

# LYCEUM

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A New Ascent Interpretation  
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# LYCEUM

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# The Order of Speeches in Plato's *Symposium*: A New Ascent Interpretation

Adrian Buchbinder  
Wake Forest University

**Abstract:** An interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* according to which the order of speeches represents an ascent is attractive for a number of reasons. However, two major challenges have stood in the way of such an interpretation: to explain how Aristophanes' speech can represent an advancement over Eryximachus' scientism, and to explain how Agathon's poorly regarded speech can be intended to pave the way for Socrates' solution. I argue that Aristophanes' speech precedes that of Eryximachus in the 'real' order. Next, I show that Agathon's speech contains overlooked themes that closely prefigure Socrates' own views about education and virtue. These corrections to understanding *Symposium* reveal both its ascent theme and an intimate philosophical connection between *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*.

## I. Does the order of speeches in *Symposium* represent an ascent?

Commentators on Plato's *Symposium* have long wondered whether the order of speakers in the discussion it depicts itself has any particular meaning. Given Diotima's central use of a ladder as ascent metaphor, the repeated ascent theme in *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, and the fact that *Symposium* shares with *Republic* and *Phaedrus* the characteristic of focusing on the process of attaining virtue (as opposed to the nature of virtue), the notion that the speeches trace some sort of ascent—recapitulated in Diotima's discussion of the ladder—is very attractive. Some commentators, for these and other reasons, have argued that *Symposium* takes the form of a dialectical ascent, with the speeches as components.<sup>1</sup> But there are several

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of previous ascent readings of *Symposium*, see Rosen, pp. 30-8.

challenges to an ascent interpretation that have prevented any fully satisfactory reading of the dialogue along these lines.<sup>2</sup> Despite strong textual and thematic indications to the contrary, there has so far been no successful representation of the order of the speeches in *Symposium* as an ascent. I believe that the order of speeches in *Symposium* is indeed meant to represent an ascent, and that previous commentators have made key mistakes in reading this extraordinarily elegant and carefully constructed piece.

There are two seemingly insurmountable challenges to a convincing ascent interpretation of *Symposium*:

- How could Aristophanes' speech—revolving around instinctive physical desire—represent an advancement over Eryximachus' scientism?

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<sup>2</sup> In "A Dual Dialectic in *Symposium*," Dorter argues that *Symposium* exhibits a complex double-dialectic structure: one dialectic on conceptions of the good, and one on conceptions of Eros. However, even he admits that this hypothesis "imputes to Plato a higher degree of structural planning and subtlety than most interpreters would consider plausible" (Dorter, p. 255). On the basis of the claim that Agathon's speech is of lesser quality than Aristophanes', and that Phaedrus' speech supplies a superior conception of Eros to Pausanias', some reject the notion that there is an ascending order based on quality (Bury, p. liii). Lowenstam argues that the sequence of the first five speeches, in their original (pre-hiccupping) order, is designed to introduce topics in the same order in which Socrates takes them up in his speech. However, Lowenstam's re-creation is more complex than this. His re-creation (Lowenstam, pp. 51-2) includes not only the topics of the first five speeches, but also the topic of Alcibiades' speech and several other topics in common interspersed among them. The complexity of this re-creation does not sit well with the notion of a simple relationship between the order of the speeches and the ascent Socrates describes. Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan, pp. 151-5) claim a linear ascent through the first five speeches that suffers from several serious overreaches: Phaedrus' speech, for example, is supposed to represent the transition from love of a single body to love of bodies generally by focusing on love of a single body; Pausanias is supposed to represent love of the soul by confusing love of soul with gratification of sexual desire; and Aristophanes is supposed to represent the transition to the study of beauty itself by describing physical unions as motivated by a longing for wholeness.

- How could a clunky speech by a mere poet, Agathon, be intended to pave the way for Socrates' solution?

The relative importance of Aristophanes' speech, and the relative unimportance of Agathon's, have almost become tropes or articles of faith among readers of *Symposium*. I shall argue that we are intended to consider Aristophanes' speech as preceding Eryximachus' in the ascent, and that Agathon's speech includes often-overlooked themes that place his conception of Eros some minor correctives behind that of Socrates/Diotima. The order of the speeches in *Symposium* is meant to suggest an ascent based on a theory of human development through education elucidated in *Republic*. In other words, the order of speeches in *Symposium* represents an ascent in terms of both knowledge and virtue perfectly mirrored by the path to virtue described by Diotima. The structural organization of *Symposium* reflects the structural elements of Plato's understanding of education and virtue; in this way, *Symposium* functions as a very close companion piece to *Republic*.

The speeches of *Symposium* are delivered in the following order (thanks to the fact that the inceptive order is disrupted by Aristophanes' hiccupping): Phaedrus => Pausanias => Eryximachus => Aristophanes => Agathon => Socrates. On my reconstruction, the ascent as recapitulated by Diotima follows this order, but with the positions of Aristophanes and Eryximachus reversed (i.e., following their seating order) in revealing a path to virtue.

## **II. Phaedrus and Pausanias**

It is easy to see how the speech of Phaedrus represents the antithesis of a proper approach to knowledge and virtue. Phaedrus is roundly criticized by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* for supplying a discourse that is tedious, repetitive and poorly

organized (263c-d).<sup>3</sup> In *Symposium* his speech makes reference to both Hesiod and Homer (178b, 179d-180b), each of whom is identified in *Republic* as an example of a poet who promotes the wrong virtues and does not have knowledge of his subjects (377d-383c, 595b-608b). A central theme of his speech is that one of the greatest goods that comes from Eros is that lovers are motivated to appear brave because they are concerned about their image in the eyes of their beloved (178c-179b).<sup>4</sup> Thus Phaedrus clearly emphasizes the importance of appearance. Citing this fact, Rosen characterizes Phaedrus' conception of Eros as a "substitute for"—or imitation of—virtue.<sup>5</sup> Even in this, however, Phaedrus may be mistaken: from Xenophon comes the point that it is dubious that "persons acquiring a habitual indifference to censure and to abandoned conduct towards one another will be most likely to be deterred by shame from any infamous act."<sup>6</sup> The focus on appearance, and consequent threat of loss of self-control, reminds us of Plato's comments on mimesis and vice in *Republic*, as well as the fanciful descriptions of a lover's failings in *Phaedrus*. Finally, Phaedrus makes several mistakes; most notably, he plainly contradicts himself on the subject of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*.<sup>7</sup>

Next up is Pausanias. His speech is to a great degree an attempt to justify his own pederasty.<sup>8</sup> Bury remarks that Pausanias' arguments "display the cleverness of a first-rate pleader."<sup>9</sup> He also notes that Pausanias "poses as a conventionalist, and a relativist, and a champion of law as against nature...; and this is of itself sufficient to

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<sup>3</sup> See Allen, p. 12. All translations of passages from *Symposium* by Allen.

<sup>4</sup> See Dorter, p. 258.

<sup>5</sup> Rosen, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Allen, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> See Bury, p. xxv.

<sup>8</sup> See Allen, p. 17, and Rosen, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Bury, pp. xxvi-xxvii; cited in Allen, p. 19.

show that, in Plato's eyes, he is a specimen of the results of sophistic teaching." He is "master of the ringing tautology".<sup>10</sup> Pausanias wears his rhetoric on his sleeve: his arguments shamelessly exploit sophistic methods in order to make his point. Dorter observes that he uses the terms "noble" and "shameful" in three distinctly different and inconsistent senses.<sup>11</sup> Most shockingly, Pausanias actually claims that the lover is justified in any behavior, no matter how base or shameful, in pursuing his beloved (182e-183c).<sup>12</sup> This is, of course, antithetical to Plato's conception of virtue.

Pausanias is thus painted by his speech as a kind of rhetorician who is concerned more with convincing the listener than with arriving at the truth. Sophists need not have any knowledge of their topic in order to be successful: all they require is the ability to flatter and manipulate the listener, and to create the appearance of good reasoning and truth where there is none.<sup>13</sup> In *Republic* (492-494; see also 539b-c) Socrates describes in detail the difference between sophistry and knowledge, and the corrupting influence this art can have on the education of the young. Because it is also concerned with appearance rather than reality, Pausanias' speech is an appropriate companion to Phaedrus', and, like Phaedrus', calls to mind the state of being on the Divided Line standing furthest from reality and true knowledge thereof.

Even for all this, there are indications that Pausanias could stand as an advancement on Phaedrus' thinking. Pausanias criticizes Phaedrus for having omitted considerations of character. Pausanias is at least concerned with the soul and its development, and describes himself as being more concerned with the soul than with

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<sup>10</sup> Allen, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Dorter, p. 259.

<sup>12</sup> See Allen, p. 17, and Dorter, pp. 258-9.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *Gorgias* 464b-466a.

the physical. By reading *Symposium* as an ascent, this contrast with Phaedrus may be significant.

### III. Aristophanes' hiccups

Despite—and partly owing to—the fact that Aristophanes' hiccups prevent him from speaking before Eryximachus, I believe that the dialectical ascent of *Symposium* is meant to be represented by an order of speeches set by the seating order rather than the speaking order—i.e., the speech of Aristophanes comes before Eryximachus.

There has been plenty of disagreement on this point. Grube ignores the hiccupping incident altogether;<sup>14</sup> Guthrie argues that hiccups would be common at a drinking party, and that the incident is there simply to add a touch of realism to the proceedings.<sup>15</sup> In making these judgments, these commentators fail to sufficiently credit the fact that *Symposium* is a carefully crafted work. Its artificial nature is evidenced by the double narration and the inclusion of obvious anachronism (182b, 193a).<sup>16</sup> The discussion is clearly intended to be read as a fictional account constructed to make a point. For this reason, the idea that the hiccupping incident, and the consequent switch in speaking order, is accidental or inconsequential is implausible.

The real intentions behind the inclusion of the hiccupping incident will never be known for certain; the idea I shall propose is a bit more plausible than many previous explanations of the incident. Brentlinger maintains that the hiccupping incident is mostly comic; however, he also feels (rather incongruously) that the switch with Eryximachus makes it possible for Aristophanes to serve as a “wise

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<sup>14</sup> Grube, pp. 98-9.

<sup>15</sup> Guthrie, p. 382.

<sup>16</sup> See Allen, p. 5.

critic” of the preceding three speeches.<sup>17</sup> Although Aristophanes does mention Eryximachus and Pausanias in his speech, he does not offer anything that directly addresses either of their views. Aristophanes also mentions Agathon in connection with his thesis, and fails to mention Phaedrus. Brentlinger does not identify what elements of Aristophanes’ speech serve as criticism of the preceding speeches.

