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IS MORALITY OPEN TO THE FREE WILL SKEPTIC?

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In contemporary discussions about free will, philosophers from the various camps (compatibilists, libertarians, and skeptics) have come to something approaching a consensus insofar as they tend to agree that free will is best understood as being a necessary condition—or, more specifically, the control condition—for moral responsibility.[1] From this it follows that if human beings lack free will, we must also lack moral responsibility in some sense. The question as to exactly what kind of moral responsibility is precluded by the absence of free will is one I will return to shortly. Given the standard view that free will skepticism implies a kind of skepticism about moral responsibility, one might naturally think that the free will skeptic is committed to denying the truth of moral claims in any form. After all, if a person cannot be held morally responsible for his actions, it seems reasonable to think that he cannot be said either to have acted in a way that was morally wrong (or right), or that he is morally obligated to act/not act in a particular fashion. This was the view of C. A. Campbell, who claimed that if we cannot possess the kind of moral responsibility that requires free will we are thereby forced to give up "the reality of the moral life."[2] And yet in perusing the free will skeptic literature, one finds no shortage of moral language by its proponents, including a variety of moral exhortations and prohibitions. Freewill skeptic Gregg Caruso speaks to the tendency of free will skeptics (henceforth simply *skeptics*) to make moral claims by noting how the view "that moral responsibility is a necessary condition for morality … is directly challenged by most skeptics."[3] Caruso himself

1 Compatibilists hold free will to be compatible with the truth of causal determinism. Incompatibilists believe that free will is not possible if causal determinism is true. Libertarians are incompatibilists who maintain that human beings are capable of exercising free will. Freewill skeptics are incompatibilists who deny the possibility that human beings can exercise free will.

2 Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood*, 166–67. Other notable philosophers sharing this view include Wolf, "The Importance of Free Will"; and Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*.

3 Caruso, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility."

has made the case that human agents and their institutions are open to moral assessment despite people lacking free will and an important kind of moral responsibility that requires free will. For instance, he frequently employs moral language when discussing the proper basis for criminal punishment. It is in this context that we find him saying things such as, "From the skeptical perspective … [we] need, therefore, to confront the *moral challenge* of balancing the individual liberties with the advancement of the public good."[4] A central point in his overall argument is that while the public health-quarantine model of treating criminals that he favors is morally justifiable, retributivist models of punishment are not. Ted Honderich is another prominent free will skeptic who has argued that moral terms are applicable to human agents and their actions even if no human actions are free. He states that "each of us has a moral standing. There are corollaries having to do with right action, and good men and women."[5] Derk Pereboom, whom I discuss in greater detail later in this essay, is another example of skeptics who reject moral responsibility while holding that human agents and actions can be proper subjects of moral appraisal.

In this essay I consider whether skeptics' assertions of moral claims pertaining to human agents and their activities are consistent with their rejection of free will. In casting doubt on the prospect of constructing a compelling skeptical defense of morality, my project can be seen as following a line of thought that stretches at least as far back to Immanuel Kant, who argued that morality only applies to beings capable of exercising free will.[6] Part of what seemed to be motivating Kant to view free will and morality as inherently connected was the intuition that, unless a person acted freely, it would be unreasonable to hold them morally culpable in such a way that could merit punishment. Hence, we find Kant stating that moral accountability

> could not happen if we did not suppose that whatever arises from one's choice (as every action intentionally performed undoubtedly does) has as its basis a free causality which from early youth expresses its character in its appearances (actions); these actions, on account of the uniformity of conduct, make knowable a natural connection that does not, however, make the vicious constitution of the will necessary but is instead the consequence of the evil and unchangeable principles freely adopted, which make it only more culpable and deserving of punishment.[7]

4 Caruso, "Free Will Skepticism and Criminal Behavior," 33, emphasis added.

5 Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, 172.

6 Some of Kant's primary arguments for why morality requires free will can be found in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 47–54, and *Critique of Practical Reason*, 122–29, 189–94.

7 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 194.

This connection between free will, morality, and deservingness of punishment for Kant is notable in that, as I discuss in more detail below, it resonates with how ordinary persons (i.e., the folk) tend to conceive of morality. This, in turn, is relevant to the aims of this paper since I will demonstrate how skeptics rely heavily upon folk intuitions to motivate their position. I will argue that one of the main obstacles confronting skeptical accounts of morality is that the folk—echoing the intuitions of Kant—embrace an account of morality that is at odds with that of the skeptic insofar as it justifies certain kinds of punishment that the skeptic believes can never be warranted for beings lacking free will. This being the case, this essay can be viewed as providing a modern defense of Kant's view that morality requires free will.

In order to properly address the issue of whether entities lacking free will are open to moral assessment, it will be necessary to see what some of the prominent skeptics have to say with regard to both what the denial of free will implies, and the kinds of moral claims that they take to be in line with their metaphysical commitments. Getting clearer about the kinds of moral claims that the skeptic deems to be consistent with her position will provide us with a better understanding of how the skeptic's view differs from that of her opponents (compatibilists and libertarians). In doing so, we will get a better understanding of what is at stake in the free will debate. I begin by considering the kinds of moral claims that virtually all skeptics hold to be inapplicable to agents lacking free will. From there I discuss the more contentious point of whether it is ever appropriate to attribute moral obligations to such agents or—what amounts to more or less the same thing—whether they can ever be proper targets of moral "ought" statements. Following an examination of folk moral judgments, I discuss what is possibly the most well-known and detailed skeptical defense of morality in the free will literature—namely, that provided by Pereboom in his book *Living without Free Will*. Although I argue that Pereboom's defense of morality is unsuccessful, it is nonetheless instructive insofar as what he says in the process of building his case for morality (in combination with his criticisms of revisionist defenses of free will) points to ways that skeptics might attempt to defend morality that are best avoided. In particular, Pereboom's discussions of free will and morality highlight why it would be problematic for skeptics to reject free will while embracing a sort of morality that is founded on a purely forward-looking notion of moral responsibility. Through this analysis I aim to show that any skeptical defense of morality is likely to be impeded by the skeptics' reliance upon folk intuitions to motivate their skepticism. As I discuss below, skeptics like Pereboom have insisted on the importance of preserving folk concepts when it comes to navigating the philosophical debates about free will and moral responsibility. In fact, it is this alleged necessity of retaining

folk concepts that has served as the main tactic by which skeptics have tried to thwart the efforts of free will revisionists like Manuel Vargas. And yet many of these same skeptics (e.g., Pereboom) have employed a similar revisionist approach when trying to defend concepts like "moral rightness" and "moral wrongness." I will argue that there does not appear to be any justifiable reason for approving of the revision of terms like "moral rightness" while disallowing any similar revision with regard to terms such as "free will" or "moral responsibility." In light of this, I conclude that the skeptic must choose one of two paths. On the one hand, they can approve of revising key terms in the free will debate in a way that differs from how the folk understand them. In doing so, however, they would appear to undermine the main justification they have offered for why skepticism is preferable to opposing views on free will, such as Vargas-style revisionism. On the other hand, they could hold fast to the necessity of using key terms in the free will debate that do not veer far from the folk conception of them. Opting for this route, however, would seem to commit them to dispensing with moral language altogether.

