

## Susan Wolf, "Assymetrical Freedom"

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### Possible Applications:

Free Will and Determinism,  
Moral Responsibility  
Blame and Punishment  
Moral Luck  
Virtue Ethics

### Level: intermediate

- requires some background in free will debate (difference between compatibilism and incompatibilism, and connection between free will and moral responsibility)
- good recap of the standard debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists

### Complimentary Texts/Resources:

- Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"
- Plato
- Kant

### Thesis:

- interesting and sophisticated position compatibilist position in the debate about free will and determinism.
- Slogan: To be free is to be determined by the Good.
- The claim is that if we do the right thing for the right reasons, then we are free—in the sense that is required by moral responsibility—even if we are determined. But if we do the wrong thing, then we are free and morally responsible only if we are not determined (i.e. if we could have done otherwise).

### Summary:

*The problem:*

- An agent who performs the right actions (for the right reasons) is one who is *determined* in the right way – her actions are determined by the right sorts of interests, and those interests are determined by the right sorts of reasons.
- So someone who is thoroughly undetermined cannot be a moral agent, since his actions cannot be determined by his moral interests, and his interests cannot be determined by moral reasons. An undetermined agent is so free he is free *from moral reasons*.
- Therefore, we have a tension between two conditions for moral responsibility:

- 1) you have to be a free agent, whose actions are under your control [often put in terms of “could have done otherwise”].
  - 2) you have to be an agent to whom moral claims apply
- Satisfying the first condition seems to rule out the second condition. Thus, our notion of moral responsibility seems incoherent: a free agent cannot be moral, and a moral agent cannot be free.

*The solution:*

- We overlook an **asymmetry** in our attributions of moral responsibility between good and bad action:
  - We usually look at examples in which people are doing bad things: the heroin addict, the victim of hypnosis or the victim of deprived childhood.
  - Those provide support for our incompatibilist intuitions, and in those cases, we do indeed require an unconditional “could have done otherwise”
- But when we ask whether an agent’s action is deserving of praise, we do not require that he could have done otherwise
  - If you tell the truth, “I cannot tell a lie” is no exemption from praiseworthiness,
    - If you cannot tell a lie because you act from the recognition of the right moral reasons, then this does not exempt you from praiseworthiness; in fact the opposite is true.
    - We should not think of this determination in terms of an inflexible and unreflective habit (has been challenged, coheres with agents’ other values, allows him do the right thing in the right sorts of circumstances)
  - The character of such an agent might be determined (it is determined by the right reasons, and they are the right reasons independently of him.) The reasons that she has for being generous are the reason there are. But that does not mean that her character is not under her control. It’s not under her control that generosity is a virtue, but only because she realizes that does she remain a generous person.
- So determination is compatible with an agent’s responsibility for a good action, but incompatible with an agent’s responsibility for a bad action.
- If an agent is ever responsible for a *bad* action, it is because his actions are not psychologically determined:
  - 1) negligence - recognizing the existence of moral reasons that one ought to have recognized (you hear your friend is in the hospital, but you don’t think about how lonely and bored your friend might be as you plan your evening)
  - 2) weakness: failure to act on reasons that you know you ought to be acting on (you know that you really ought to visit your friend, but the thought of having to drive all across town convinces you to stay home)

- In those cases, you you have the requisite moral abilities (the ability to grasp the reasons one ought to grasp, and the ability to direct your action in accordance with those reasons), and if nothing interferes with your use of these abilities, then it is possible that you are not determined.

**Class Activities:**

- think about examples of good actions that we think are not praiseworthy