Rosen thinks that the substitution of Eryximachus subordinates the poetry of Aristophanes to the technism of Eryximachus, and also indicates Plato’s own preference for Aristophanes.<sup>18</sup> The difficulty with this interpretation should be obvious: Rosen is suggesting that Plato intended with the same event both to denigrate *and* to promote a certain view. There is straightforward evidence that the doctor’s world-view is to be preferred to Aristophanes’, in that Eryximachus, “fighter of eructations,” is the provider of the successful cure for Aristophanes’ hiccups. In this way it does make sense that the incident subordinates the poetry of Aristophanes to the technism of Eryximachus. But it is difficult to see how the hiccupping incident is supposed to indicate a preference for Aristophanes.

Oddly enough, Allen takes a position very similar to Rosen’s. He thinks that the purpose of the incident is to call attention to the drinking habits of Aristophanes and the medical knowledge of Eryximachus, and at the same time to emphasize the importance of Aristophanes’ speech by mentioning it and deferring it.<sup>19</sup> The incident does indeed serve the former function. But it seems very unlikely that Plato would hope to emphasize the importance of a speech through an incident making its speaker appear drunken and foolish. Surely the speaker’s being portrayed as a buffoon would tend to downplay the seriousness of his presentation.

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<sup>17</sup> Brentlinger, pp. 12-3.

<sup>18</sup> Rosen, pp. 91-2.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, p. 20.

Finally, Dorter claims that the speech of Eryximachus is body-oriented and the speech of Aristophanes is soul-oriented, and that the hiccupping incident is intended to illustrate the superiority of soul over body.<sup>20</sup> But if Eryximachus' speech is intended to represent a bodily orientation and that of Aristophanes a spiritual orientation, then it would make more sense for Eryximachus to be the victim of hiccups: he would then be the one experiencing corporeal failings. Instead, it is Aristophanes who loses control over his body. He is made to look the fool and must be rescued by Eryximachus. Also, as I shall discuss below, Dorter's characterization of the orientation of Aristophanes' speech is inaccurate.

The dialogue makes clear that the physical arrangement of the speakers determines the order of the speeches. Socrates' late entry, and Agathon's subsequent and deliberate placement of him to his right, for example (175c-d), ensures that Socrates will be speaking last. The hiccupping incident disrupts the order determined by the seating arrangements. Aristodemus is careful to note that Aristophanes was "supposed to speak" after Pausanias (185c), just as Eryximachus is careful to make clear what the disruption entails: "I'll take your turn speaking, and you take mine when you stop" (185d). I *tentatively* suggest that the hiccups could be intended, in part, to help emphasize the *non*-accidental nature of the order of the speakers by highlighting the fact that it takes an accident—Aristophanes' ailment—to disrupt the intended order. Note also the almost obsessive concern over seating and speaking order after Alcibiades arrives (222e-223b).

The hiccupping incident, by itself, could mean any number of things; the proposed ascent context is the best reason for the proposed reading. That Aristophanes' speech is the one that, from the point of view of a formal order of

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<sup>20</sup> Dorter, p. 262.

speeches, is intended to be considered after Pausanias' is most strongly indicated by the nature of Aristophanes' and Eryximachus' speeches and their relation to the other speeches. Like the speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias, and unlike any of the other speeches, Aristophanes' speech focuses on sex. The speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias explain sexual attraction by reference to the creation of images in the eyes of others. Aristophanes' speech explains sexual attraction by reference to bodily characteristics: the physical separation of the circle-beings explains our desire for physical intimacy with others (191a-b). His is a grotesque farce that includes three visceral metaphors for the initial physical separation—the beings are sliced like serviceberries (190d-e), eggs (190e), or flatfish (191d)—and an explicit description of the various surgical operations performed by Apollo (190e-191a) and Zeus (191b-c) to reconfigure the physical shapes and genitalia of the new half-beings. Aristophanes explains sexual attraction by reference to this physical event: erotic desire stems from the urge to experience a bodily reunion. Desire for kinship or friendship, along with other forms of attraction, is caused by, and secondary to, physical attraction (192b-c). *Pace* so many strained readings to the contrary, it is just so much more straightforward to read Aristophanes' speech as having a strong orientation towards bodily attraction!

Eryximachus, by nature of his profession, is also concerned with bodily matters. However, his speech represents a higher stage of human capability than that of Aristophanes because of his craft-knowledge in the field of medicine. Rather than a thoughtless instinct, his Eros is associated with an informed quest for health and balance. For him, good health is the attunement of Eros in the body, Eros representing the good and bad desires of the body (186b-c). He speaks of bodies generally, and of general laws concerning the harmony or disharmony of the

conflicting desires of the body (note especially 186b and 187b). Eryximachus' speech represents the type of mental activity in which general laws are derived from hypotheses based on experience and empirical models. He is concerned with bodies, but from the point of view of a scientist: Allen notes that doctors at the time were quite sophisticated, with some knowledge of effective pharmaceutical remedies and the importance of diet and exercise.<sup>21</sup> Note also that Eryximachus associates himself with Asclepius, who (along with the "sons" [=followers] of Asclepius) is spoken of very highly by Socrates in Book Three of *Republic* (408b).

For the first time in *Symposium*, Eryximachus' speech directly relates Eros to fields that do not have to do with bodily functions (186e, 187c-e, 188b-c). For Eryximachus, Eros represents often-conflicting desires, which must be attuned in the body by medicine or in the soul by "education and culture" (187d). He also notes (drawing a parallel between medicine and music) "when one needs to apply rhythm and attunement in men...here there is indeed difficulty, and need for a good practitioner" (187c-d). Effective medical practices require knowledge—the knowledge of the scientist, founded on experience and used to develop widely-applicable methods of treatment.<sup>22</sup> Compare this to the concern with image in the speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias, and the blind, physical urges of Aristophanes' account. The contrast between Eryximachus' serious call for internal harmonizing and Aristophanes' silly description of uncontrollable urges is striking. As C.D.C. Reeve observes, Eryximachus "praises orderly, harmonious, pious, temperate love,

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<sup>21</sup> Allen, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Socrates argues in *Charmides* 156b-157d that the ideal doctor wouldn't treat the body in isolation from the soul, and the failure to appreciate this makes the physicians of Hellas much less effective. Eryximachus focuses on treating the body, but does not ignore the need to harmonize desires in the soul via education. My thanks to Emily Austin for drawing my attention to this passage.

while condemning “the Pandemotic Eros of the many-tuned Muse Polyhymnia.” Comedy, which Aristophanes represents, is thus presented as a backward turn, a step in as anti-philosophical direction as the “satyr play—or rather Silenus play” of Alcibiades (222d3-4).”<sup>23</sup>

#### **IV. Agathon: Eros as educator**

In addition to identifying the proper role of Aristophanes’ speech, the other major obstacle to an ascent interpretation of *Symposium* is Agathon’s speech. His speech does not, at first, seem a likely candidate for a speech that is to represent something close to a Platonic ideal. Agathon is a tragedian and poet. His speech is considered by many commentators to be insignificant,<sup>24</sup> or sophistic and superficial.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Agathon’s speech is extremely important to Plato’s goal in *Symposium*. It represents a point of view that is very advanced from the standpoint of *Republic*’s theory of mental development. Agathon’s speech serves a dual role in *Symposium*: it serves to foreshadow and prepare the way for Socrates’ speech, and it expands the role of Eros into several important areas described by Socrates (through Diotima) in *Symposium* and by Socrates in *Republic*. As Sheffield notes, Socrates explicitly states at 201d that “the nature of Eros is clarified on his own account *on the basis of things agreed between himself and Agathon*.”<sup>26</sup>

The first part of Agathon’s speech (194e-196b) is a poetic encomium to Eros’ beauty. This prepares the way for Socrates’ elenchus of Agathon, in which it is demonstrated that Eros is love of the beautiful (as Agathon has stated), but is not himself beautiful. Yet Agathon foreshadows Socrates’ position by explaining Eros’s

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<sup>23</sup> Reeve, p. 146.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Guthrie, p. 385, Bury, p. xxxv, and Dorter, pp. 253-4.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Allen, p. 40, and Brentlinger pp. 3-4, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Sheffield, pp. 41-2.

beauty and goodness by reference to his love of the beautiful: Eros seeks the young (195b), and chooses to dwell only in those whose “bloom” is not “faded or gone” (196a-b). Grube notes that Agathon anticipates two crucial points made by Socrates by emphasizing that “Eros is always concerned with beauty, and it resides in the souls of men.”<sup>27</sup> As Ferrari explains,

Eros for Agathon is beautiful and good, not because his effects are, but because he is love of the beautiful and good...now this is a most serious conclusion....It is what enables Socrates, next to speak, to introduce Diotima’s teaching that all love, ultimately, is love of the good, and for that reason commendable.<sup>28</sup>

The second part of Agathon’s speech (196b-196d) concerns Eros’ virtues. These virtues mirror the cardinal virtues as identified by Socrates in *Republic* (427e, ff.): Agathon argues that Eros exemplifies the virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom. This is a novel development on his part. Phaedrus spoke of courage, but only in the sense of courage in the eyes of one’s beloved. Pausanias subsumed all virtues under erotic attraction, and even claimed that any base behavior is acceptable when in the throes of such passion. Aristophanes did not speak of virtue at all, and Eryximachus (188c-d) spoke only of “gratifying” or “fulfilling” the orderly Eros through knowledge, temperance, and justice (omitting courage, and not actually ascribing these virtues to Eros). In *Republic*, Plato is deeply concerned with the question of how souls can be encouraged to exemplify all the virtues mentioned by Agathon. Thus the ascription of precisely these four virtues to Eros in Agathon’s speech is an indication of the seriousness with which we are to consider his account.

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<sup>27</sup> Grube, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Ferrari, p. 252.

The third section of Agathon's speech is a continuation of his discussion of Eros' wisdom, and concerns Eros as educator and motivator to education. Eros teaches all poets, because only and everyone Eros touches become poets:

we may fittingly use this as proof that Eros is a poet who is, in sum, good in respect to all creation over which the Muses preside; for one could not give someone else or teach another what one neither has nor knows. (196e)

Note that this echoes the reasoning behind Socrates' criticism of mimetic artists in *Republic* (598b-600e). There Socrates reasons that, if artists like Homer really had knowledge of the things they described, they would be revered as educators of virtue, rather than as artists. Because they are not educators, they must not have knowledge that can improve men's souls. Agathon's Eros is not subject to this criticism, because he is a teacher as well as an artist. First, Agathon has shown himself (195 b-c) capable of critically examining claims by poets like Hesiod and Phaedrus (rejecting their claim that Eros is older than Kronos and Iapetus), preferring instead to reason out Eros' age by the philosophical principle that "like attracts like."<sup>29</sup> Second, Eros is the "teacher" of the divine experts on archery, medicine, metalworking, weaving, and even the "guiding of gods and men" (197a-b). Note that, in *Republic*, the highest calling for men, beyond the contemplation of the Forms, is the guidance of the city (539e-540c). Agathon's description makes Eros a kind of guardian. Furthermore, the duties of the guardians described in *Republic* are said to be secondary to their duty to look after the education of the young (423d-e). In light of the importance of education in *Republic*, Agathon's description of Eros as a teacher—the ultimate teacher, really—strongly suggests that his views are intended to be read as relatively sophisticated.