1. WHAT ARE FREE WILL SKEPTICS COMMITTED TO?

1.1. The Rejection of Backward-Looking Moral Responsibility, Basic Desert, and Praise and Blame

Given that the issue of free will has been argued over endlessly for over two millennia with seemingly little progress being made in providing a definitive answer to the fundamental question—"Do human beings have free will?"—one would be forgiven for suggesting that any further discussion of the matter would be pointless. While such a sentiment is understandable, it fails to recognize the significant progress that has been made in the past few decades with respect to clarifying both the key concepts in question and the primary points of contention that are driving the debate. Speaking to the former, I mentioned earlier how philosophers have converged on an understanding of free will as being the control condition for moral responsibility. While there are some philosophers who reject the understanding of free will in terms of its connection to moral responsibility (e.g., Bruce Waller), it nonetheless remains the accepted view among the vast majority of the more prominent participants in contemporary debates involving free will.[8] Speaking to the central role that moral

8 See, for example, Pereboom, *Living without Free Will* and *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*; Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* and "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility"; O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*; McKenna, "Ultimacy and Sweet Jane"; Nielsen, "The Compatibility of Freedom and Determinism"; Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood*;

responsibility has played in driving discussions surrounding free will, Galen Strawson maintains that it "is a matter of historical fact that concern about moral responsibility has been the main motor—indeed the *ratio essendi*—of discussion of the issue of free will."[9]

Given that free will is generally understood as being the control condition for moral responsibility, it is not surprising that virtually every self-identified free will skeptic currently writing on the subject of free will has denied the existence of moral responsibility for human beings in some form or another. This is apparent among proponents of a popular branch of skepticism (the view that Pereboom calls "hard incompatibilism"), according to which free will is most likely impossible whether or not causal determinism is true. Capturing the view of many skeptics, Galen Strawson has stated that "it makes no difference whether determinism is true or not. We cannot be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our actions in either case."[10] Pereboom himself contends that hard incompatibilism lends itself to skepticism toward a kind of deep and ultimate type of moral responsibility. Other skeptics who deny that this sort of moral responsibility is available to human agents include Richard Double, Gregg Caruso, Thomas Nadelhoffer, and Neil Levy.[11]

In order to better understand the skeptic's position, it is necessary to consider the kinds of moral claims that they believe can and cannot legitimately be made given that human agents lack free will. One moral concept that virtually all self-identified skeptics believe is inapplicable to human agents is *basic desert.* In fact, when skeptics claim that a lack of free will precludes human beings from being morally responsible, it is typically the basic desert sense of moral responsibility that they have in mind. Pereboom offers a summary of what the basic desert sense of moral responsibility is in this passage:

> For an agent to be morally responsible for an action is for it to belong to her in such a way that she would deserve blame if she understood that it was morally wrong, and she would deserve credit or perhaps praise if

Clarke, "An Argument for the Impossibility of Moral Responsibility"; Levy, *Hard Luck*; Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*; Vargas, "Desert, Responsibility, and Justification"; Nahmias, "Response to Misirlisoy and Haggard and to Bjornsson and Pereboom"; Caruso, *Free Will and Consciousness*; and Nadelhoffer, "The Threat of Shrinking Agency and Free Will Disillusionism." In what follows I simply assume that the majority of philosophers investigating free will are correct in holding free will to be the control condition for moral responsibility.

9 Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," 8.

10 Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," 5.

11 Double, *The Non-Reality of Free Will*; Caruso, *Free Will and Consciousness*; Nadelhoffer, "The Threat of Shrinking Agency and Free Will Disillusionism"; and Levy, *Hard Luck.*

> she understood that it was morally exemplary. The desert sense at issue here is basic in the sense that the agent, to be morally responsible, would deserve blame or credit just because she has performed the action … and not by virtue of consequentialist considerations.[12]

Speaking to the central role that the rejection of basic desert moral responsibility plays in motivating the skeptic's view, Caruso says:

> What all these skeptical [hard incompatibilist] arguments have in common, and what they share with classic hard determinism, is the belief that what we do, and the way we are, is ultimately the result of factors beyond our control and because of this we are never morally responsible for our actions in the *basic desert* sense—the sense that would make us *truly deserving* of blame or praise.[13]

To get a better idea of what philosophers mean by "desert" or the "basic desert sense" of moral responsibility, it may help to consider what Strawson has said about the kind of moral responsibility that the free will skeptic rejects and that many if not most of us consider ourselves to have. Referring to this type of moral responsibility as "true moral responsibility," he has described it as "responsibility of such a kind that, if we have it, then it *makes sense*, at least, to suppose that it could be just to punish some of us with (eternal) torment in hell and reward others with (eternal) bliss in heaven."[14] In response to this suggestion, some philosophers have argued that the excessively retributivist notions of eternal suffering or eternal bliss at work here cannot accurately capture the more modest desert element seemingly at work in the folk understanding of moral responsibility. While this may be true, the idea of divine retribution in the afterlife (perhaps in a form more limited than the kind of eternal retribution captured by traditional concepts of heaven and hell) seems a plausible way of understanding the folk notion of desert that plays an important role in many people's notions about moral responsibility.[15] *Retributivism* refers roughly to the justification for treatment whereby an individual is either rewarded or punished as payback for the moral rights/wrongs he has committed. Consequen-

12 Pereboom, "Hard Incompatibilism," 86.

13 Caruso, "Free Will Skepticism and Criminal Behavior," 26.

14 Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," 9.

15 Pereboom also suggests that the basic desert sense of moral responsibility is closely connected with retributive attitudes. As he puts it, of all of the justifications for punishment, retributivism "is the one that most intimately invokes the basic desert sense of moral responsibility, together with the freedom it entails" ("Free Will Skepticism and Criminal Punishment," 52).

tialist considerations do not figure into justifications for treatment from this perspective.[16]

It is worth noting here that the basic desert sense of moral responsibility that is rejected by virtually all skeptics is not the only type of moral responsibility on the table. Whereas this kind of responsibility is completely *backward looking* in that its focus is on the type of responses that are warranted strictly by an agent's past decisions or behaviors, skeptics have been much more willing to embrace a kind of moral responsibility that is considered to be purely *forward looking* in nature, such that certain reactions to agents—such as judgments, rewards, and punishments—can only be justified on consequentialist foundations such as future protection, future reconciliation, or future moral formation.[17] While I have restricted my discussion in this section to how almost all skeptics reject moral responsibility in the backward-looking sense, in section 3 I will consider whether skeptics could succeed in defending a type of morality founded upon a forward-looking sort of moral responsibility.

In the earlier statement in which Caruso discusses how modern skepticism is characterized by its rejection of basic desert moral responsibility, he mentions how this implies that people are never truly deserving of blame or praise. This idea that human agents are never genuinely praiseworthy or blameworthy is another defining feature of skepticism. Speaking to this point, Pereboom says:

> The feature of our ordinary conception of ourselves that would most obviously be undermined if hard incompatibilism were true is our belief that people are typically praiseworthy when they perform morally exemplary actions, and they are typically blameworthy when they perform actions that are morally wrong. To be blameworthy is to deserve blame just because one has chosen to do wrong. Hard incompatibilism rules out one's ever deserving blame just for choosing to act wrongly.[18]

Other prominent skeptics who reject the applicability of attributions of genuine blame or praise to human agents include Nadelhoffer, Strawson, and Levy.[19]

1.2. Moral "Ought" Statements and Moral Obligations

While there is a general consensus among skeptics that neither backward-looking moral responsibility, nor basic desert, nor backward-looking praise or blame

16 For further analysis of the role that basic desert plays in contemporary debates about free will, see McKenna, "Basically Deserved Blame and Its Value."

17 See Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life.*

18 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 139–40.

19 Nadelhoffer, "The Threat of Shrinking Agency and Free Will Disillusionism"; Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* and "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility"; and Levy, *Hard Luck.*

are attributable to us—I will refer to this consensus as the "core moral denials of free will skepticism"—there is less certainty with regard to whether moral "ought" statements or moral obligations are applicable to human agents. It should be stated from the onset that, with regard to current discussions of free will in the philosophical literature, the concepts of *ought* and *obligation* tend to be inextricably linked. This is to say that participants in these discussions tend to use these concepts interchangeably such that the statement, "Agent *A morally ought to/ought not* do action *X*" is generally taken to be equivalent to "Agent *A* is *morally obligated to/obligated not to* do *X*," and vice versa. In light of this, the discussion that follows assumes that where a particular moral "ought" statement is applicable to a specific human agent, it must be the case that the agent is subject to an equivalent moral obligation.

