can be a clearer or more genuine expression or manifestation of us than an involuntary or accidentally performed one (though this is not necessarily the case).

We also find elements of this perspective in authors such as Harry Frankfurt (1971) and Gary Watson (1982), whose proposals on moral responsibility Susan Wolf (1990) has called “Real Self” approaches, to the extent that they rest on the postulation of a self that identifies with a central aspect of the personality and the psychological and moral identity of an agent. In Watson’s case, this central aspect is constituted by the axiological system of a person and, in the case of Frankfurt, by what he calls “second-order volitions”, desires that certain desires move or not move us to act. For Watson and Frankfurt, an agent is morally responsible for her actions or attitudes to the extent that they manifest her real self, her values, or her reflective volitions.⁷ Frankfurt has also made an important contribution to decoupling moral responsibility from freedom by arguing, in a classic and long-discussed article [Frankfurt (1969)], that plural control, the ability to avoid what was done or to act otherwise, is not necessary to be morally responsible for an action or an outcome.

Thus, even if determinism excludes the freedom to act otherwise, it does not thereby exclude moral responsibility.

This line of thought on moral responsibility has currently crystallized in a set of proposals that can be grouped under the label “attributionism”, which includes authors such as Thomas Scanlon (2008), Angela Smith (2005), Pamela Hieronymi (2008) and Matthew Talbert (2017), among others. The central feature of attributionism is the importance it attaches to morally objectionable (or commendable) attitudes, to the ill (or good) will manifested in actions, and to the fact that those attitudes and will are attributable to the agent, no matter whether she could have avoided them or not, or whether she has them because of previous voluntary acts.⁸ The important thing is that the conduct is attributable to her to the extent that it expresses some of her commitments, ideals, judgments, or values.

In my opinion, the philosopher who has defended this line of thought most vigorously is Angela Smith (2005), (2008), (2021). For Smith, volitional and conscious control over our actions is not necessary for moral responsibility. Her proposal bears some relation to Watson’s. For Smith, some of our actions, reactions, and attitudes manifest certain evaluative judgments that we subscribe to, perhaps unconsciously. Thus, we judge a person morally responsible for an action, reaction, or attitude because of our judgment on the evaluations expressed or manifested in them. Unlike the traditional conception, Smith has no major problem accounting for the moral responsibility we attribute to our partner or a friend for, e.g., forgetting our birthday or other anniversary. Although forgetting is neither voluntary nor conscious, we feel that it expresses, at the very least, little interest and a poor appreciation towards us, and this underlying disinterest is the reason we blame that person for forgetting. Something similar happens, *mutatis mutandis*, with some cases of negligence, carelessness and certain beliefs, desires, and other attitudes.

V. ASSESSING THE OPTIONS

What to do in the face of this duality of conceptions of moral responsibility? These proposals are not merely diverse, but apparently incompatible. One of them considers volitional and cognitive control over what we do necessary for moral responsibility for it, while the other denies that necessity. But we cannot, in my opinion, simply dismiss one of them in favor of the other, for in doing so we lose important aspects of

moral responsibility. Attributionism has brought to light the crucial relevance of the attitudes, beliefs, and evaluations that are expressed in our behavior. When we blame someone for some action or omission, we are hurt or bothered more by the attitude, such as contempt, ill will, or intention underlying their action or omission than by the action or omission itself, regardless of the volitional, cognitive, or plural control that the agent has over them and, with it, of the freedom with which she carries them out. However, it is also difficult to deny the significance we attribute to control in our ascriptions of moral responsibility. On many occasions, we exempt a person from liability if we consider that she acted involuntarily or unconsciously, or that she literally lacked alternatives. Attributionism may respond that the reason for the exemption is not properly the lack of control, but the fact that that lack of control may show that the action or omission does not actually express a morally questionable attitude or assessment. This response, however, merely reaffirms the attributionist proposal.

In my opinion, a major problem with attributionism is that, by almost completely dispensing with the necessity of freedom and control for moral responsibility, it does not offer sufficient conceptual space to account for the notion of true desert, or for the powerful intuition according to which people, sometimes, really deserve the reactions of blame, reprobation, or sanction, or, alternatively, of praise, commendation, or reward, which are intimately associated with ascriptions of moral responsibility. It seems correct to think that true desert requires that the action manifest a morally meaningful underlying attitude, good or bad. But this is not enough. True desert also seems to require appropriate, volitional, cognitive, and plural control over actions and even over the attitudes and assessments they express (deep, ultimate control). And the latter is something that, at a first sight, the traditional conception, but not attributionism, might seem able to offer.