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<sup>29</sup> As pointed out in Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan, p. 87.

Agathon's immediate predecessor in the original order, Eryximachus, also relates Eros to all human practices; however, Agathon's connection between Eros and human practices is more sophisticated, from a Platonic standpoint, than Eryximachus'. The latter's Eros manifests itself in the form of good and bad desires that can be moderated by these human practices. He does not explain, however, what guides these practices in their moderative functions; without such guidance, all kinds of bad practices may issue. Doctors, for example, need to be taught how to heal, or "balance the body's desires." Otherwise, they could do more harm than good. Agathon's Eros is perfectly suited to fulfill this educational function for Eryximachus and his peers.

*Republic* centers on the development of a guardian class whose members exemplify Plato's four cardinal virtues, and whose function is to supervise the practices of the citizens. Compare this to Agathon's Eros, who exemplifies Plato's four cardinal virtues and who is a teacher of human practices, including the guidance of men! Agathon's speech clearly presents an Eros who, from Plato's standpoint, is more sophisticated than the Eros of the previous speakers. His speech, furthermore, echoes several central doctrines expressed in *Republic*, and closely foreshadows Socrates' speech in *Symposium*. If the order of speeches in *Symposium* represents an ascent, it makes perfect sense that Agathon's speech should immediately precede that of Socrates.

## **V. The ascent recapitulated**

Socrates' conception of Eros displays many similarities to Agathon's. As quoted by Socrates, Diotima characterizes Eros as a lover of knowledge (204b)—a characterization that is suggested by Agathon's conception of Eros as knowledgeable in all fields of human endeavor. In defining Eros, Diotima, like Agathon, links the

god with poetry and then to other pursuits, like money-making, athletics and philosophy (205c-d). For Diotima, Eros involves creation and “begetting in beauty” (208c-209e). Men can be creatively pregnant with respect to their body or soul (208e-209a). Pregnancy of the soul leads to “practical wisdom and the rest of virtue—of which, indeed, all the poets are procreators, and as many craftsmen are said to be inventors” (209a); note that Agathon had mentioned specifically that Eros is the teacher of poets and craftsmen. Diotima continues by saying that the highest form of practical wisdom is “that concerned with the right ordering of cities and households.” This right ordering is called “temperance and justice” —virtues Agathon also ascribes to Eros. Diotima then works toward the idea of Eros as love of beauty and what is good, and, in its most pure form, love of Beauty and the Good itself (211c-d).

To this end, Diotima describes a “ladder,” where the preceding speeches find their proper place (210a-e). If one ascends this ladder, one attains that for which love truly exists—the Beautiful itself (211a-212a). The ladder represents how one is to proceed “rightly” to the highest kind of knowledge (210a), and dealing in imagery and imagination is no part of this process. In *Republic*, the education of the guardian excludes many kinds of poetry, and education in dialectic is delayed until the student is old and wise enough not to be tempted to use that skill degenerately (539b-c).

As in *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, the ladder is a metaphor evoking an ascent to virtue via development of character. Diotima’s ascent moves from “bodily beauty, through spiritual and intellectual beauties, to the contemplation of Beauty itself.” We now see that this perfectly recapitulates the preceding speeches. The first three speakers in *Symposium*—Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Aristophanes—all tie Eros to sex and carnal desire. Aristophanes’ conception is more sophisticated than those of Phaedrus and Pausanias: he departs from their focus on appearance, and, although he

sees sex as the primary symptom of love, he also sees sex as a means to a feeling of spiritual wholeness, in addition to the satisfaction of physical desire. Eryximachus suggests a relationship between bodily beauty and spiritual or intellectual beauty. As a doctor, he is concerned with craft-knowledge of bodies in general. His task, and the task he prescribes for medicine, is to moderate good and bad desires in the body so to preserve its health and beauty. In addition, he recognizes that this manipulation of eros occurs in educational and cultural pursuits. Thus Eryximachus' speech serves as a bridge between the corporeal and intellectual/spiritual realms. Agathon is the first to see Eros as primarily concerned with the soul. For him, Eros' primary function is that of an educator leading its students to knowledge and proficiency in the arts and in politics. This conception strongly anticipates Socrates, who sees Eros as the motivating force behind the various human arts and practices, as well as the search for knowledge. Eros is linked by both Agathon and Socrates with the Platonic cardinal virtues. Agathon holds that Eros is wise and beautiful, even as Socrates describes him as a lover of wisdom and beauty. Agathon's Eros is involved with beautiful practices and so reflects the penultimate step on Diotima's ladder, the ultimate goal of which is the appreciation of the beauty of knowledge and the contemplation of the Beautiful itself. This ascent, which reiterates the speeches of *Symposium*, in the same way reiterates the ascents described in *Republic* via the divided line and the cave: from immersion in bodies and the material world, to sciences and studies, up to contemplation of the Forms.

The first stage of Diotima's ascent concerns bodily attraction (210a). This stage—where most of us are stuck—is represented by Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Aristophanes. Next comes appreciation for what makes bodies in general beautiful (210b), as is required for a physician like Eryximachus, with his craft-knowledge of

bodies; he identifies illness with disharmony and internal erotic conflict. After this, according to Diotima, one realizes that “beauty in souls is more to be valued than beauty in bodies” (210b-c). Owing to this realization, one will turn to the young (as Agathon says Eros does [195b]) and encourage them to “contemplate what is beautiful in practices and laws.” The person at this stage of development, pregnant in soul and inspired by Eros, teaches the young about human practices: the arts, crafts, and politics. Agathon, recall, describes Eros as a teacher of all these practices. Eros, for him, exemplifies the Socratic virtues, and is the educator of the Gods in the various arts and crafts and in politics. His Eros thus matches this stage of development. For Diotima, this is the stage that comes just before “beautiful studies”—exemplified by Socrates and the elenctic method he deploys in correcting Agathon—and the final ascent to contemplation of the Beautiful itself (210c-212a). One thus ascends to Beauty

as though using the steps of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful studies, and from studies one arrives at the end at that study which is nothing other than the study of that, the Beautiful itself (211c).

The one who masters this final study is the philosopher, who alone gazes upon the Forms and the Beautiful itself. Diotima’s ladder thus serves much the same function as the divided line and the cave metaphor in *Republic*.

The coda of *Symposium* is the wild and desperate contribution by an intoxicated Alcibiades, followed by his interaction with Socrates. There is a very nice parallel between this interaction and the last element of *Republic*’s cave, wherein the philosopher returns to the cave to guide the unenlightened.<sup>30</sup> Alcibiades enters and

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<sup>30</sup> As proposed in discussion by Isaac Nevo.

describes the erotic gap between himself and Socrates, as well as the corresponding difference in virtue (215a-222b). He undertakes to praise Socrates “through images” (215b); recall that understanding through images is, for Plato, the only means of understanding available to the corrupted who have not even begun the path to knowledge. Alcibiades recognizes his deficiencies in self-examination and the virtues of the philosopher; he is “ashamed” before Socrates, whose words make him realize how much he lacks the proper virtues (216a-c). At the same time, he recognizes how Socrates exemplifies these virtues (219d, 220d-221c, 222a). He wants to ascend to Socrates’ level, but apparently does not have the willpower to do so. In an attempt at a shortcut, Alcibiades attempts to seduce him (217a-219d). Socrates, however, recognizes his intent (218e-219a). He sees Alcibiades as attempting to exchange “beauty for beauty”; though in Alcibiades’ case the beauty in question is mere “comeliness of form,” the appearance of beauty. In Socrates’ case, of course, the beauty in question is what is “truly beautiful.” To exchange the one for the other, Socrates says, would be like exchanging “bronze for gold”—the image of beauty for the reality. Though humiliated by this rejection, Alcibiades realizes that Socrates is correct, and that what is truly beautiful is not something that can be won through physical means. The superiority of contemplation over the body is further illustrated by what follows (219e-220d), wherein Alcibiades describes Socrates’ transcendence of physical hardship. He characterizes Socrates as impervious to physical threat, cold, lack of food, and drunkenness (see also 214a, 223d). Alcibiades’ speech thus eloquently and dramatically illustrates the difference between the realm of images and corporeal things and the intellectual realm. It wraps up the dialogue by comparing the virtuous, serene, and godlike Socrates (219b) with the tortured soul of

one who partially appreciates his point of view but who has been unable to follow his lead.

This interpretation of *Symposium* as a reflection of the Platonic ascent to understanding and virtue has the advantage of being much simpler and more plausible than other ascent interpretations. In taking seriously the whole of a carefully crafted work, it has an inherent advantage over the many readings that ignore the hiccupping incident or Agathon's speech. This reading of the structure of *Symposium* construes it as an aesthetically appealing elucidation of the core message of *Republic*, and a companion to Plato's dialogues—*Republic* and *Phaedrus*—that focus on the path to virtue.<sup>31</sup>

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# **Individuality, Conformity and Freedom in Mass Society: A Millian Perspective Revisited**

George Mousourakis  
University of Auckland, New Zealand

**Abstract:** J. S. Mill thinks of individuality as the most essential of human interests. Individuality is equivalent to freedom as self-determination – the principal condition of and main ingredient in self-development. Accordingly, non-interference or the absence of external coercion is, for him, a vital prerequisite of the good life: it is a fundamental presupposition of his liberalism that individuals should not be interfered with unless their activities can be shown to injure the interests of others. But Mill’s sociology and his theory of history led him to an awareness of the inadequacy of the ‘negative’ conception of freedom as non-interference for dealing with problems of liberty within the context of the newly emerging mass society. This paper sketches an interpretation of the link between individuality and a ‘positive’ conception of freedom as arising in the course of Mill’s critique of this type of society. To understand this link one needs to consider the contrast, to be found in Mill but not thought out in a very explicit way, between, on the one hand, social coercion and, on the other, oppressive social pressures of a non-coercive kind.

There is a common assumption that Mill was interested only in negative freedom; or that he identified freedom with non-interference, that is, with the absence of external coercion or constraint. This assumption results, I believe, from Mill’s habit of using the word ‘individuality’ to mean freedom in the sense of self-determination.