With this in mind, let us consider whether free will skepticism is consistent with moral ought statements of the form, "You *ought to/ought not* do action *A*," where the failure to act in accordance with such a statement is taken to ground either the moral rightness or moral wrongness of one's action (or failure to act). In terms of why one might think that such statements are never warranted given the truth of free will skepticism, it helps to recognize that virtually all skeptics are at least open to the possibility that causal determinism is true. And while most skeptics are hesitant to commit themselves to determinism given what contemporary physics tells us about quantum probabilities, they virtually all recognize that determinism is a live possibility with some even going so far as to claim that determinism is, for all intents and purposes, true. As Al Mele acknowledges, even if we accept that quantum mechanics is correct, this does not "ensure that any human brains themselves operate indeterministically," nor does it rule out that "any indeterminism in the human brain is simply irrelevant to the production of actions."[20] Neuroscientist Sam Harris, himself a free will skeptic who has attempted to defend traditional moral notions, has gone so far as to say that, on the basis of science, "we know that determinism, in every sense relevant to human behavior, is true."[21]

Given that free will skeptics generally agree that causal determinism is a genuine possibility (if not a likelihood with regard to human behavior for all intents and purposes), one might think that these skeptics should also agree that neither moral "ought" statements nor claims of moral obligation can be justified with regard to people. This conclusion gains force once we combine the possibility of determinism with the widely accepted principle asserting that "*ought implies can*" (hereafter OIC). The idea behind this principle is that in order

20 Mele, *Effective Intentions*, 157.

21 Harris, *Free Will*, 16.

for it to be true of any agent *A* that he (morally) ought to do *X*/have done *X*, it must actually be possible for *A* to do/have done *X*. OIC has figured prominently in arguments that incompatibilists have levied against compatibilists. One of the basic incompatibilist intuitions driving the free will debate is that since determinism makes it impossible for anyone to *actually*—as opposed to *hypothetically or counterfactually*—do something other than what they ultimately do, it is a mistake to claim that anyone morally ought to have done something other than what they in fact did given that determinism is true.[22] Given, then, that (a) skeptics accept that determinism is a live possibility, if not most likely true with regard to human behavior (for all intents and purposes), (b) determinism precludes the kind of (actual) ability to do otherwise that skeptics believe is relevant to discussions about free will, and (c) the plausibility of the OIC principle, one might reasonably conclude that the skeptic must, at the very least, remain agnostic about the applicability of "ought" statements and obligations to human agents.[23] Put another way, the foregoing considerations suggest that, from the skeptic's perspective, no statements involving moral "oughts" or obligations can be justified with regard to human agents.[24]

22 Whereas the actual sense of the ability to do otherwise requires that an agent could have acted other than she did given the way she and the world *actually was* when she acted, the hypothetical sense requires only that the agent could have done otherwise if something about the world (e.g., the agent's psychology) had been *different* during the time at which the action in question occurred. Though there is much debate as to whether the actual or hypothetical sense of the ability to do otherwise is the sense relevant to the issue of free will, addressing this controversy is not really necessary insofar as the aims of this paper are concerned since skeptics (and incompatibilists generally) are more or less in agreement that insofar as the ability to do otherwise is required for free will, it is the actual sense of the ability to do otherwise that is needed.

23 While the OIC principle might be considered to pose a challenge to compatibilist as well as to skeptical accounts of morality, there is reason to think that the challenge it poses to skeptical accounts is more serious. This is because while skeptics typically view the *actual* ability to do otherwise as being relevant to free will and moral responsibility, compatibilists typically think that the *hypothetical* ability to do otherwise is what matters. Since determinism only appears to prevent an agent from exercising the former ability, the compatibilist is better positioned than the skeptic to deny that determinism precludes the kind of ability to act otherwise that moral responsibility (or morality more generally) requires. That is, a compatibilist is better situated than the skeptic to argue in a given case that since a determined agent *could have* (hypothetically) done something other than the morally bad act in question, it is reasonable to assert that he, therefore, morally *ought to* have done so.

24 Pereboom suggests that such ought statements might not apply to human agents even if determinism were false. As he puts it, "one might claim that if our choices and actions are partially or truly random events, then we could never do otherwise by the sort of agency required for it to be true that we ought to do otherwise" (*Living without Free Will,* 143).

Locating a compelling objection to the conclusion that the free will skeptic must refrain from asserting that moral "ought" statements are ever justifiably uttered about human agents is difficult to locate in the literature. Since traditional skepticism is founded on both an assumption that determinism might be true (if not altogether true) and that the actual ability to do otherwise, rather than the hypothetical ability to do otherwise, is the sense of "could have done otherwise" that is relevant to debates concerning free will, it seems reasonable that a skeptic interested in defending the applicability of moral "ought" statements or obligations for human agents would find it necessary to challenge the OIC principle.[25] As stated earlier, this principle is widely accepted today, and its strong intuitive appeal likely accounts for its having been accepted by historic luminaries such as Kant and G. E. Moore as well as many prominent contemporary participants in the free will debate, such as Ishtiyaque Haji, who has said that it is reasonable to suppose that "any theory of moral obligation . . . should 'validate' [the OIC principle]."[26]

25 Another option for the skeptic is to attempt to justify the applicability of moral obligations/moral "ought" statements to human agents by basing them on the kind of forward-looking moral responsibility that many skeptics are willing to ascribe to people. The issue of whether such an appeal to forward-looking moral responsibility could contribute to a skeptical defense of morality is addressed in section 3.

26 Haji, *Moral Appraisability*, 53. Haji's forceful defense of OIC and how it provides reasons for doubting the possibility of moral obligations for determined agents can be found in Haji, *Moral Appraisability*, 50–53. It is worth pointing out that while Haji's views in this book share some similarities with my own with regard to the kinds of moral claims that do not appear to be available to the skeptic, there are important differences. With respect to the similarities, in addition to the view that determinism precludes the kind of ability to do otherwise that is required for moral obligations (namely, the actual rather than hypothetical sense), he and I also seem to agree that the skeptic is committed to denying that human actions can be morally right or wrong. In terms of how his and my views differ, since Haji asserts that neither moral goodness/badness nor moral blameworthiness are incompatible with determinism, he leaves open the possibility that the skeptic could justify applying such terms to agents in a deterministic world. Concerning blameworthiness, Haji argues that it only requires that an agent *believe* that what she did was morally impermissible, whether or not this was actually the case (see *Luck's Mischief*). Since a skeptic can consistently agree that an agent could believe what she did was morally impermissible, it follows that Haji would not take issue with a skeptic attributing moral blameworthiness to an agent in the actual world, whether or not determinism holds true.

The fact that Haji would presumably allow the skeptic to ascribe certain moral properties to agents (e.g., moral blameworthiness) but not others (e.g., moral obligations) points to what is probably the most significant difference between our positions—namely, that while my account seeks to ground the meaning of moral terms in folk usage, Haji's does not. As I discuss in detail below, empirical research on folk attitudes about free will and moral responsibility suggests that the key folk moral concepts at issue (including moral blameworthiness) are intimately connected with backward-looking features like basic

These points notwithstanding, there is at least one notable skeptic—namely, Pereboom—who calls the OIC principle into question. While Pereboom acknowledges that the principle is "indeed attractive," he hedges by saying that he is "not sure" whether moral "ought" statements can be true given the truth of determinism.[27] The basis of his uncertainty is that there is a sense in which one might appropriately employ "ought" judgements in order to guide others away from engaging in future behaviors that this individual believes they ought not do. According to Pereboom, such *practically rational* "ought" statements are justified insofar as (a) they effectively encourage others from partaking in problematic behaviors that are prohibited by the "ought" statements, and (b) given that the target of the statement is unaware of what their future actions are (regardless of whether or not determinism is true), it appears *epistemically* open to the recipient of the "ought" statement that he can choose to obey it or not.[28] Of course, to say that a moral "ought" statement may be effective in influencing one's behavior while appearing epistemically justifiable from one's personal (and quite possibly mistaken) standpoint of having an open future is not to say that such a statement is *metaphysically justifiable* (a point that Pereboom acknowledges), which, from the skeptic's point of view at least, is the sense of justifiable that matters. After all, were skeptics to accept Pereboom's epistemic understanding of moral "ought" statements—or any similarly "looser" account of them that did not require the actual, rather than hypothetical, ability to do otherwise in order to be applicable—they would now face a serious problem. This is because moral "ought" statements would now seem to apply to determined agents insofar as their behavior can be influenced and their futures appear epistemically open to them. But if determined agents can have moral obligations, it is unclear why we should deny the compatibilist's claim that they can also be morally responsible and, thus, possess free will. I suspect that Pereboom's recognition of this issue may have played a role in his hesitance to adopt an epistemic understanding of "moral ought" statements.[29] It is telling that while he does not commit to holding that all moral "ought" judgments are false in actuality (regardless of whether they appear epistemically justified from

desert that the skeptic is committed to rejecting. Given that it appears that the skeptic's position depends crucially on adopting the folk usage of these key moral terms, I will argue that the skeptic cannot consistently adopt the more compatibilist-friendly understanding of some moral terms that Haji accepts.