Another major problem with attributionism lies in its apparent inability to account for a distinction that, initially, we find intuitively very plausible. I mean the distinction between two dimensions of moral evaluation: *goodness-badness* and *blamelessness-blameworthiness*.⁹ There are people whose behavior manifests morally unacceptable and even monstrous evaluations and attitudes; however, they apparently lack control over those attitudes and assessments underlying their behavior; it is not up to them either to harbor them or to be the kinds of persons they are. A relevant example is subjects with unfortunate childhoods and strongly adverse circumstances for adequate intellectual and moral development.

Think of some members of certain violent youth gangs. A plausible judgment about these subjects is that they are bad, but not blameworthy; or, if badness and blameworthiness admit of degrees, they are bad in a higher degree than they are blameworthy for their conduct. But this judgment does not seem to be within the reach of attributionism, since such a moral assessment requires appealing to conditions of control over one's own moral personality, values, and attitudes, an appeal contrary to the spirit of that position. The traditional conception, on the other hand, can coherently distinguish between badness and blameworthiness and thus generate a judgment like that about some agents.

VI. RECONCILIATION AND DISSONANCE

What options do we have in the face of this apparent disagreement in our concept of moral responsibility between the traditional conception and attributionism? Can we reconcile them and thus eliminate the apparent incoherence or are we forced to live in division and dissonance? One way to reconcile them and avoid conflict would be to accept a distinction that Gary Watson drew, in another important article [Watson (2004)], between what he called “two faces of responsibility”. There are, on the one hand, judgments of an *aretaic* nature, judgments about the quality and moral virtues of a person according to her actions, omissions, or attitudes. We can judge an agent generous, attentive, sensitive, or else petty, selfish, or insensitive because of her conduct. These are morally dense expressions, which form a part of moral evaluations. Watson calls this aspect of responsibility “attributability”, insofar as we attribute to the agent the virtues and vices that those omissions or attitudes manifest. There are, on the other hand, judgments in which we impute to an agent liability for some of her actions and consider her suitable for assignments of blame, reprobation, and even sanction. For Watson, the justification of the second set of judgments, as compared with the first, requires control (or greater control) by the agent over her conduct. Watson calls this other aspect of responsibility “accountability”. The importance of this distinction in our context lies in the fact that, if appropriate, it can allow conciliation between the two conceptions of moral responsibility that we have described. Thus, the traditional conception, with its insistence on the need for volitional, cognitive, and plural control, would be adequate for moral responsibility understood as accountability, while attributionism,

with its broad rejection of the need for control, would rather conform to moral responsibility understood as attributability.

Various philosophers, such as Carlsson (2019), Nelkin (2015) and Portmore (2019), have accepted Watson's distinction between those two aspects or types of responsibility, attributability and accountability. Instead, Angela Smith is highly skeptical of such a distinction. For her, attributability is sufficient for accountability, so that a negative assessment of the moral quality of an agent in the light of her conduct is, perhaps apart from serious mental pathologies, ipso facto an attribution of blameworthiness for such conduct.

For my part, I tend to think that our concept of moral responsibility contains a continuum, rather than a sharp cleavage, between attributability and accountability. Thus, from my point of view, the judgments of responsibility presuppose, to a greater or lesser degree, the ascription of morally significant attitudes, typical of attributionism, and of some forms of control, typical of the traditional conception. This unified concept of responsibility makes it possible to address the problems of attributionism indicated above and at the same time to do justice to its most valuable intuitions, especially the importance of the underlying attitudes that are expressed in actions and omissions and of cases in which the agent lacks control over an attitude, action or omission and is nevertheless responsible for it. In the next sections, I will present a way in which this reconciliatory proposal might be developed and take some steps to justify and defend it.

VII. TOWARD A UNIFIED CONCEPTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Can we try to move towards a unitary conception of moral responsibility by somehow integrating central features of the traditional conception, on the one hand, and of attributionism, on the other? Let's see whether it is possible to make some progress in this direction.

First, suppose that, in the case of acts or events over which we lack volitional and even cognitive or plural control, we do not restrict ourselves to a moral evaluation or criticism (a possibility that remains open for me), but assign to the agent moral responsibility for them. This would indicate that such control is not necessary for moral responsibility for an action, event, or attitude. However, it would be possible to preserve, from the traditional conception, the importance of volitional and/or cognitive control by conceiving these conditions as *sufficient* for moral responsibility,

given some necessary conditions. That is, if an agent voluntarily carries out an action knowing that she is carrying it out and that it has questionable moral properties, she is then, given some other conditions, morally responsible for that action. In addition to being a sufficient condition, volitional and cognitive control can also act as an aggravating factor in an agent's responsibility for an action, as compared to that which she would bear if she acted involuntarily or ignored essential features of that action.