Negative freedom is, undoubtedly, part of Millian liberty. The words ‘freedom’ or ‘liberty’ in *On Liberty* frequently carry the commonsense meaning derived from the British empiricist tradition associated with Hobbes, Locke and

Bentham. In this use, often regarded as the primary sense of liberty, a person's desires are taken as the given data and what is in question is whether any constraints prevent him from giving effect to them. It is clear that in this context, and in a good many others as well, he thinks of liberty as jeopardized only by external constraints. He is concerned with "the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion."<sup>1</sup> Thus, a person is unfree, is not doing what he desires, when sanctions are being invoked against him, whether these take the form of laws backed by the state or assume the force of moral rules supported by social opinion – "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling," in Mill's words.<sup>2</sup>

However, Mill could not rest content with altogether relying on the negative concept of freedom. The originality of his Essay lies very much in the fact that, without making it quite explicit, he extended the earlier liberal concept of freedom. He wrote the Essay at a time when certain characteristics emerging in nineteenth century society seem to him to thrust the problem of liberty into a wholly new perspective. Earlier liberal theory, he believed, had become partly outmoded because of its failure to take these developments into account. Mill, in much of his social and political work (especially in his essay *On Liberty*), was preoccupied with what appeared to him to be the inexorable advance of social conformity in modern European communities. From his study of de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and from his own observations and reflections, he concluded that modern industrial democracies were rapidly becoming more egalitarian and generating

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<sup>1</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 72. Consider also pp. 73-4, 150.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

pressures hostile to the growth and development of individuality. He became fearful “lest the inevitable growth of social equality and of the government of public opinion, should impose on mankind an oppressive yoke of uniformity in opinion and practice.”<sup>3</sup>

His discernment of a powerful historical trend towards the growth of a mass society with its extreme egalitarianism and stress on social conformity leads Mill to attempt a restatement of the problem of liberty. The “changes progressively taking place in modern society” have led to a situation where “in the stage of progress into which the more civilized portions of the species have now entered, it [the question of social liberty] presents itself under new conditions, and requires a different and more fundamental treatment.”<sup>4</sup> He then goes on (in the Introduction to his Essay) to explain what these new conditions are and why they call for a new approach to the problem of liberty. After sketching the history of the “struggle between liberty and authority,” he points out that the ‘tyranny of the majority’ operating through the acts of democratic governments has come to be generally recognized both in theory and in practice as constituting the most dangerous threat to liberty. But what only a few reflective persons perceive is that the tyranny of the majority is not confined to the acts of governments and that in England especially, a much more serious danger is to be apprehended from the likings and dislikings of society, or the ‘yoke of opinion’. In an eloquent summary of his chief concern in the Essay, Mill writes:

Society can and does execute its own mandates; and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it

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<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, pp. 177-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 177; *On Liberty*, p. 65.

ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself. Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them. ...There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism.<sup>5</sup>

Mill's enunciation, in the Introduction and in his Autobiography of his chief concern in writing the *Liberty*, is confirmed in the body of the essay itself, where we find him devoting Chapter 3 and also a good deal of the following chapter to the problem of individuality and social interference.

It seems correct to say that Mill was more concerned to avert the spread of social uniformity and the tyranny of an uneducated mass society than he was to prevent any political tyranny. He thought that social tyranny was the most pressing problem of freedom. What is more, he also believed that advanced societies were moving out of a period of transition into one of increasing social cohesion and uniformity. Thus, he thought that the teachings of the *Liberty* would be likely to be of even greater relevance in the future.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 178.

The question now facing Mill was whether the traditional, ‘negative’ concept of freedom remained adequate for dealing with the problem of freedom within the context of the new mass society. To some extent it could be adapted to deal with the novel situation, and part of Mill’s treatment of the problem of the tyranny of social opinion reveals just such an adaptation. In his response to the problem of the tyranny of the majority, Mill was in part concerned simply with the external coercion of the individual by society, i.e. with moral rules backed by the sanctions of public opinion. Some but not all of the social tyranny the Liberty was especially designed to combat arose from the oppressive social ethos of the Victorian middle class, whose Philistinism and intolerance were reinforced by the theories and projects of many social and religious reformers. In Mill’s view, a large proportion of the morality of any country emanates from the dominant class. In England this was the middle class, and its views of what is right and wrong tended to be adopted by most other members of society.

Moreover, a major reason why current popular morality was intolerant of purely personal conduct was that it was guided by an underlying view of the nature of morality. This view was essentially illiberal in that it rejected the necessity of giving reasons for moral judgments and found the basis of morality in the moral feelings of the majority.<sup>7</sup> Upheld by “nine-tenths of all moralists and speculative writers,” this view of morality holds that “things are right because they are right; because we feel them to be so.”<sup>8</sup> For people of this persuasion the “practical principle which guides them to their opinions on the regulation of human conduct,

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<sup>7</sup> *On Liberty*, pp. 69-70; 140-141.

<sup>8</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 141.

is the feeling in each person's mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathises, would like them to act.”<sup>9</sup>

This appeal to the feelings of the majority on moral matters brings into existence a ‘yoke of opinion’ that has extremely mischievous effects in at least two notable directions. First, in the domain of thought and discussion it induces in many of the most active and inquiring minds an extreme moral timidity. They have a strong inclination to keep their heretical thoughts to themselves and to conceal their true opinions when offering their views to the public. “Our merely social intolerance”, says Mill, “kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion.”<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the tyranny of social opinion is invariably associated with a whole series of active attempts by the majority (or those who represent themselves as speaking on behalf of the majority) to extend the ambit of ‘moral police’. Strenuous efforts are made to enforce the majority moral viewpoint on those who do not share it, by means of legislation designed to protect people for their own good.<sup>11</sup>

A good deal of Mill's discussion of the problem of the social tyranny of the majority is, then, concerned with the need to expose and thereby possibly avert the external or perceived constraints upon personal behaviour, which flowed from the oppressive social ethos of Victorian England. But there is something else as well. R. Friedman has pointed out that Mill's use in the *Liberty* of expressions like ‘social tyranny’ and ‘social oppression’ is ambiguous. Such expressions may refer

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<sup>9</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> *On Liberty*, pp. 143-147.

either to external social coercion or to the unperceived pressures of the prevailing social morality.<sup>12</sup>

I propose now to elaborate on the contrast, to be found in Mill but not brought out in a very explicit way, between, on the one hand, social coercion and, on the other, oppressive social practices of a non-coercive kind. There are a number of contexts in which it is clear that what Mill is concerned with is social coercion, for instance when he says “society can and does execute its own mandates”, “society has expended much effort in the attempt to compel people to conform to its notions of personal and social excellence”, or when he speaks of “the coercion of public opinion.”<sup>13</sup> These dicta recognize social tyranny as a threat to liberty, but they conceive of social coercion on the analogy of physical and legal coercion. Mill is here still operating with the concept of negative freedom, while extending it to include the deliberate interference of public opinion as an additional and hitherto underestimated form of external coercion. Liberty is still essentially the absence of external obstacles to the expression of one’s desires. The point Mill is laying stress on, though, is that a person’s desires may be frustrated as much by the fear of social as of legal threats and deterrents.

But even if a person is free in the negative sense (i.e. is not deterred by threats or sanctions, whatever their source, from doing what he desires) may it not be that, in another sense of freedom he nevertheless remains unfree? For there is a sense of freedom with respect to which attention is focused not on the constraints a person

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<sup>12</sup> R. B. Friedman, “A New Exploration of Mill’s Essay ‘On Liberty,’” *Political Studies*, 1966. In claiming that Mill made no discernable effort to articulate and develop the concept of freedom as self-determination in *Liberty*, Friedman, though correct up to a point, has failed to appreciate that, since individuality and self-determination are equivalent, Mill’s chapter on individuality may be read as in part an attempt to articulate the notion of self-determination.

<sup>13</sup> *On Liberty*, pp. 68, 76, 72.

perceives as obstacles to the realization of his desires, but on the person himself and on the origin of his opinions and desires. It is this sense of freedom – freedom as self-determination – that Mill has in mind when he introduces the idea of ‘individuality’ in Chapter 3 of *On Liberty*. His discussion there indicates that, without being able to make the point explicit, he has become aware that one of his concepts of liberty – the absence of constraints on doing what one desires – gives a partial characterization of liberty. Had Mill meant by liberty simply freedom from interference, the claim that liberty is of intrinsic value could not be sustained. There is no intrinsic value in leaving alone and free from interference a blind man who is about to walk into the path of an oncoming train. We value such negative liberty for the goods it makes possible, or because it secures its possessors from various evils, and not for its own sake. Whilst he never made it fully explicit, the thrust of much of Mill’s thought carries with it the underlying presupposition that ‘negative’ or traditional liberalism requires to be reinforced with a view of what activities are valuable in themselves and worth pursuing for their own sake. Accordingly, in practical contexts, Mill is to be found arguing not simply for the absence of interference as such, or the removal of restraints upon an unspecified range of activity, but for the removal of obstacles to the growth and expression of those positive and specific modes of thinking, feeling and behaving which he associates with the development of personality.

A person may be unimpeded by social or legal constraints and yet, as Mill came to see, be dominated by a more subtle and much more effective form of social tyranny: custom, convention and mass opinion may be operating on him in such a way that he never stops to think where or how he acquired his beliefs or desires and it rarely occurs to him to question them. The majority of men and

women are largely passive in relation to their society; even if they are not coerced by legal or social sanctions, their opinions, tastes and ways of living are largely determined by the prevailing customs, pattern of beliefs and morality of that society. To put it otherwise, most people are largely lacking in individuality. They do not ask about a proposed course of action: “what do I prefer?” or “what would suit my character and disposition?” or “what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive?” They ask, instead: “is it suitable to someone in my position or (worse still) in a position superior to my own?” “I do not mean,” Mill explains, “that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary.” Conformity is the first and only thought of the majority, until through not following their own nature they have none at all to follow “and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own.”<sup>14</sup>

By contrast with the ‘mass man’, the person with individuality, the self-determining man, is he whose opinions and desires represent his own personal bent or the path of life he has chosen for himself. As well as being unobstructed by external constraints, his desires are truly his own; his opinions, impulses and decisions depend on or flow from himself; he is more than just a reflector of the

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<sup>14</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 119. In pp. 116-17 he writes: “He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it. If the grounds of an opinion are not conclusive to the person’s own reason, his reason cannot be strengthened, but it is likely to be weakened, by his adopting it; and if the inducements to an act are not such as are consentaneous to his own feelings and character (where affection, or the rights of others are not concerned) it is so much done towards rendering his feelings and character inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic.”

dominant customs or conventions of his society. The independent or autonomous person is he who thinks his own thoughts and makes his own decisions over a certain range of his activities. This does not mean that he is not in some measure beholden to traditions and customs. People must be trained in youth to benefit from the results of human experience and the mature adult finds some customs both good and suitable to his character and circumstances. But the free man always has customs and traditions under critical review; he does not conform to custom merely as custom, for he “who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice.”<sup>15</sup> The self-directing man is the person who scrutinizes the standards of society, who is fully aware that there are different and competing opinions and ways of life, and who strives to judge them critically and to act responsibly on the best of his judgments. According to Mill, “he who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 116. Consider also p. 68, 114, 118, 127, 133.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117. In her introduction to *On Liberty*, Elizabeth Rapaport observes: “Mill defines liberty ... as ‘pursuing our own good in our own way.’ Understood in this way, freedom is one of the most important ‘elements in well-being,’ or happiness. Mill believed that only someone who was capable of choosing an independent path and who had the social space in which to exercise that capacity could achieve happiness. Why? Because Mill conceived happiness as human self-development or self-realization. He contrasts the ‘ape-like’ existence of those who unquestionably adopt ready-made beliefs and values with the human existence of those who think for themselves and are prepared to depart from traditional lifestyles.” *On Liberty*, page xviii. In this connection, reference may be made to Samuel Fleischacker’s observation that “no one is happy without the opportunity to use judgment, or at least, no one is happy in a way that allows them freedom, allows them what Mill rightly identified, without properly explaining, as a *human* happiness.” See *A Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith*, 1999, p. 94.