27 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 142, 147.

28 For a more detailed discussion, see Pereboom, *Living without Free Will,* 147–48.

29 I return to a similar worry for skeptics in section 3.

a subjective perspective or whether they are effective in influencing others to act), he does claim to be "somewhat sympathetic" to this view.[30]

Another way that the skeptic might attempt to refute the OIC principle is by citing research indicating that the folk find it counterintuitive. As I will elaborate on below, skeptics often speak to the importance of folk intuitions in philosophical debates about free will, and they frequently attempt to support their position by claiming that it fits best with key folk intuitions. Were it the case, therefore, that the folk generally reject the OIC principle, this could provide the skeptic with the ammunition she needs to make a compelling case for how moral "ought" statements are applicable to human beings even if determinism makes it impossible for them ever to have acted otherwise in the actual sense. So what evidence is there that the folk reject the OIC principle? In two separate studies—one conducted by Wesley Buckwalter and John Turri and the other by Vladimir Chituc, Paul Henne, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, and Felipe De Brigard—subjects appeared to attribute moral "ought" statements and obligations to agents even when they lacked the actual ability to perform the actions that they were viewed as being obligated to do.[31] Caruso has commented that these empirical findings support the claim that "the OIC principle is a philosopher's invention infected by mistaken assumptions about moral responsibility."[32] A more recent study conducted by Miklos Kurthy and his associates, however, points out how each of these previous studies was flawed insofar as the prompts given to subjects made it difficult to draw any firm conclusions as to whether or not they accept the OIC principle.[33] To provide a more accurate analysis of this issue, Kurthy et al. ran another version of the 2015 Buckwalter and Turri studies using prompts that eliminated the kind of ambiguity in the prompts employed in the original studies. With these improved prompts, Kurthy and his colleagues completely reversed the results generated by the original Buckwalter and Turri experiments, leading them to conclude that "people do make judgments largely compatible with the OIC principle, at least in cases in which the inability is not self-imposed."[34] Insofar as the studies by Kurthy et al. seem to provide more accurate insights into folk attitudes regarding the OIC principle, there is reason to agree with the principle's validity.[35] And if this is true,

30 Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will,* 148.

31 See Buckwalter and Turri, "Inability and Obligation in Moral Judgment"; and Chituc et al., "Blame, Not Ability, Impacts Moral 'Ought' Judgments for Impossible Actions."

32 Caruso, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility."

33 Kurthy, Lawford-Smith, and Sousa, "Does Ought Imply Can?"

34 Kurthy, Lawford-Smith, and Sousa, "Does Ought Imply Can?" 15.

35 For additional evidence that the folk accept something like the OIC principle, see C. Clark et al., "Free to Punish."

it reinforces the claim that skeptics cannot justifiably attribute moral "ought" statements or obligations *to* human agents. At the very least, the burden is on the skeptic to defend how the use of such terms can be warranted with regard to people who may be subject to deterministic laws. Such a conclusion, however, turns partly on how much weight we should give to folk intuitions when arbitrating disputes about morality.

1.3. The Relevance of Folk Intuitions with Regard to Morality

When it comes to discussions about any philosophical concept that has its basis in folk discourse (e.g., free will, morality, God), a fundamental question that must be addressed concerns the extent to which philosophers' usage of the concept should resemble the folk conception of it (assuming that there is a discernable folk understanding of the concept in question). One popular view among contemporary philosophers is that philosophical discussions of such concepts should resemble how they are used in ordinary language. The main justification behind this view is that were philosophers to use a term like "morality" in a way that was too far afield from the ordinary conception of it, their subsequent discourse would be more likely to muddy the conceptual waters than to provide clarity. Put another way, the worry is that by diverging too far from the folk concept, philosophers would be essentially changing the subject in such a way that their discussions would have very little to do with the original concept that sparked philosophical discussions in the first place.[36]

Freewill skeptics have been especially vocal in making the case that philosophical discussions of concepts that are rooted in folk discourse—such as free will—must not veer too far from the folk concepts that originally gave rise to the philosophical controversies. Hence, you find skeptics such as Pereboom warning against revising a root folk concept "so radically that the concept used is no longer the same."[37] His argument for skepticism is based on the claim that it stands as the most plausible perspective on free will if we go by what the folk mean by terms like "free will" and "moral responsibility." Nadelhoffer is another skeptic who places importance on how the folk understand these terms, and the case he makes for retaining the folk understanding of them in the philosophical debates is compelling. As he puts it:

> I think that what we call things matters. And I also think the terms "free will" and "moral responsibility" carry an awful lot of both metaphysical and historical baggage. Given this web of historical associations [e.g.,

36 For further discussion of the role folk intuitions play in philosophical discourse, see Morris, *Science and the End of Ethics.*

37 Pereboom, "Hard Incompatibilism and Its Rivals," 24.

> religious overtones, Cartesian dualism] I do not think that we should revise the terms "free will" and "moral responsibility." If we do not have the kind of agency and responsibility that people have traditionally thought we had, we invite confusion by continuing to use the old terms to talk about what we actually do have—especially when we could use other terms which are less loaded.[38]

Like Pereboom, Nadelhoffer believes that skepticism is the preferred view in light of how we cannot possess free will and moral responsibility as the folk understand them.[39]

That skeptics (and incompatibilists more generally) should emphasize the importance of folk intuitions makes sense given how incompatibilism is more metaphysically demanding than compatibilism. As I pointed out in a paper co-written with Nadelhoffer, Eddy Nahmias, and Jason Turner, incompatibilism is more demanding than compatibilism since the conditions that it requires for free will—e.g., "at a minimum, indeterministic event-causal processes at the right place in the human agent, and often, additionally, agent causation"—go beyond what the compatibilist requires.[40] The question then becomes why we should agree with the incompatibilist's conception of free will given that it is more complex than its compatibilist counterpart and, all things being equal, a less complex understanding of a philosophical term is generally preferable to a more complex understanding. The most plausible answer that incompatibilists can give is that all things are not equal since their view comes closest to the notion of free will accepted by the folk.

It is not, however, only skeptics and other incompatibilists who believe that philosophers ought to preserve key aspects of folk concepts when discussing free will and other related issues. Nahmias is a compatibilist who, along with myself and the other co-authors, also speaks to the importance of paying heed to folk intuitions. Echoing the views of the aforementioned skeptics, he agrees that "because the free will debate is intimately connected to ordinary intuitions and beliefs via [certain] values and practices, it is important that a philosophical theory of free will accounts for and accords with ordinary people's understanding of the concept and their judgments about relevant cases."[41] Mele, another who falls outside of the incompatibilist camp, makes a similar point by suggesting that where the folk hold a widely shared view of a particular philosophical

38 Nadelhoffer, "The Threat of Shrinking Agency and Free Will Disillusionism," 176–77.

39 That is, in the sense in which these terms are intimately connected to basic desert. Strawson and Caruso are other skeptics who argue along these lines.