Second, it seems plausible to maintain, as a necessary condition of moral responsibility for an action, event, or attitude, the central feature of attributionism, namely that they express or manifest a morally significant assessment or disposition of the agent, such as contempt, malice, or ill will towards other persons (or the opposite qualities). As I suggested above, this relation of expression or manifestation underlies the especially close relationship, which might be called "genuine ownership", that exists between an agent and those items for which she is morally responsible.¹⁰ One would think that certain cases of negligence, carelessness or forgetfulness could be counterexamples to this proposal. But if in fact, for understandable reasons, these cases do not manifest a negative moral assessment, disposition, or attitude, I take it that it would not be justified to ascribe responsibility to the agent. In the case of forgetting an important date, for example, if this person received the previous day a disastrous news, such as the death of her mother, it would be very likely that said forgetfulness did not express contempt or disinterest towards her partner, so that the ascription of blame could be unjustified. In this proposal, then, it is necessary that a person's conduct expresses, implicitly or explicitly, a morally questionable attitude, judgment, or disposition, such as contempt or bad faith, for that person to be blameworthy for such conduct or some of its consequences (and, *mutatis mutandis*, something similar could be said for morally laudable conduct).

Thirdly, the traditional conception insists, as we know, on control, especially volitional and cognitive, as a necessary condition of moral responsibility for an action. We have suggested that this control might not be necessary, but only sufficient, and that its presence could increase the agent's degree of culpability. But, in the spirit of such a conception, the variety of control we have called "plural control" might instead be necessary for moral responsibility. This type of control essentially incorporates the notion of alternatives. In our perspective, this control applies to all cases where we consider an agent morally responsible, and especially culpable, for something; it affects, therefore, not only actions, but also attitudes and, possibly, personality or character traits as well. In all these

cases, the attribution of blame incorporates implicitly (or even explicitly) the assumption that the agent *should not have acted like this* or *should not have had that attitude or character trait*. This assumption is present, not only in voluntary and conscious actions, but also in cases of involuntary or unconscious actions or attitudes for which we judge an agent morally responsible. Thus, when we assign responsibility to someone for negligence or forgetfulness, we assume that they *should not have done or omitted what they did or omitted*.¹¹ Thus, for example, although forgetting her husband's birthday was not voluntary, the husband's reproach presupposes that his wife *should not have forgotten that date*. And in presupposing this, he also presupposes that *she could not have forgotten it*. So, one way plural control enters the conception of moral responsibility (though not the only one) is through intuitive applications of the Kantian principle 'Ought implies Can' (OIC), or perhaps some weaker principle, such as 'Ought implies Fair Opportunity', according to which the obligation or duty that an agent has to do something presupposes or implies that she can, or at least that she has a fair opportunity to do so.¹² And, by contrast, if someone cannot literally do something, or does not have a fair opportunity to do it, she is exempted from the obligation to carry it out.¹³ Plural control is, in my opinion, normative in nature. The husband presupposes that his wife should, and hence could, have remembered his birthday, without going into too much detail about her effective ability to remember that anniversary. However, if it were indeed the case that the woman was literally unable to remember (perhaps due to a sudden neurological accident) the ascription of responsibility would cease to be justified.¹⁴

It should be added to these conditions some form of rational control over decision and action, as well as some sort of self-determination or genuine authorship, in line with what, in the debate about moral responsibility, is commonly denoted by expressions such as 'control of origin', 'source control' or 'ultimate control'. I am aware of the difficulties involved in this requirement,¹⁵ but its importance does not allow us to do without it.

VIII. DEEP CONTROL AND TRUE DESERT

Why should one include conditions of control in a theory of moral responsibility instead of limiting oneself to the relations of expression or manifestation between attitudes and behavior typical of attributionism? Two considerations, which I have already suggested above, are in order.

First, in section V, I have pointed to an important reason to insist on conditions of control, namely that we seem to need them in order to account for an intuitively correct moral distinction, i.e., the distinction between two central dimensions of moral evaluation, the dimension *goodness-badness*, on the one hand, and the dimension *blameworthiness-blamelessness*, on the other. We seem to need this distinction to issue a balanced and justified judgment about certain cases, which include, e.g., agents with highly traumatic childhoods or with little or no opportunity to develop a sound and coherent system of moral values. The view that some such agents are bad but not blameworthy is quite compelling, but it also seems that we need to assume the possibility of rather deep forms of control (a possibility which quite probably these agents have lacked) over their personality, values, and sensitivity in order to justify that distinction and to ground judgments that make use of it.