Mill occasionally observed that lack of necessary conditions for effective self-determination, e.g. when impoverished, involved limitations on one's freedom.<sup>17</sup>

I reiterate that, for Mill, individuality is not mere non-conformity. He is not saying that choice is exercised only in condemning current standards or in continual rebellion against accepted modes of behaviour; it is the act of questioning that, in Mill's view, gives content to the notion of choice.

Sometimes Millian individuality is taken to mean mere unlikeness or difference. I regard this as a gross misinterpretation and propose to clear Mill of the charge of putting forward the unsophisticated view that would be implied by such a definition. One can see how when Mill stresses the need for non-conformity it might be thought he is assuming individuality to be nothing other than unusual or eccentric thought and behaviour. In these circumstances it is perhaps not too surprising that some of Mill's critics have supposed that uniqueness is, for him, the only criterion of individuality. Thus, R. F. Anschutz charges Mill with "the error of assuming that a man is only himself when he succeeds in being different from other men, as if individuality meant peculiarity or idiosyncrasy."<sup>18</sup> Such a view, Anschutz suggests, would require Mill to count the mere eccentric – the thoughtless, bearded and ragged Bohemian, let us say – as more of an individual

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., *Principles of Political Economy*, II, 1. However, Mill nowhere elucidated and developed the concept of liberty implied by this kind of observation. It was left to later liberals, such as D.G. Ritchie and L.T. Hobhouse (more cautiously), and to socialists, such as R.H. Tawney and H.J. Laski, to develop and employ the concept in support of state coercive measures aimed at improving conditions and thereby enlarging most people's effective range of choices. For example, an effective national health service, in ensuring the good of health to many who would lack it, being crippled, confined to bed or doomed to early deaths, provides a condition that allows for more effective exercise of freedom, more scope for individuality, and greater opportunities for effective self-development. The same is true with respect to employment, access to education, legal aid and the like.

<sup>18</sup> R. F. Anschutz, *The Philosophy of J. S. Mill*, Oxford, 1953, p. 27.

than most people, since he is so obviously more unusual. And Anschutz goes on to argue that we cannot for the moment believe that the man who spends most of his time struggling to assimilate the traditions of his calling and conforms, out of conviction, to most of the customs of his community, is any less of an individual than someone whose ruling passion is his desire to revolt against custom and tradition. Now, it is certainly true (as Anschutz is at pains to emphasize) that Mill does not speak of the desirability of eccentricity, though with two qualifications Anschutz fails to notice. First, eccentricity, “the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom”, should be encouraged only when the tyranny of mass opinion is exceptionally strong – as Mill believed it was in the England of his day; at other times, when the pressure towards social conformity is not so strong, there is no need to encourage exceptional individuals to behave differently from the mass. Secondly, Mill links the desirability of difference with the desirability of independence of character. He observes that “eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour and moral courage it contained.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Mill is here explicitly connecting uniqueness with mental vigour and strength of character, thus linking it to the notion of freedom as meaning self-determination. He is indicating that where there is mental and moral independence, there will generally be considerable variations in thought and behaviour and that where such variations are absent there is unlikely to be much independence or autonomy. Mill is in effect postulating a

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<sup>19</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 125.

statistically high, but not invariable, correlation between relative difference and the possibility of individuality.<sup>20</sup>

When Mill employs the concept of individuality what he has in mind, then, is a special type of character or mode of living. Or, one may say, what he has in mind is a certain ideal life to which in any society only a limited number of individuals closely approximate. On Mill's view, what we mean when we say of someone that he is an individual (or possesses individuality) is that he is a person who has in some measure developed his capacity for critical judgment and decision and so can properly be regarded as a distinct human being set apart from his fellow members of society. The mass of men and women are obviously individuals in a generic sense: they can be counted separately and they each possess certain special characteristics that enable us to pick them out from their fellows. But they do not qualify as individuals in Mill's sense or (as we might equally well put it) they have a comparatively low degree of individuality.

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<sup>20</sup> Mill argued convincingly even for the freedom to err, the liberty to be wrong. Since self-determination involves recognition of the need for choice between a variety of different opinions or ways of life it also involves the possibility of error. If the quest for absolute certainty is fruitless even in natural philosophy, how much more is it likely to be so in human affairs, and how much more necessary is it therefore that any and every doctrine be allowed the possibility of refutation. This very general theoretical belief concerning the nature of human knowledge is the basis of Mill's doctrine of toleration, which is a vital element in his liberalism. If in the ideological sphere it is especially true that uncertainty reigns, then unless toleration of all doctrines and practices (short of definite injury to others) is allowed, we cannot ever hope to arrive at true opinions, or discover which are the best ways of life. Mill's thesis is that men are fallible and imperfect at present (and will be as far as we can see into the future). We, therefore, cannot be sure that any doctrine is not a source of truth nor any way of living a source of goodness. Hence we must allow men and women free scope to explore diverse views and to try out various "experiments of living." (See *On Liberty*, p. 115) Unless we do this, many at present unforeseeable opinions and forms of human fulfillment will be left untried and we shall never know whether they are true or worthwhile.

Practical political philosophies, or ideologies, contain more or less explicit pictures or conceptions of man. Mill's doctrine of individuality is part of such a picture; it is his view of what men essentially are or are capable of becoming. What Mill regards as most fundamental in the nature of a man is his capacity for choice and (as a corollary) his relative uniqueness. For Mill the most important though not the only characteristic human excellence is man's individuality, or his capacity for self-determination. The notion of individuality does not exhaust Mill's concept of man – the perfectly developed man has other excellences as well; but individuality is the most essential for it is both the principal condition of and most vital ingredient in the fully developed personality.

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# **Leibniz and Huayan Buddhism:**

## **Monads as Modified *Li*?**

Casey Rentmeester  
Finlandia University

When the question is posed as to when Chinese thought influenced Western philosophy, people often turn to the philosophy of the German rationalist Christian Wolff, whose 1721 speech on the virtues of Confucianism led to his academic indictment and eventual ousting from the University of Halle in 1723. In his speech, Wolff lauds the Chinese for attaining virtues by natural revelation rather than appealing to Christian revelation, which made their accomplishments all the more impressive in his eyes (Fuchs 2006). According to Kanamori (1997), the audience of Wolff's speech "criticized it as the product of atheistic thoughts because they thought that the speaker valued Chinese morality as highly as Christian morals, which were formulated by divine revelation" (p. 299). The worry, in other words, was that Wolff was corrupted by Chinese thought since the atheism of Confucianism may have influenced Wolff's own views. Almost invariably, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz's name is involved in conversations that question the Chinese influence on Western philosophy, but it is typically tempered by the standard scholarly interpretation of the Leibniz-China connection, which is that Leibniz respected Chinese thought but was not influenced by it. I will argue against this standard scholarly interpretation by showing how Leibniz could have been influenced by Chinese thought. In particular, I propose that Leibniz's conception of monads, which is something that we only see *after* his engagement

with Chinese thought, may have been influenced by the Huayan Buddhist concept of *li*, which creeps into the Neo-Confucianism with which Leibniz had exposure. Should my argument be persuasive, this means that Chinese thought influenced the Western world sooner than has been previously believed.

### **I. Leibniz's Relationship with Chinese Thought**

It is well known that Leibniz was the first Western philosopher to seriously engage with Chinese thought. His studies of China began in 1667<sup>1</sup> and continued for the remainder of his life, which means his interest in China spanned almost half a century. In 1697, Leibniz wrote a letter to Electress Charlotte Sophia (commonly referred to as Sophia of Hanover) in which, as Merkel (1920) notes, he says that “I shall have to post a notice on my door: Bureau of Information for Chinese Knowledge” (p. 59), demonstrating his self-identified interest and expertise in China. The enduring interest Leibniz had with China has led scholars to question whether Leibniz's own philosophy was influenced by Chinese thought, especially considering the similarities one finds between his philosophy and Chinese traditions, particularly regarding certain aspects of Neo-Confucianism. The standard interpretation is that Leibniz came upon his own philosophy independently of his study of Chinese thought. Though scholars have recognized a curious parallelism between Neo-Confucianism and Leibniz's own philosophy (Rowbotham 1945), the typical position taken, as represented by Cook and Rosemont (1981) is that “the chronological evidence and an analysis of the *Discourse [on Metaphysics]* together weigh heavily against any claim that Leibniz drew inspiration from Chinese thought in general, or from Neo-Confucianism in

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<sup>1</sup> Rowbotham (1945) notes that Leibniz mentions that he was reading about Chinese philosophy in a letter to the Landgrave Ernst von Hessen Rheinfels in 1667.

particular, in developing his own philosophical views” (p. 262). This position is based on two claims. First, the general consensus is that Leibniz’s mature study of Chinese philosophy begins in 1689 (Cook & Rosemont 1981). And, second, all of the major aspects of Leibniz’s metaphysical system were fully developed in 1686 in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*. Benson Mates (1986), perhaps the most preeminent contemporary Leibniz scholar, expresses this standard view as follows:

In general, if one compares the doctrines of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) with those of the *Monadology* (1714), one sees that during his last thirty years there was almost no change in any of them. In fact, I have yet to find a single basic metaphysical principle on which [Leibniz] changed his mind over time. (p. 8)

Apparently sharing this standard interpretation of Leibniz, Cook and Rosemont (1981) argue that there is no way that Chinese thought influenced Leibniz’s metaphysics in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. Their argument is as follows:

The *Discourse* displays (a) a deep indebtedness to the Greeks and to Scholasticism, (b) a naiveté with respect to Chinese history and thought, (c) many mistakes and misunderstandings about that history and thought, (d) a subdued but nevertheless clear Christian and Western bias—all of which seem to tilt the scales decisively against any East-to-West metaphysical influence. (p. 262)

According to this standard scholarly interpretation, since the *Discourse* represents Leibniz’s mature philosophical system and, since it was not only written before his serious engagement with Chinese thought but also shows a naiveté with respect to Chinese thought, it is clear that the similarities one finds between Leibniz’s philosophy and elements of Chinese thought are merely coincidental. Also, if

Leibniz didn't change any of his views after writing the *Discourse*, then there is no possible way that Leibniz's philosophy was at all influenced by Chinese thought in his later works such as the *Monadology*.