40 Nahmias et al., "Is Incompatibilism Intuitive?" 31.

41 Nahmias et al., "Is Incompatibilism Intuitive?" 30.

concept, "such judgments provide evidence about what the concept is," and warns that a philosophical analysis "that is wholly unconstrained by [the folk] concept runs the risk of having nothing more than a philosophical fiction as its subject matter."[42]

Given that philosophical discussions involving concepts based in folk discourse ought to proceed with an understanding of these concepts that is not unduly at odds with how the folk understand them—a view, again, that skeptics are particularly committed to—the question then becomes: How do the folk actually conceive of morality and its constitutive parts, such as morally right and morally wrong actions?[43] While a full-fledged account of how the folk conceive of morality is a subject that I am not equipped to address in this essay, I do wish to point out that the manner in which the folk understand it seems to clearly involve attitudes that can properly be called backward looking. To be more specific, the folk concept of morality appears to be, to a significant extent, grounded on moral responsibility in the basic desert sense discussed earlier. The notion that there is a fundamental desert-based component to people's moral judgments has a long history in philosophy. John Stuart Mill asserted that "[w]e do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or another for doing it."[44] Speaking to how he has the basic desert understanding of punishment in mind, he continues by saying that the "sentiment of justice, in that one of its elements which consists in the desire to punish, is thus, I conceive, the natural feeling of *retaliation or vengeance*, rendered by intellect and sympathy to those injuries that is, to those hurts, which wound us through, or in common with society at large."[45] Echoing the same opinion, Friedrich Nietzsche mentions that "wherever [moral] responsibilities are sought, it is usually the instinct of wanting to judge and punish which is at work."[46] Richard Joyce lends a more contemporary voice to this perspective by pointing out that "when we examine our ordinary concepts of desert and justice, what we seem to find is an idea of the world having a kind of 'moral equilibrium.' When a wrong is done this equilibrium is upset, and the

42 Mele, "Acting Intentionally," 27. Speaking to how he is reluctant to identify himself as a genuine incompatibilist, Mele has stated that he is "officially agnostic about the truth of compatibilism" (*Free Will and Luck*, 78).

43 To be clear, the issue here is not what *specific actions*, etc., the folk generally hold to be moral or immoral, but rather what the folk generally *mean* when they say that a certain action or agent is morally good/bad or morally right/wrong.

44 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 187.

45 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 188, emphasis added.

46 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 499.

administration of the appropriate punishment is seen as the procedure that will effect its restitution."[47]

Theoretical support for the claim that our moral judgments are steeped in the kinds of retributivist attitudes that characterize the basic desert sense of moral responsibility comes by way of the prevailing evolutionary account of our moral faculty. According to this view, our moral faculty is an evolutionary adaptation that allowed our ancestors to transcend their selfish proclivities in order to engage in the type of cooperative behaviors that gave their groups a fitness advantage over their less cooperative rivals. In order to ensure that members of the group conformed to its norms, it was necessary, this account goes, that the moral sentiments included the desire to punish wrongdoers and reward those who abided by the group's rules. Charles Darwin himself favored this account of morality's origins, and it has been championed in more recent times by psychologist Jonathan Haidt among others. Recent empirical work has lent strong support for this evolutionary picture of our moral faculty and how retributivist sentiments play a central role in our moral judgments.

In a series of studies, psychologist Cory Clark and her colleagues provide evidence that people's beliefs in free will are motivated by a desire to punish perceived wrongdoers. For instance, subjects were significantly more likely to attribute free will to the actions of an immoral agent than they were to the actions of a neutral agent. Interpreting their results, Clark et al. claim that considering the immoral behavior of others caused subjects to attribute higher levels of free will and moral responsibility to the immoral agents in order to justify their desire to punish them. As they put it:

> Moral responsibility is a construct that permits societies (and individuals) to blame and punish others for their misdeeds. Insofar as free will is a prerequisite for moral responsibility, ascribing free will to criminals or other miscreants provides a crucial justification for punishing them for their actions.[48]

In what follows, Clark and her associates explain how their experiments provide empirical reinforcement to the evolutionary account of the human moral faculty discussed earlier: "The core of our argument is that this subjective experience of free will gains motivational reinforcement by facilitating the assignment of moral responsibility, which in turn supports the crucial task of punishing individuals who act in ways that are detrimental to cohesive group functioning."[49]

47 Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 68.

48 Clark et al., "Free to Punish," 503.

49 Clark et al., "Free to Punish," 509.

Clark et al.'s studies suggest that retributivist motivations are driving people's tendencies to assign free will and moral responsibility to agents viewed as acting immorally and, hence, that it is the basic desert sense of moral responsibility at work in people's minds when they are passing judgment on agents deemed to be immoral. However, their studies do not explicitly aim to uncover whether the desire to punish that is apparently driving subjects' judgments to assign free will to immoral agents is retributivist or consequentialist in nature. Another series of studies by Azam Shariff and his associates set out to determine the nature of these punitive inclinations with more precision.[50] Their results provide robust support for the view that retributivist impulses—as opposed to consequentialist considerations—were primarily responsible for eliciting increased attributions of free will for immoral agents in the experiments conducted by Clark et al. The work of Shariff et al. also provides some of the strongest evidence yet that folk moral judgments invoke the basic desert sense of moral responsibility and that, hence, basic desert constitutes an essential component of folk moral judgments.

Shariff and his colleagues set out to discover whether reducing people's beliefs in free will would make them less retributive about punishment. They assumed that if folk attributions of moral responsibility are dependent upon attributions of free will, then we should find that people tend to be less retributive in their judgments about the kinds of treatment that a particular individual should receive insofar as they believe that the individual in question did not act freely. An implicit assumption these researchers were operating under is that folk conceptions of moral responsibility are closely connected to deservingness of retributivist treatment. Put another way, the researchers assumed that the folk are operating under a conception of basic desert-based, as opposed to consequentialist-based, moral responsibility. The results of their studies suggest that their assumption was correct. In study 1, they found that while stronger beliefs in free will predicted retributivist punishment, they were not predictive of consequentialist punishment. In study 2, the researchers found that the subjects who had their beliefs in free will diminished by reading a scientific argument against free will recommended prison sentences that were roughly half of those that were recommended by subjects in a control group, suggesting that reducing the free will beliefs of the test group made them significantly less retributive than subjects in the control group. The results led Shariff and his colleagues to infer a tight connection between actions perceived as immoral with the natural desire to inflict retributivist punishment upon immoral agents. Hence, they conclude that "Humans respond to transgressions with an urge

50 See Shariff et al., "Free Will and Punishment."

to exact punitive costs on the transgressor."[51] Shariff et al. add further support to the notion that there is an essential basic desert element at work in people's moral judgments by highlighting the important role that blameworthiness appears to play. More specifically, they mention how "the mediational effect of perceived blameworthiness made a strong case for the role of moral responsibility in the effect of diminished free will belief on retribution."[52] In light of the ample empirical evidence suggesting that exposure to perceived immoral acts tends to elicit strong retributivist sentiments from test subjects which, in turn, influences their attributions of free will and moral responsibility, the burden of proof would appear to fall upon those who would deny that folk moral judgments have a retributivist (basic desert) element as a central component. This burden is made even stronger by more recent research by Jim Everett and his colleagues that set out to explain why political conservatives tend to believe in free will more than political liberals.

In order to account for the empirical observation that conservatives have both a higher belief in free will and a greater tendency to attribute it to agents, Everett et al. set out to test their hypothesis that it was conservatives' greater tendency to moralize than liberals—i.e., to give moral weight to a larger set of actions and behaviors than liberals—that accounts for this phenomenon. While the studies that they ran reinforced the claim that conservatives have a greater tendency to both believe in free will and to attribute it to others, they found that it was conservatives' tendency to make more *moral judgments* (particularly judgments about moral wrongness)—mediated by a desire to hold agents blameworthy— that accounted for this difference among liberals and conservatives rather than political views or metaphysical beliefs about human

51 Shariff, et al., "Free Will and Punishment," 1564.

52 Shariff et al., "Free Will and Punishment," 1567. Additional empirical support for the standard evolutionary account of our moral faculty and how the instinct toward retributivist punishment acts as a driving force in our moral judgments can be found in Fehr and Gächter, "Altruistic Punishment in Humans"; and Hamlin et al., "How Infants and Toddlers React to Antisocial Others." Fehr and Gächter's experiments indicate that the desire to punish wrongdoers runs so deeply in the human psyche that people will punish others for transgressions even when doing so comes at a significant cost to themselves. The work of Hamlin and her colleagues demonstrates not only that children as young as twenty-one months administer reward and punishment to others based on their good or bad behavior, but also that babies as young as eight months show an affinity for those who dole out punishment to "bad guys" and an intolerance for those who reward "bad guys." To attribute the behavioral tendencies of young children that Hamlin and her colleagues discovered to moral instruction seems pretty clearly to overestimate the ability of young children to comprehend complex social norms and to manifest such moral lessons into appropriate behaviors. The more likely explanation is that these tendencies are manifestations of innate moral capacities involving retributivist instincts that have been forged by evolutionary pressures.