Second, and not unrelated to this, I also have previously indicated that a major problem of attributionism is its apparent inability to coherently account for the property of true desert of certain reactions linked to ascriptions of moral responsibility. In my view, we need conditions of control to account for that property too. However, an alternative, adopted by various authors (skeptics and compatibilists) is the elaboration of theories of moral responsibility that completely dispense with this notion.¹⁶ Several philosophers of skeptical orientation, such as Galen Strawson, Derk Pereboom or Bruce Waller consider that no one truly deserves praise or moral reprobation, much less reward or punishment. The reason for this position is, according to these authors, the impossibility of exercising deep, ultimate control over one's own attitudes, decisions, and actions. But attributionism, with its rejection of the need of control for moral responsibility, also seems to lack room for ultimate control and true desert.

But these theses contrast sharply, or so it seems to me, with our intuitions about certain real cases. I think for example of Desmond Doss, a religiously motivated conscientious objector (he was a Seventh-day Adventist), who saved 75 soldiers (including some Japanese) from death in a battle in Okinawa between Americans and Japanese in the spring of 1945. Or of Arland Williams, who drowned after helping rescue other passengers, after the catastrophic crash landing of a plane in the icy waters of the Potomac River. Or of Maximilian Kolbe, who, in a Nazi concentration camp, offered his life (which was taken) in exchange for that of another prisoner, claiming that this person, unlike him, had a family. We can also think of real cases of morally inadmissible actions. Although

these cases, and many others, will not move those who deny, because of certain arguments or theories, true desert, we are not rationally obliged to accept that denial. We must ask ourselves what we find more convincing, either this denial or the natural and pre-philosophical judgment according to which these people truly deserve admiration and praise. In the latter case, reasoning by *modus tollens*, we should think that there must be something wrong (and try to bring it to light) in the premises or the logical form of the arguments or in the theories that have as a consequence the non-existence of true desert. And, of course, we also have an obligation to draw up a reasonable explanation of the existence of true desert and ultimate control.

Both reasons for including control conditions in a theory of responsibility are conditional on the acceptance of the distinction between badness and blameworthiness and of the existence of true desert. Provided that someone is prepared to renounce to both that distinction and that property, the indicated reasons will not move her. There is, however, quite a high price to pay for that renouncement.

IX. CONCLUSION

Although there are other ways of drawing a picture of the current situation in the debate about moral responsibility, I think that the question of the necessity of freedom or control, in different varieties, for moral responsibility, is no doubt a central issue. In this respect, the division between the traditional conception of moral responsibility, which requires control, and attributionism, which does not, on which I have based my depiction of that situation, yields an important and insightful partition of the theoretical field. Whereas control-based approaches account for some important features of moral responsibility ascriptions, they fall short of a full picture of them. It is just a fact that we ascribe ownership and responsibility for some items that are beyond people's voluntary or cognitive control, provided that they express some relevant stances, judgments, or values. Attributionism, in turn, can explain these cases, but finds difficulties in accounting for such things as the relevance of control in some other cases, the distinction between badness and blameworthiness, or true desert. My position about this controversy has been to recommend a unitary view of responsibility that incorporates valuable aspects of both general approaches and hopefully avoids their main problems. On this view, whereas voluntary and cognitive control

would not be necessary, but only sufficient, for moral responsibility (given other necessary conditions), plural control or access to alternative possibilities would be instead necessary for it, in the spirit of the traditional conception. And, as a central tribute to attributionism, it would also be necessary for moral responsibility that the actions or attitudes for which an agent is responsible are the expression of relevant judgments, commitments, or values of hers. The unitary proposal that I have tentatively suggested allows for a more perspicuous and richer understanding of moral responsibility and the practices associated with it than each of the two other conceptions taken in isolation.

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NOTES

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, chapters 1-5. Both factors are related, so ignorance implies involuntariness (but not vice versa). Aristotle further distinguishes between the involuntary and the non-voluntary, an interesting and justified distinction, but one that we will not go into, as it would take us too far for the reasonable extension of this paper.

² See, e. g., Pink (1996), p. 1: “By *freedom* I mean the freedom of alternative possibilities: the freedom to do things or not to do them or – as I shall put it – *control* over whether we do this thing or not. It is just this freedom that we think we possess in relation to much of our action”.