In his influential four-volume *Science and Civilization in China*, Joseph Needham (1956) mentions that Leibniz may in fact have been influenced by Chinese thought. Needham states that Leibniz read *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, a work written by Jesuit missionaries who spent time in China meant to explain Chinese philosophy and religion, in 1687, the year it was published, which leads him to hypothesize that Leibniz's mind was stimulated by Neo-Confucianism. David Mungello (1971), on the other hand, states that:

The influence of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* upon Leibniz's thought...must...be tempered by the fact that...the germs for the development of many of the key terms in Leibniz's system—apart from monads, which were to await elaboration in the *Monadology* (1714)—were present prior to Leibniz's reading of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*. (p. 4)

Apart from a recent article by Yu Liu (2010), who argues that “Leibniz's diligent study of the Confucian and neo-Confucian texts...cannot help but leave an indelible imprint on the development of his own ideas” (p. 169), the general consensus remains that Leibniz was certainly interested in Chinese thought but that his study of it did not have an influence on his own philosophical views. I will argue against the standard view that Leibniz was not influenced by China—as held by Cook, Rosemont, and Mungello—by showing that Leibniz's metaphysical views change from the *Discourse on Metaphysics* of 1686 to his *Monadology* of 1714. In 1716, the year of his death, Leibniz finally set down his views on Chinese philosophy and religion systematically in a letter to Nicholas de Rémond, which is

now referred to as the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*. In the letter, Leibniz indicates his knowledge of some Chinese concepts that align closely with the metaphysical outlook of the *Monadology*. Specifically, Leibniz indicates his knowledge of the Chinese concept of *li*, which is a Huayan Buddhist concept that is appropriated by the version of Neo-Confucianism studied by Leibniz. As Wing-Tsit Chan (1963) notes, the Huayan philosophy “is the most Chinese and has exercised the greatest influence on Neo-Confucian thought” (p. 406). Chan also notes that the Neo-Confucian concept of principle was derived through, if not from Huayan Buddhism. Therefore, when Leibniz was studying Neo-Confucianism, he was actually attaining some knowledge of Huayan Buddhism. In order to understand the Chinese influence on Leibniz’s thought, we need a basic understanding of the Huayan worldview.

## **II. A Sketch of Huayan Buddhism**

The most famous image that Huayan Buddhists utilize in exemplifying the way in which things exist is the god Indra’s net. The Huayan master Fazang gives the following description of Indra’s net in his attempt to explain the cosmos:

It is like the net of Indra which is entirely made up of jewels. Due to their brightness and transparence, they reflect each other. In each of the jewels, the images of all the other jewels are [completely] reflected. This is the case with any one of the jewels, and will remain forever so. Now, if we take a jewel in the southwestern direction and examine it, [we can see] that this one jewel can reflect simultaneously the images of all other jewels at once. It is so with the one jewel, and is also so with each of all the others. Since each of the jewels simultaneously reflects the images of all other jewels at once, it follows that this jewel in the southwestern direction also reflects all the

images of the jewels in each of the other jewels [at once]. It is so with this jewel, and is also so with all the others. Thus, the images multiply infinitely, and all these multiple infinite images are bright and clear inside this single jewel. The rest of the jewels can be understood in the same manner. (As cited in Liu 1982, p. 65)

The first thing to note about Indra's net is that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. Within this net, there are cast an infinite amount of jewels, each of which is unique and unrepeatable due to its distinctive perspective. Although each is unique, it is also true that each jewel is similar to all others in some way because each contains the reflection of all other jewels in the net, demonstrating that each jewel only exists as a relational entity. The result of the image of the net is a mutual, reciprocal, symmetrical interfusion of all jewels that spreads out infinitely in all directions, with an infinite amount of jewels reflected in each individual jewel.

This image of the infinite, harmonious interfusion of jewels is analogous to the universe according to Huayan Buddhism. The most important aspect of the universe is that all of the entities that make it up are devoid of any sort of independent existence. Since Aristotle, most Western philosophers (including Leibniz, as we shall soon see) have conceived of the universe as consisting of substances, which can be defined as things that exist self-sufficiently, that is, that exist in a manner so that they need no other thing in order to exist.<sup>2</sup> Buddhists deny that anything can exist in this way and stress instead that all things are interdependent. The Huayan master Fazang (1963), for instance, states, "Because [entities] come into existence through causation, they surely have no nature of their

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<sup>2</sup> This is the definition of substance given by Leibniz in 1668. Cf. Leibniz 1970b, p. 115.

own” (p. 416). This doctrine is commonly referred to as the doctrine of interdependence or the doctrine of interdependent arising. Francis Cook (1977), explaining the Huayan worldview, states, “The point of the doctrine of interdependence is that things exist *only* in interdependence, for things do not exist in their own right. In Buddhism, this manner of existence is called ‘emptiness’ (Sanskrit *śūnyatā*)” (p. 15). Rather than conceiving of entities as substances, Buddhists conceive of entities as empty of self-existence. Everything exists only in relation to all other things, which means that conceiving of something existing outside of a causal nexus is grossly mistaken from the Buddhist perspective. In order to make this clear, Cook (1977) speaks of intercasuality in his description of Huayan. He states, “intercausality involves the interpenetration of one thing with another” (p. 68). Each entity is simultaneously conditioning and being conditioned by all other entities in the universe at all times. The mutual reflection of jewels in Indra’s net provides a good analogy here. Just as one jewel contains in itself an infinite amount of jewels in its reflection and also is contained in the reflection of all other jewels, each entity in the world is influenced by all others and yet is also exerting its influence on them.

The result of this mutual interpenetration is a universe that is perpetually changing. Since everything is interconnected, each and every act that occurs in the world affects everything else, which results in all entities being in perpetual flux. Everything that exists is a process, rather than a static being. Cook (1977) states, “The web of interconditionality is...infinite in scope. For this reason, there is no point anywhere which is exempt from this process of change, and nothing anywhere which lasts in one form for two moments in a row” (p. 40). There are an infinite amount of past and present activities that shape every single event, which

means that absolutely every event is new. The world is constantly moving into novelty since everything in it is always affecting everything else.

Now that we know the basic framework of Huayan Buddhism, we can determine what the entities are that make up this framework. The essential aspect to note for our purposes is that the entities are not made up of matter. Gary Zukav (2001) speaks of the Buddhist outlook as follows:

The world of matter is a relative world, and an illusory one...in the sense that we do not see it as it really is. The way it really is cannot be communicated verbally, but in the attempt to talk around it, eastern literature speaks repeatedly of dancing energy and transient, impermanent forms. (p. 174)

Although Buddhists admit that the world *seems* to consist of stable material substances like chairs and tables, they think that this is an *illusion*. The ultimate constituents of reality are immaterial. All of the stable “things” that we experience really consist of an infinite amount of forces seeking to reach consummation and simultaneously acting on one another. These entities all work according to a universal principle, which Buddhists call “*li*.” Perkins (2004) says that “*Li* is unified and is the unifying principle of the universe, but it also exists in each particular thing, as its principle or the norm toward which it tends” (p. 21). Therefore, *li* is both spoken of as within each individual entity and as the universal principle that governs how the universe functions. Often, the distinguishing aspects of *li* are designated by *Li* as the universal principle and *li* as the individual principles inherent in each entity. Mungello (1971) explains this as follows:

There is the *li* (designated in the lower case) of any given particular which relates to the *Li* (upper case) of the supreme form which embraces all

particulars. For example, just as any pear has its own infrastructure, so too does that single pear relate to the infrastructure of the entire universe which created it, enables it to exist, and even now—for the cycle is never arrested—is reabsorbing it. (p. 11)

It is the particular, individual conception of *li* that may have been influential to Leibniz. The *Li/li* relationship is appropriated by Neo-Confucianism, the major thinker of which is Zhu Xi, who writes what has come to be known as *The Philosophy of Human Nature* in the West. This work was commented on by Father Nicolò Longobardi, a Jesuit missionary to China, in his *Traité sur quelques points de la religion des Chinois* [Treaty on Some Points of Chinese Religion], which Leibniz not only read but commented on (Lach 1945).

### **III. Leibniz's Engagement with Chinese Thought**

In his letter to Rémond on China, Leibniz (1994) shows that he is familiar with the concept of *Li*. He states:

The first principle of the Chinese is called Li, that is reason, or the foundation of all nature, the most universal reason and substance; there is nothing greater nor better than the Li. This great and universal cause is pure, motionless, rarified, without body or shape, and can be comprehended only through the understanding. (p. 79)

From this passage alone, it seems as though Leibniz has a decent grasp on what *Li* means within the framework of Chinese philosophy. However, as he continues to speak about it, he divorces its meaning from the Chinese framework and imports it into a Western schematization. Leibniz (1994) equates *Li* with God and says that it is the “sovereign substance” (p. 83). Within both Neo-Confucianism and Huayan Buddhism, *Li* is not conceived of as a divinity, nor is it the case that *Li* is ever

regarded as a substance. Rather, it is simply seen as the principle that nature follows, which is manifested in each entity in the world as *li*. Therefore, we can say that Leibniz's understanding of this concept is not quite true to the Chinese concept.

Nevertheless, Leibniz does understand one crucial aspect of *Li*, which is the fact that it plays the dual role of being a universal principle and a principle that is imminent in entities themselves. He says that *Li* does not only stand for the universal principle, it also “signifies what is endowed with activity and perception or orderly action as souls are” (p. 88). He speaks of the “Li’s” as spirits and says that they should not be understood as consisting of matter. Cook and Rosemont (1970) point out that “in his review of the Loosen-Vonessen German translation of the *Discourse*, [Arthur] Zempliner argues that these passages show that for Leibniz, *li* = monads” (p. 88).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, when one looks at how Leibniz speaks of the “Li’s” of Chinese philosophy, it seems as though he is equating them with the monads he speaks of in his later thought since both monads and “Li’s” are understood as particular principles immanent in entities that follow some higher guiding principle (God and *Li*, respectively) in their quests to reach consummation. The question that arises is whether or not the similarities between the two concepts are a result of Leibniz being influenced by Chinese philosophy. Is it the case, in other words, that Leibnizian monads are so much like the Buddhist *li* because of his exposure to Chinese philosophy? Before we attempt to answer this, let us look at what Leibniz means by monads.

Leibniz (2000b) calls monads the “true atoms of nature” (p. 285) and he considers them to be simple substances. When we think of atoms, we usually think

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<sup>3</sup> The reference is to Zempliner 1970, p. 228.

of elements of matter; however, monads are *not* material substances. Leibniz accepts the Cartesian theory that all extended things are infinitely divisible, though he does not believe that the world is ultimately made up of matter. In calling monads “simple,” he is saying that they are indivisible, which clearly shows that he does not consider monads to be atoms in the sense of material entities. Rather, monads are mental entities that have perceptive states (Leibniz 2000b). Monads should be thought of as being like human minds insofar as they are able to perceive the world. In his short treatise, “On Nature Itself,” Leibniz (1970) explains this as follows: “if we ascribe to our mind an inherent force of producing immanent actions...then nothing prevents the same force from residing...in the natures of other substances” (p. 503). In other words, all substances are like minds insofar as they possess inherent forces and perceive the world. In his later thought, Leibniz makes it clear that human minds are monads, but he also notes that there are other types of monads as well. Unlike human minds, most monads *merely* perceive the world and are driven by an immanent principle bestowed upon them by God. Other monads not only perceive the world, but also *perceive that they are perceiving* the world, an ability Leibniz calls “apperception.” Human minds would fall into this latter category.