autonomy. In one of their studies, for instance, Everett and his associates found that when liberals were more motivated than conservatives to hold an agent as having acted morally wrong, liberal subjects tended to assign a greater level of free will to the agent than conservative subjects. Everett et al. draw the following conclusion: "Supporting the idea that differences in moralization underpin the specific free will attributions, we found that when adding perceived moral wrongness . . . to the model, political ideology no longer predicted ascriptions of free will . . . with only reported moral wrongness significantly predicting free will attributions."[53] They go on to say that "people endorse the idea of free will in order to justify their desire to blame others for moral wrongdoing."[54]

Combining the research of Shariff et al. and Everett et al. suggests that folk moral judgments—including those about moral rightness and wrongness—are inseparable from free will, backward-looking moral responsibility, and blame. Shariff and his colleagues found that folk judgments about free will are tied to backward-looking moral responsibility and retributivist, as opposed to consequentialist, punishment. Everett and his associates helped further clarify the relationship between folk moral judgments, free will, and backward-looking moral responsibility by finding that judgments about moral wrongness (regardless of political ideology) were positively correlated to judgments about free will and a desire to blame immoral agents.

It is important to clarify here that my point is not that there are not any forward-looking elements in the folk concept of morality, but merely that it contains fundamental backward-looking elements as well. This will be important to remember since my primary argument against skeptical defenses of morality—such as that provided by Pereboom—is that they illicitly aim to revise the folk understanding of morality by eliminating these essential backward-looking elements. I will argue that it is inconsistent for the skeptic to alter an important folk concept in this way since their primary objection to free will revisionists is that they themselves are improperly altering the folk concept of free will by stripping it of its fundamental incompatibilist elements. Employing a parallel type of reasoning to what I mentioned above in reference to how the folk understand morality, skeptics do not deny that the folk concept of free will is infused with elements that are central to compatibilist notions of free will (such as the ability to deliberate among choices and act upon reasons). Their primary issue with the revisionists is that the watered-down notion of free will that they favor—that is, one without any incompatibilist commitments—is

53 Everett et al., "Political Differences in Free Will Belief Are Associated with Differences in Moralization," 470.

54 Everett et al., "Political differences in Free Will Belief Are Associated with Differences in Moralization," 479.

too different from the folk concept to be relevant to the primary philosophical debates surrounding free will. Likewise, I will argue that the weakened notion of morality that skeptics defend, insofar as it diverges too far from the folk concept of morality by eliminating its basic desert elements, is equally ill suited for helping address key philosophical debates in ethics.

To this point I have discussed how skeptics are in general agreement that the lack of free will commits them to rejecting the backward-looking type of moral responsibility, moral praise/blame, and moral desert with respect to human beings and their actions. Furthermore, I have mentioned why the skeptic seems unable to justify the attribution of any genuine moral "ought" statements or obligations to human agents. But if this is correct, one may reasonably ask what kind of morality is left for the skeptic to defend. To address this question, it will be helpful to examine the account of morality defended by Derk Pereboom since it is perhaps the most detailed account of morality offered by a free will skeptic.

2. Pereboom's Skeptical Account of Morality

In addition to accepting what I am calling the "core moral denials of free will skepticism," Pereboom seems willing to grant the inapplicability of moral "ought" statements (and presumably moral obligations as well) to human agents. Nonetheless, he still believes that people and their actions can properly be subject to moral appraisal. As he puts it, "Even if moral 'ought' judgments are never true, it would still seem that moral judgments such as 'it is morally good for *A* to do *x*' and 'it is morally bad for *A* to do *y*' still can be."[55] The question now arises as to how Pereboom conceives of terms such as "morally good," "morally bad," "morally right," and "morally wrong" given that such terms cannot be cashed out in terms of moral responsibility, desert, praise/blame, or even moral obligations. Put another way, what exactly would it mean for Pereboom to assert that a human agent's action was *morally wrong*?

Insight into the kind of morality that Pereboom believes can be reconciled with free will skepticism can be found in his book, *Living without Free Will*. So what does he say? Though Pereboom rarely offers specifics in terms of the kind of morality he believes can coexist alongside skepticism, it is possible to get at least a rough outline of what he has in mind from some examples and discussions that he provides. The following is one such example:

> Suppose you say to an animal-abuser, "You ought not to abuse that animal," but then you find out that he has a psychological condition

55 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 143.

> (which he could have done nothing to prevent) that makes animal-abusing irresistible for him, so that he cannot help but abuse the animal. From my point of view, there is an appreciable strong pull to admitting that the "ought" judgment was false, but there is relatively little to denying that abusing the animal is morally wrong for him.[56]

As for what Pereboom takes "morally wrong" to mean, he says that "[h]ard incompatibilist moral worth is indeed moral, but it is more similar to the value we might assign to an automobile or a work of art."[57] Along the same lines, he asserts that the moral goodness of a human agent "is more like the aesthetic sort than is often thought because it does not involve blameworthiness or praiseworthiness, but it is no less moral for that."[58]

Pereboom even maintains that skepticism is compatible with non-consequentialist forms of morality. As he puts it, "most of the descriptive and prescriptive content of any ethical system is consistent with hard determinism, and more inclusively, with hard indeterminism."[59] "The reason for this," he says, "is that the metaphysical bases for non-consequentialist positions in general, insofar as they have been developed, do not clearly involve an essential appeal to notions of freedom unavailable to the Hard Indeterminist."[60] Evidently Pereboom believes that one could subscribe to a genuine version of Kantian ethics, for example, so long as he abandons certain aspects of this moral outlook such as free will, moral responsibility, and blameworthiness.

In laying out my reasons for rejecting Pereboom's attempt to salvage morality in the face of skepticism, I begin by mentioning a general point that appears applicable to any defenses of morality by genuine free will skeptics. The point is that there are strong reasons for rejecting any such defense insofar as it breaks in fundamental ways from the folk conception of morality. In section 1.3 I discussed how many philosophers—especially free will skeptics—have stressed the importance of not deviating too far from relevant folk concepts when engaging in philosophical debates. And yet by advocating for a kind of morality that eschews blame, desert, and backward-looking moral responsibility, this is precisely what skeptical defenders of morality are doing. Concepts such as these are so deeply entrenched in our ordinary moral judgments that there is little doubt that a typical representative of the folk would have enormous difficulty resonating with a moral outlook where notions such as moral blame, etc.,

56 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 147.

57 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 153.

58 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 153.

59 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 150.

60 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 150.

have no place. At the very least, therefore, it seems incumbent on any skeptical account of morality to explain why we should accept a notion of morality that is so vastly at odds with ordinary intuitions.

This problem is especially acute for Pereboom, who has argued extensively about the importance of using philosophical terms in a way that closely resembles folk usage. Addressing the efforts of philosophers like Manual Vargas who have argued that making headway in the free will debate requires us to revise key terms like "free will" and "moral responsibility" in a compatibilist way that eliminates some of the more controversial elements that are included in the folk understanding of them, Pereboom poses the following "crucial question":

> [Is] there a defensible compatibilist conception of free will near enough to the folk's to count as a natural extension of it, one that can do enough of the work the folk conception does in adjudicating questions of moral responsibility and punishment, and in governing our attitudes to the actions of those around us?[61]

The essence of his case against compatibilists who seek to revise key terms in the fashion that Vargas and others do is that they end up with an understanding of free will that is too different from that of the folk. Pereboom's stance is that by changing the meanings of these key terms so drastically, philosophers are likely to cause confusion in the eyes of the folk (and quite possibly other philosophers) who will interpret the revisionists to be defending the old folk concepts. He illustrates this point using the following example:

> If people started saying "he's morally responsible for the murder since he did it of his own free will," but did not mean to claim that he in the basic sense deserved blame or punishment, then it could well be misleading to use the old terminology, *since an audience might well be confused about which concept these words stand for*.[62]

Since Pereboom believes that the folk have the basic desert sense of moral responsibility in mind when it comes to free will, he rejects revisionist attempts to extricate this sense of moral responsibility from what it means to exercise free will.