³ Other recent examples: “For many free will theorists, the notion of free will is especially important because of its connection to moral responsibility. We ordinarily take ourselves and others to be morally responsible for much of what we do, and yet, plausibly, having free will is a necessary condition on moral responsibility” [Cyr (2022), pp. 3-4]. Also: “... If [agents] are responsible for their actions, then they performed them out of free will” [Menges (2021), p. 9]. Many other authors take free will to be necessary for moral responsibility.

⁴ Statman (ed.) (1993) contains important contributions to this problem, including the seminal papers by Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams, both titled “Moral Luck”. At present, the bibliography on this topic is huge.

⁵ Zimmerman writes: “The degree to which we are morally responsible cannot be affected by what is not in our control. Put more pithily: luck is irrelevant to moral responsibility” [Zimmerman (2002), p. 559].

⁶ Dewey, John, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, New York, Hillary House, 1957, pp. 160-161. Cited by Watson (2004), p. 260.

⁷ Frankfurt's (and Watson's) Real Self approaches would appear to face a significant problem: people sometimes are responsible for actions that do not correspond to their values or are not backed by second-order volitions. For example, someone might strongly value generosity, but, on a particular occasion, she may act, consciously and willingly, in a mean way. It would seem she is morally responsible for this action, even if meanness is not part of her true or real self, and hence this action does not express it.

⁸ Such as what Kane has called "self-forming willings". See Kane (1996).

⁹ In favor of this distinction, cf. for example Levy (2005), against A. Smith rejection of it.

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to insist on this point.

¹¹ Cf. Widerker's W-defense of the necessity of alternatives for moral responsibility in Widerker (2000). For a critical stance toward the W-defense see, e. g., Patarroyo (2013).

¹² In Nelkin (2019) we find a defense of a condition of alternatives in terms of fair opportunity, although restricted to responsibility as accountability. I also consider very interesting the article by Fernando Rudy-Hiller (2020), who defends a condition of avoidability or alternatives for responsibility that he calls the condition of reasonable expectations. Widerker (2000) also defends a related principle, namely the Principle of Alternative Expectations. In Swenson (2019) we find another defense of a version of the condition of alternatives. Steward (2016) takes accessibility to (some, rather weak) alternatives to be a condition of action in general, of any exercise of agential powers, even by non-human animals. See also her (2022). We can find a related, though different, defense of the necessity of alternatives for moral responsibility in Alvarez (2009). See also Moya (2014) for another defense of a condition of alternatives, based on the idea that, if someone does her reasonable best to comply with morality, she is not morally responsible for not doing more.

¹³ The 'Ought Implies Can' (OIC) principle is not uncontroversial. Some people think it is false. Widerker is among them. In his (2005: 303), he holds that the principle has clear counterexamples, such as the following. Suppose that John has borrowed from Chris a rare copy of *Principia Mathematica* and has promised to return it to Chris before the 10th of October. The 9th of October, on his way to Chris's home to return the book, someone assaults John and steals the book, so that he cannot keep his promise. Widerker contends that, in these circumstances, John is not culpable for not keeping his promise, but he emphatically affirms that, nevertheless, John has not met his obligation to return the book to Chris (which means that he still had that obligation). He promised to return the book and he did not do it. John had an obligation which he could not fulfill. Therefore, 'ought' does not always imply 'can'.

Carlos Patarroyo (2015), p. 176, also presents an interesting counterexample to OIC: "In a country overwhelmed by violence and war for as long as mine

has been (Colombia), one finds people, admirable people, who can neither forgive nor forget, but who, nevertheless, strongly believe and are deeply convinced, without a doubt, that they ought to do so ... If you ask them, they will tell you that they ought to do what they know they cannot do. This just makes me wonder whether they are right”.

Suppose (though this is not obvious) that there are genuine counterexamples to OIC, like the indicated, so that this principle is false. This, however, would not mean that alternatives would not be required for moral responsibility, for this requirement does not need to rest on OIC. The following is an intuitively correct principle which does not resort to OIC [Moya (2014)]: If someone has done her best to comply with morality, she is not morally blameworthy for not doing more. This principle explains why John is not culpable for not keeping his promise: he did his best to keep it. However, it leaves open whether John retained his obligation to keep his promise, even if it was impossible for him to keep it.

¹⁴ See also Rudy-Hiller (2020), who plausibly relativizes the distinction between normative and descriptive expectations. Frankfurt cases are supposed to be the strongest objection to a necessary condition of alternatives for moral responsibility. I have responded to this objection [Moya (2011), (2014)] by arguing that agents in such cases retain morally significant alternatives.

¹⁵ See the last chapters of my books Moya (2007) and Moya (2017) for a more detailed treatment of this important though controversial form of control.

¹⁶ Cf., for example, Pereboom (2015).

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