Perhaps an example will help to illuminate the distinction between monads with perception and monads with apperception. A sunflower leaning towards the sun does so because it perceives the sun and follows its movement because of this perception. The sunflower merely perceives the sun and does not perceive itself perceiving the sun in the Leibnizian world, which means that it lacks apperception. A human being, on the other hand, can perceive the sun and can also perceive this perception, thereby demonstrating the ability of apperception. In Leibniz’s

worldview, humans are distinctive in their ability to apperceive, and all other monads have the ability to perceive.

The other ability that Leibniz ascribes to monads is being “appetitive.” Leibniz (2000b) states, “The action of the internal principle which brings about the change or passage from one perception to another can be called *appetition*” (p. 286). We can think of appetition as the tendency of the perceptions of monads to change or unfold in accordance with their natures (Perkins 2004). For Leibniz, each monad is a processual entity: every monad is in perceptual flux. One can see the clear similarities between the Huayan Buddhist outlook and Leibniz’s philosophy here. In both Huayan and in Leibniz’s later philosophy, the ultimate building blocks of nature are immaterial entities in perpetual flux governed by an internal principle. In the Leibnizian framework, the internal principle of the monads is appetition and in the Buddhist worldview the internal principle of entities is *li*. Now that we see the similitude between the two outlooks, we can approach the question as to whether or not Leibniz’s engagement with Chinese philosophy influenced his metaphysical outlook or whether he espoused his system on his own.

#### **IV. “Pre-established Harmony” or Influence?**

As noted above, the standard Leibniz-China interpretation is that Leibniz was interested in China, but not influenced by his study of Chinese thought. Cook and Rosemont (1981), perhaps the two most distinguished scholars on the Leibniz-China connection, call the similarities between Leibniz and Chinese thought merely a matter of some sort of “pre-established harmony.” I will argue that there may, in fact, be a causal influence, since Leibniz’s metaphysical views change after his serious engagement with Chinese thought, and the changes are reflective

of the metaphysical worldview of Huayan Buddhism, which Leibniz indirectly studied in his engagement with Neo-Confucianism. Ariew and Watkins (2000) state, “One finds approximately the same set of typical Leibnizian theses in Leibniz’s various essays...However, the formulations of the theses and the relations they have with one another vary from essay to essay; *these are not always minor differences*” (p. 211). One of the major changes that occurs in Leibniz’s metaphysical outlook is that the fundamental substances of nature are seen as completely immaterial in his later thought as represented in the *Monadology*, but not in his early thought, as represented by his *Discourse on Metaphysics*. First, let us point out that Leibniz does not make monads the ultimate constituents of his system until *after* his engagement with Chinese philosophy. Leroy Loemker states that “the term ‘monad’ is widely held to have been used first by Leibniz in a letter to Fardella on September 3/13, 1696” (Leibniz 1970a, p. 508, [10]). This is the time at which Leibniz declares the ultimate substances of reality to be completely immaterial, which is a departure from his view in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. Leibniz (2000a) explicitly distances himself from the idea that bodies are illusory in an early draft of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. He states, “I do not attempt to determine if bodies are substances in metaphysical rigor or if they are only true phenomena like the rainbow” (p. 255, [40]). Rather, he states that all of reality cannot be *merely* material. What this means is that Leibniz believes that the ultimate constituents of reality must be material and also immaterial in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. After he embarks upon his mature study of Chinese philosophy in 1689, he changes his view on this matter, saying that monads are completely immaterial and are the *only* ultimate constituents of reality. The crucial change is explained in a letter to Remond from 1714. Here, Leibniz (1989) states,

“monads, or simple substances, are the only real substances, and...material things are only phenomena, though well founded and well connected” (p. 655). In his later work, material aspects of reality are not the true constituents of the world. Just as Buddhists consider matter to be illusory, Leibniz adopts the view that material substances do not really exist. And, since this change in the understanding of the basic constituents of the world comes *after* his engagement with Chinese philosophy, it is possible that Leibniz was influenced by Chinese philosophy, and Huayan Buddhist metaphysics in particular, in espousing the metaphysical framework of the *Monadology*.

## **V. Divergences in Metaphysical Outlooks**

Now that we have seen how it is possible that Leibniz was influenced by Huayan Buddhism, we can truly begin our comparative study of Huayan and the *Monadology*. Our final task will be to try to understand Leibniz’s metaphysics in the *Monadology* in light of our knowledge of Huayan Buddhism. By looking at the striking similarities between the two outlooks, we may be able to understand why Leibniz was so interested in Chinese philosophy. We have seen that both begin by saying that the ultimate constituents of reality are immaterial entities in constant flux governed by an internal principle and we will soon see that, in the end, the structure of each system is identical. The image of harmony and mutual reflection of the infinite jewels in the god Indra’s net provides a perfect analogy for both Leibniz’s universe and the Huayan worldview. However, there are still important differences between the two metaphysical systems that need to be emphasized.

Let us begin by pointing out the most important difference between Buddhism and Leibniz. We said earlier that Buddhists stress that all entities are empty of any independent existence since all beings only exist in a relational

manner. Every entity constantly and simultaneously affects all others in a causal manner, which means that one cannot posit the existence of anything that could be called a substance. Leibniz begins his *Monadology* positing the opposite position in saying that monads are substances, that is, entities that exist self-sufficiently. This means that all of the monads that exist do not depend on anything else for their existence. Rather, each monad is completely distinct from all others and it exerts no causal influence on any other monad. Leibniz (2000b) makes this clear in calling the monads “windowless” (p. 285). He goes on to state that “in simple substances the influence of one monad over another can only be ideal” (p. 289), indicating that there can be no actual causal influence whatsoever between monads. Therefore, one could say that each monad lives in its own universe. The perceived ways in which entities affect one another are actually illusory since monads, as windowless substances, never casually interact with one another.

At the same time, however, Leibniz (2000b) states that each monad is “subject to change, and even that this change is continual in each thing” (p. 286). Just as Buddhists posit each entity as perpetually in flux, Leibniz thinks that substances should not be thought of as static entities. Rather, each monad is a process. Buddhists account for the continual processual nature of entities by saying that each entity has an internal principle and that each is continually being conditioned by all other entities. All of the internal principles simultaneously both affect and are affected by all others, creating an interfusion of entities in the world. In stating that the monads are windowless, Leibniz is unable to go this route.<sup>4</sup> He

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<sup>4</sup> I take this as the main reason why Leibniz’s philosophy differs from Huayan Buddhism. Since Leibniz holds firmly to the belief that the basic constituents of the universe must be substances, he must declare monads to be windowless. Since Huayan Buddhists have not inherited substance ontology, they can allow for the causal interfusion of entities.

does, however, accept the thesis that each monad is endowed with an internal principle, its appetite, which accounts for the natural changes in each individual thing (Leibniz 2000b). Every individual monad is constantly striving forward into novel states of being, and this striving is governed by an internal principle.

Both Leibniz and Huayan Buddhists stress that the universe is harmonious. Huayan Buddhists explain this by saying that each and every entity in the world is constantly causally affecting all other entities, leading to an infinite amount of interaction among all things. This entire process is governed by the fundamental principle, *Li*. *Li* is ineffable and therefore not completely knowable, but it is responsible for the harmonious interfusion that the world results in. Huayan Buddhists stress that *Li* should not be thought of as a God. It is not the case that a rational being has set up the world to be harmonious. In other words, there is no cosmic choreographer of the world that is responsible for the harmony. Instead, the world just simply *is* harmonious. This can be partially explained by the fact that there are not individual, self-sufficient things in the Huayan Buddhist universe. Rather, there are harmonious forces that work together. Each entity perceives how the other entities function and it coordinates together with them, which leads to a universe of harmonious processes.

Leibniz (2000b) agrees that the world is one of harmony, yet he thinks this can only be explained by positing the existence of a God.<sup>5</sup> First, he states that “each created monad represents the whole universe” (p. 290). In recalling the god Indra’s net, we can get some idea as to what this picture looks like. Recall that in the net, there are an infinite amount of jewels, each containing the reflection of all

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<sup>5</sup> Leibniz would likely see the Huayan belief that the world simply *is* harmonious to be a violation of the principle of sufficient reason, which states that everything must have a reason. For an analysis of Leibniz and the principle of sufficient reason, see Pruss 2010, pp. 28-30.

other gems. Every gem reflects the entire universe from its own perspective. The result is a harmonious interfusion of jewels. Leibniz would agree that this is the way in which the universe truly is. He speaks of the world as consisting of an infinite amount of substances, each of which reflects all others from its own unique perspective. However, this harmonious universe happens in a different manner than one finds in Huayan Buddhism. Since each monad is a substance and is therefore windowless, its existence does not depend on any other monad. The monads do not work together to create the harmonious universe; rather, they are all simply working according to their own individual principles. Leibniz does say that all monads are given perception, but each monad is unable to causally influence any other, which means that it is impossible for the monads to work together at all. The question that arises is how this harmonious universe can be explained. How can we say that each monad is a living mirror of the entire universe without being influenced at all by other things in the world?

Leibniz (2000b) thinks the only way to explain it is by positing the existence of God. He states, “the ultimate reason of things must be in a necessary substance in which the diversity of changes is only eminent, as in its source. This is what we call God” (p. 288). God has set up the world so that all of the monads simply follow their own principles, yet he has coordinated each monad so that its internal principle harmonizes with all others. The seeming causal influence on each monad by others is only illusory. The way in which things work harmoniously is explained by God’s initial choice to create the world as it is and to coordinate the internal principles of the infinite monads to bring about a harmonious universe. Leibniz (1973) states, “every substance is like an entire world and like a mirror of God, or of the whole universe, which each one expresses in its own way” (p. 195).

This is Leibniz's doctrine of pre-established harmony. Perkins (2004) states, "Preestablished harmony depends directly on two factors. The first is that each simple substance contains and unfolds everything that will ever happen to it. The second is that this internal development coordinates with all others" (p. 63). In other words, each monad is endowed with an internal principle by God, which has been calibrated with the internal principles of all other monads. These two factors result in the harmonious universe—Leibniz's pre-established harmony—wherein each monad reflects the infinite monads in the universe from its unique perspective.