One of the main reasons that Pereboom wants to preserve the folk concepts of free will and moral responsibility in philosophical discourse is that he believes that one of the primary jobs of philosophers is to show us when our ordinary attitudes are mistaken. In particular, he believes that philosophers' discussions of free will are key to showing us that our concepts of blameworthiness

61 Pereboom, "Hard Incompatibilism and Its Rivals," 25.

62 Pereboom, "Hard Incompatibilism and Its Rivals," 26, emphasis added.

and retributivist desert are indefensible and ought to be jettisoned. Since he believes that the folk take the existence of free will to provide the primary philosophical justification for these backward-looking attitudes, Pereboom worries that revising the term "free will" along the lines that Vargas suggests would make it more difficult to convince the folk that they ought to dispense with these attitudes as well as the problematic practices that they give rise to (e.g., retributivist criminal punishment). Of note here is that Pereboom believes the importance of preserving folk concepts in philosophical discussions extends beyond the free will debate. As he puts it, "More generally, when deciding how to revise, we need to retain concepts that facilitate our thinking that some of our attitudes and beliefs are mistaken."[63]

The main point I wish to make here is that the same arguments that Pereboom offers against revising the folk concepts of free will and moral responsibility can be applied with just as much force against revising the folk concept of morality in the manner he suggests given its close connection to notions such as moral responsibility, blame/praise, basic desert, and obligation. Even Pereboom himself admits that the watered-down kind of morality that he believes can coexist with skepticism "differs significantly from the ordinary conception."[64] A major question facing Pereboom, then, is whether he can consistently defend his version of morality given the kinds of arguments he offers against free will in general and Vargas-style compatibilism in particular.[65] From what has preceded, we can discern three distinct, though related, criteria that Pereboom believes an adequate revisionist account of free will must satisfy: (a) the notion of free will that it employs must be near enough to the folk's notion to count as a natural extension of it, one that can do enough of the work the folk conception does in (among other things) governing our attitudes to the actions of those around us; (b) it must not result in the audience being confused about which concepts key words like "free will" and "moral responsibility" stand for; and (c) it must not revise the key term(s) in question so drastically that it would damage the effort of retaining concepts that facilitate our thinking that some of our attitudes and beliefs are mistaken. Pereboom's argument against Vargas's revisionist account of free will is, in essence, that it fails to meet each of these criteria.

The question before us is whether the kind of test that Pereboom proposes for a revisionist account of free will would be passed by his revisionist conception

63 Pereboom, "Response to Kane, Fischer, and Vargas," 203.

64 Pereboom, *Living without Free Will,* 153.

65 While trying to categorize Vargas's view on free will can be tricky, it seems appropriate to consider it a form of compatibilism. Hence, we find Michael McKenna and D. Justin Coates using the term "revisionist compatibilism" in referring to Vargas's position ("Compatibilism").

of morality. In terms of whether his skeptical understanding of the term "morality" comes close enough to the folk concept to play all the key roles it does in holding people accountable, etc., it seems pretty clear that a negative answer is warranted. As I alluded to earlier, once we strip from the folk notion of morality concepts like moral responsibility, praise and blame, basic desert, and having moral obligations, it is not clear what would be left since, as I have discussed, all of these elements seem to be central features of folk moral judgments. While Pereboom maintains that we can still properly use terms like "moral good/bad" and "moral rightness/wrongness" to describe human agents and their actions, these terms have traditionally been so inextricably tied to moral responsibility (including backward-looking moral responsibility), praise/blame, etc., that any usage of terms like "morally wrong" in the way that Pereboom conceives of them would change their usual meaning in ordinary discourse. After all, it seems beyond contention that the folk do not use a term like *moral rightness* as more or less a term of aesthetic appreciation or as the kind of label we might give to "an automobile or a work of art" that pleases us on some level—both of which capture how Pereboom suggests one should interpret this term from a skeptical perspective.[66] Furthermore, since folk attitudes toward others, as well as their treatment of one another, would change dramatically under the revised kind of moral outlook that Pereboom favors (i.e., one that rejects retributivist attitudes and practices), it seems fair to say that his revisionist account of morality is not a natural extension of the folk understanding of morality.

It seems equally clear, if not more so, that by revising morality in the manner he suggests, Pereboom would be promoting the kind of terminological confusion that he warns us so sternly about with regard to free will revisionism. Under the reasonable assumption that a statement such as "*A* was morally wrong to do *X*," when uttered by the folk (and most other philosophers) generally implies, among other things, that *A* is both morally responsible and morally blameworthy for *X*-ing and that *A* ought not have done *X*, there is little doubt that the meaning of this statement is very different from the same sentence being uttered by Pereboom. Given this, we should expect that confusion would often arise among a general audience when hearing Pereboom and other like-minded skeptics using moral terms that are devoid of the implications that most people usually take them to have.

Finally, if Pereboom is worried that revising the term "free will" away from its usual meaning would make it more difficult to facilitate our acknowledgment that some of our attitudes and beliefs (e.g., retributive punishment is

66 See my prior discussion of Everett et al. with regard to how the folk appear to understand moral rightness/wrongness.

justifiable) are mistaken, he should be equally if not more concerned about revising the term "morality" along the lines he suggests. Recall that his worry is that revising the term "free will" in the manner that Vargas suggests would make it more difficult to change the folk's views about basic desert, retributive punishment, and the like. But since the folk understanding of "morality" is just as encumbered (if not more so) with backward-looking attitudes, any effort to preserve the use of this term in our ordinary language would appear to cause the same kinds of inability to confront folk views about basic desert that Pereboom deems both false and problematic.

3. Can Forward-Looking Moral Responsibility Help Salvage a Skeptical Account of Morality?

I mentioned earlier that while it appears that skepticism precludes a kind of backward-looking moral responsibility, few, if any, philosophers have argued that skepticism is incompatible with a forward-looking type of moral responsibility. In light of this, a skeptic might suggest that a defensible account of morality can be constructed once we eschew the backward-looking variety of moral responsibility in favor of its forward-looking counterpart. With this understanding of moral responsibility in tow, the argument goes, the skeptic can now explain how moral terms like "good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong," and "obligations" can properly apply to human agents and their actions even though concepts like basic desert, (genuine) moral praiseworthiness, and (genuine) moral blameworthiness cannot. The idea is that certain moral labels would do no more than indicate that certain individuals, through their decisions and actions, are proper targets of particular kinds of forward-looking responses (e.g., imprisonment geared toward rehabilitation) that can be expected to increase the likelihood of influencing their (or perhaps others') future behavior in order to achieve consequentialist ends such as increasing overall happiness. Might this serve as an effective strategy for defending a skeptical account of morality?

I previously discussed how the folk notion of moral responsibility is constituted in part by backward-looking elements such that, for example, the judgment that one is morally responsible for a morally bad action is often (if not most of the time) associated with the judgment that he/she ought to suffer retribution. It follows from this that any attempt to revise the term "moral responsibility" in a way that eliminates all backward-looking elements would leave us with a notion of moral responsibility that is fundamentally different from the folk meaning of the term. In light of this, we need an explanation of how such a revisionist account of moral responsibility can be justified by the skeptic given how a desire for preserving the folk understanding of key philosophical terms

serves to motivate the skeptic's position in the first place. Beyond this concern, another issue presents itself: if it is open to the skeptic to revise moral responsibility in a way that eliminates the backward-looking attributes it contains in the eyes of the folk, then why is it not equally open to a compatibilist to revise *free will* in a similar way—that is, in a way that denotes no more than the possession of the types of capacities (e.g., the ability to apprehend and respond appropriately to a society's norms) that are needed to render one an appropriate target for forward-looking (but not backward-looking) treatment? Since philosophers generally construe free will as being the control condition for moral responsibility, it is reasonable to expect that where one construes moral responsibility in a sense that is stripped of any backward-looking elements, they should also conceive of free will in a similar fashion. But if this is true, then it is unclear why the skeptic should choose to reject free will rather than accept a revised notion of it, something along the lines of that favored by Daniel Dennett.

Dennett's compatibilist account of free will shares many similarities with the most common forms of skepticism, including a naturalistic account of human decisions and behaviors, a rejection of basic desert moral responsibility, and the idea that punishments can only be justified by forward-looking considerations.[67] Unlike the skeptic, however, Dennett asserts the existence of free will, which he understands as basically the kind of capacity that allows us to conceive of the consequences of our actions—as well as to understand prevailing social norms—and respond to them accordingly. When it comes to the related issues of free will and morality, Dennett's concern is purely pragmatic in that he wants to know how we can justify punishment in order to ensure a well-functioning society. Since he believes that punishments based on forward-looking considerations are all we need to achieve this goal (and the only kind of punishments that are justifiable), he argues that it is necessary for us to identify which agents are proper subjects of such punishments and he uses the term "moral responsibility" to capture the status of such agents. Furthermore, he believes a well-functioning society needs a way to distinguish individuals whose capacities make them appropriate targets of these punishments from those who are not. He uses the term "free will" to refer to this capacity. The challenge for the skeptic is to

67 Dennett, *Freedom Evolves.* See also Clark, "Exchange on Waller's *Against Moral Responsibility*." While Dennett occasionally speaks as if his account of free will can accommodate a purely backward-looking type of moral responsibility, he has made it clear that any reactions toward either proper or improper behavior (e.g., rewards and punishments) that his account endorses are ultimately justified by forward-looking considerations. Hence, in a recent discussion with Gregg Caruso, he declares, "*Of course* it is the 'forward-looking benefits' of the whole system of desert (praise and blame, reward and punishment) that justifies it" (Warburton, "Just Deserts").

explain why, if it is legitimate to revise either the term "moral responsibility" or other moral terms like "morally wrong" so as to eliminate the backward-looking properties that are engrained in folk conceptions of them, we cannot also revise the term "free will" along similar lines.[68] Presumably, any skeptical resistance toward doing so would be based on the kinds of arguments Pereboom offered when addressing the dangers of revising key philosophical terms away from their folk meanings (the need to avoid terminological confusion, etc.). But similar to the objection I brought against Pereboom, this understandable apprehension toward revising key folk concepts would appear to be equally warranted against any attempts to revise moral terms in a way that jettisons the backward-looking elements that are built into the folk understanding of them.

4. Taking Agents Out of the Equation

Suppose that my foregoing arguments have persuaded a skeptic to agree that moral terms like moral responsibility, moral obligation, moral praise/blame, and even moral rightness/wrongness are never applicable to human agents since the use of such terms by the folk has implications that the skeptic rejects (e.g., the propriety of retributivist attitudes). A skeptic who desires to preserve our use of moral concepts might assert that while my arguments imply that we should abandon some of our moral concepts (specifically those that pertain to *human agents*), there are other moral concepts (namely, those that refer to positive *states of affairs*) that could still persist, and these moral concepts could form the basis of a revised moral perspective that sits comfortably alongside skepticism. Consider for instance how people often talk about the moral importance of reducing the impact of climate change or eradicating cancer. In speaking of such outcomes in moral terms such as being "morally good," the idea is that they are something that we should aspire to bring about.

My response to this hypothetical effort to defend morality in light of skepticism is twofold. To begin with, I would point out that this understanding of morality is a far cry from the kind of morality that skeptics such as Pereboom, Caruso, and Honderich have tried to defend. Each of them has made clear that the morality that they are interested in pertains to human beings and their actions. Thus, if the only kinds of moral properties a skeptic could defend concerned states of affairs rather than human agents, I doubt that these skeptical defenders of morality would find much to celebrate. Beyond this, however, it

68 One could even make the case that revising free will is more justifiable than revising these moral terms since while it is beyond reasonable doubt that the moral terms as used by the folk have certain backward-looking elements built into them, there is less certainty as to whether the folk notion of free will consists of essential backward-looking features.

is not clear to me what is entailed by the claim that a certain future outcome is "morally good." Presumably, in saying that eradicating cancer would be "a morally good state of affairs," one implication—and one that the folk would likely draw from such a statement—is that *we as humans* are somehow *morally responsible* or *morally obligated* to work toward eliminating cancer. But since this runs against my prior arguments that neither moral responsibility nor moral obligations are applicable to human agents from the skeptic's perspective, this interpretation would place the burden on the skeptic to explain how any state of affairs could be morally good in this way. Perhaps we could construe any claim about an outcome being "morally good" as amounting to nothing more than a single person, group of people, complete population, etc., being positively disposed to it. In this case, it is unclear what role the term "moral" is playing here. Under such an interpretation, it seems reasonable to assert that the individual(s) positively disposed to the outcome in question has *prudential* or *self-interested* reasons for seeing that it is brought about and nothing more. That being the case, an argument is called for to explain why it would be appropriate to add a moral element to the strictly prudential claim since it does not appear to accomplish anything other than imparting onto certain individuals particular moral obligations, etc., that do not appear justifiable in light of my previous arguments. At any rate, even if a skeptical account of morality that applies only to states of affairs and not to persons could be constructed in a way that does not stray too far from ordinary folk moral attitudes—an unlikely prospect in my opinion—I would still consider the arguments of this paper a success insofar as they persuaded skeptics to refrain from making moral ascriptions to people.

In the end, it appears that skeptics wishing to preserve the use of moral terms are faced with the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, they can argue for the importance of retaining the folk understanding of key terms like free will and moral responsibility with their attendant backward-looking elements. In which case, it seems the proper course of action (given that the skeptical perspective is the correct one) is to deny the existence of free will, moral responsibility, or any moral properties whatsoever, since any attempt to preserve these concepts in philosophical discourse would seem to require changing their folk meanings too drastically. On the other hand, they can argue that such a revisionism of folk notions like moral responsibility is justified since it is necessary for some useful purpose, such as ensuring that society functions well. In this case, however, it would be unclear why the skeptic should not switch allegiance to Dennett-style compatibilism since the case for revising the folk understanding of free will can be justified on the same grounds. For my part, I believe that philosophers like Pereboom and Nadelhoffer make a strong case for not revising terms like free will and moral responsibility in a way that fundamentally

changes the folk meaning of these terms. I agree with them that doing so runs the risk of muddying up the waters with regard to the philosophical debates. I also worry that the folk might misinterpret the outcome of such debates such that, for example, when a philosopher affirms the existence of a type of moral responsibility that is devoid of backward-looking elements, a layperson may nonetheless take this to justify their retributive attitudes. And while I believe that this sort of problem is likely to outweigh whatever advantages would come by revising folk terms in such fundamental ways, this subject requires a deeper analysis than I have provided here. Regardless, it would appear that the burden is on the skeptic to explain why a substantial revisionism of key philosophical terms away from their folk meanings is acceptable in some cases (e.g., morality, moral responsibility) but not others (e.g., free will).

5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that skeptics have yet to succeed in their attempts to construct a compelling case for how the rejection of free will can be reconciled with a worldview that retains traditional moral concepts such as moral wrongness or moral responsibility. To this end, I analyzed Pereboom's defense of morality and argued for why it falls short of explaining how moral properties can plausibly be attributed to human agents lacking free will. I also made the more general point that any skeptical defense of morality is likely to fail insofar as the morality it ends up defending will almost certainly break too drastically from traditional folk moral notions that are heavily embedded with features that skeptics believe are untenable, including backward-looking elements such as basic desert. Given the skeptic's emphasis on the importance of retaining folk concepts, they shoulder the burden of explaining how they can justify significantly revising folk moral terms. I have argued that were they to allow revising folk moral terms (e.g., moral responsibility) in such a way as to eliminate the kinds of backward-looking properties that skepticism prohibits, it would seem that they should also allow revising free will in a similar manner. In doing so, however, they would essentially be undermining the case for free will skepticism.[69]

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