Perhaps the best explanation of pre-established harmony comes from Leibniz himself. In a letter to Basnage de Beauval from 1696, Leibniz (1989) explains his doctrine using the analogy of clocks:

Consider two clocks or watches in perfect agreement. Now this can happen in *three ways*: the *first* is that of a natural influence. This is what Huygens experienced, to his great surprise. He had suspended two pendula from the same piece of wood, and the constant swinging of the pendula transmitted similar vibrations to the particles of wood. But since these vibrations could not continue in an orderly way without interfering with each other, at least while the two pendula were not in accord with one another, it happened in a marvelous way that even when the swings of the pendula had been intentionally disturbed, they came to swing together again, almost as if they were two strings in unison. The *second way* to make two faulty clocks always agree would be to have them watched over by a competent workman, who would adjust them and get them to agree at every moment. The *third way* is to construct these two clocks from the start with so much skill and

accuracy that one can be certain of their subsequent agreement. (pp. 147-148)

Leibniz rejects the way of natural influence since he states “we can conceive neither material particles nor immaterial qualities or species that can pass from one of these substances to the other” (p. 148) and accepts the third way, which he calls the way of pre-established harmony.

The fact that Leibniz must posit God to account for the harmony of the universe is due to his insistence that monads must be substances. He thinks that God alone can explain how these windowless monads could possibly be calibrated so as to result in an ordered universe. If he were to admit that each monad had “windows” and therefore actually did causally affect one another, his view would resonate more fully with the Huayan Buddhist view of the world.

In the end, the Huayan Buddhist worldview and the metaphysical outlook we see in Leibniz’s later thought are structurally isomorphic in that they both fit nicely into the mold of the god Indra’s net, yet Leibniz’s commitment to substance ontology necessitates the positing of a supernatural entity, namely God, to account for the harmony between monads. Because of their commitment to interdependence, the Huayan outlook does not require an appeal to the supernatural to explain the order in the universe.

## **VI. Concluding Thoughts**

I leave it to the reader to determine which philosophy provides a more plausible metaphysical framework. I should, however, note that Western students interested in Huayan Buddhism would do well to read Leibniz as an introduction to the Huayan philosophy since they are so similar. I have tried to argue that this similarity is not a matter of coincidence. Leibniz’s engagement with Chinese

philosophy, which spanned almost a half-century, seems to have influenced his own philosophical system, which can be seen most clearly in his last major work, the *Monadology*. Those interested in Leibniz, and especially in how Leibniz's metaphysical views change over time, would do well to mind the Leibniz-China connection to understand the changes in his philosophy. More generally, if my argument is persuasive, the Chinese influence on European thought comes sooner than we otherwise thought.

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# **Lucky Assassins: On Luck and Moral Responsibility**

William Simkulet  
Friends University

Recently the problem of moral luck has garnered a lot of attention in ethics; the existence of moral luck is at least *prima facie* inconsistent with our commonsense conception of moral responsibility, and resolution of the problem seems to require a drastic revision of our intuitions regarding moral praise and blame.

The problem of moral luck is deeply tied to the classic problem of free will. Most philosophers on both sides of the free will debate believe that some form of the control principle is true, where the *control principle* asserts that moral responsibility requires control; a necessary condition for one's being morally responsible for a thing is that she is in control of that thing in the appropriate way. However, everything that we can be held responsible for is at least in some sense outside of our control, and thus a matter of luck. At first glance, it appears we have a dilemma—(1) reject the control principle, or (2) admit that no one is morally responsible for anything.

Luck plays a substantive role in each of our lives; it is a matter of luck that we are born and whether we succeed or fail in our endeavors is, at least in part, outside of our control, and thus a matter of luck. Here I argue this luck plays no role in determining our moral responsibility, our praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, for who we are and what we do. I purport to offer a third option to the dilemma above.

Any serious discussion of luck needs to admit that luck plays an undeniable role with regards to moral responsibility. Because our existence is outside of our control, a matter of luck, it is a matter of luck that we are morally responsible for anything.<sup>1</sup> If you never existed, there would be no *you* to be moral responsible. Because our coming to exist is a matter of luck, the control principle precludes the possibility that we are morally responsible for coming to exist, or for our having the opportunity to act morally or immorally. However, this should come as no surprise, it would be absurd to judge someone morally responsible for their being born.

While it is a matter of luck that we exist to have a moral record, I contend that luck plays no role in determining the contents of our moral record, or those things that we are morally responsible for. *Moral luck* would occur only if luck affects our moral record; this is to say that moral luck would occur only if it plays a role in determining how praiseworthy or blameworthy we are for what we do or who we are. Inquiry into moral responsibility is not inquiry into whether we live, a matter of luck, or into what situations we face, also luck, but what responsibility we have for how we choose to live given all of this. Here I argue we have good reason to believe that this is not a matter of luck.

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible that we are not moral agents. Even so, it is at least theoretically possible that other things sufficiently dissimilar to us could be moral agents of the kind we believe ourselves to be. However, for the sake of simplicity, here I assume that we are moral agents. Furthermore, I take it that a moral agent can be contingently morally responsible for nothing. This is to say that one's moral record, or moral history, might not have an entry. However, if something is necessarily morally responsible for nothing, I do not think it makes sense to say it is a moral agent. (Note: Being morally responsible for nothing in this way is distinct from the sense discussed in Michael Zimmerman's 2002 paper "Taking Luck Seriously" (*The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 99, No. 11, pp. 553-576 – *TLS from now on*) where he argues for what he calls moral responsibility *tout court*, where an agent is morally responsible but responsible for nothing insofar as they are not morally responsible for anything in particular that they've done, but rather for something they would have done.)

In his landmark paper “Moral Luck,” Thomas Nagel succinctly gets to the root of the problem of moral luck by asking, “How is it possible to be more or less culpable depending on whether a child gets into the path of one's car, or a bird into the path of one's bullet?” In “Taking Luck Seriously,” Michael Zimmerman answers that it is *not* possible. (*TLS*, 560) Zimmerman claims the problem of moral luck supersedes the more traditional problem of free will. The problem of moral luck is devastating if left answered, and runs parallel to the problem of free will; one potential, but undesirable, solution to both of these problems is the conclusion that none of us is morally responsible for anything.<sup>2</sup> Zimmerman's solution to the problem of moral luck is innovative, but I spend much of this time showing that Zimmerman's solution to the problem is unsatisfactory and offer my own, alternative view.

In "Moral Luck," Nagel distinguishes between four types of luck, each potentially a type of moral luck inconsistent with the control principle. *Resultant luck* is perhaps most familiar, and concerns luck in the consequences of our actions. Even if moral agents have complete control<sup>3</sup> over their choices, it is uncontroversially true that we lack this control over the results of our actions. It may be within my power to *try* to rob a bank, but whether or not I succeed is,

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<sup>2</sup> I am a bit confused as to why Zimmerman holds that the problem of moral luck is *more* of a problem than the traditional problem of free will. Much like the compatibilist position that holds determinism does not undermine our moral responsibility so long as we have the ability to act in accordance with our will and the ability to do otherwise (in different circumstances), there is surely a position, and one Zimmerman seems at times to hold that moral luck does not undermine our moral responsibility so long as we have what Zimmerman calls *restricted* control over our actions (See “Luck and Moral Responsibility,” - *L&MR from now on* - pg. 376). If restricted control is sufficient for moral responsibility, the problem of moral luck goes away just as if freedom from coercion is sufficient for moral responsibility, the problem of free will goes away. Yet if either problem is unsolvable, agents lack moral responsibility.

<sup>3</sup> By complete control here I mean something different from Zimmerman. If a person has complete control over something, I mean that she is the sole self-determining cause of that thing.

ultimately, determined by factors outside of my control—luck. *Circumstantial luck* is luck regarding the circumstances one faces. *Constitutive luck* is luck regarding whom one is, or the character traits one has. *Causal luck* (or *antecedent luck*) is luck dealing with how our choices are determined by antecedent circumstances, and is generally synonymous with the free will problem itself. The last three are often grouped together and called *situational luck* because each deals with the situations under which an agent acts.<sup>4</sup> Although each kind of luck plays a role in our lives, below I argue that they play no role in determining our moral responsibility.

This paper is divided into three main sections. Section I briefly summarizes the problems of free will and moral luck. In section II I argue that resultant luck plays no role in determining our moral responsibility for our actions; this is to say that resultant luck is not moral luck. In section III I argue that situational luck, also, does not constitute moral luck.

## **I. Introduction**

The control principle, or CP, is at the center of both the free will and moral luck debates. Philosophers on both sides of the free will debate generally agree that moral responsibility requires control; that to be morally responsible for  $x$  one must be in control of  $x$ . Where they differ is what kind of control is sufficient to satisfy CP.

The *free will problem* is the name of a cluster of related problems surrounding free will and moral responsibility; philosophers worry that free will and/or moral responsibility are incompatible with our best metaphysical theories.

*Compatibilists* are philosophers who believe free will and moral

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<sup>4</sup> Zimmerman introduces the terms *situational* and *resultant* luck in *L&MR*, pg. 376.

responsibility are compatible with *universal causal determinism*, the metaphysical theory that the actual past, coupled with the actual laws of nature, completely causally determines the future. If universal causal determinism is true in our world, then there is only one possible future - the actual future. If compatibilism is true and CP is true, then the control required by CP must be entirely compatible with our being wholly causally determined to act by circumstances outside of our control, the actual past and the actual laws of nature, matters of luck.

*Incompatibilists* are philosophers who believe that free will and moral responsibility are not compatible with universal causal determinism; roughly incompatibilists believe that moral responsibility requires multiple possible futures. Critics of incompatibilism argue that if our choices are not causally determined by the past (by our character and reasons we have to act), then our choices are determined arbitrarily, and thus matters of luck.

Michael Zimmerman characterizes the problem of moral luck, roughly, as follows:

- (1) CP - A person P is morally responsible for an event *e*'s occurring only if *e*'s occurring was within P's control, not a matter of luck.
- (2) No event is not a matter of luck.

Therefore,

- (3) No event is such that P is morally responsible for its occurring. (*L&MR*, p. 374)

There are many competing theories of moral responsibility, but for the purposes of this paper by *moral responsibility* I mean roughly what Galen Strawson calls *true moral responsibility*, where one is truly morally responsible for something if and only if it "makes sense" to be rewarded in heaven or punished in

hell for that something. (Strawson, p. 9) True moral responsibility does not require that one believe in such an afterlife; rather the contention is that there is something fundamentally misguided about heaping praise or blame on things that are not the authors, or original sources, of their actions. It would make no sense to punish an automatic weapon for being causally determined to fire bullets that kill innocent people, but it is at least *prima facie* plausible to punish the person who freely and intentionally pulls the trigger with the hopes of killing innocent people. That person is *prima facie* morally responsible for her action because we believe she is the author of her action; she could have chosen otherwise, and yet freely chose to act in a *prima facie* morally abhorrent manner.

Strawson believes that we come to have our concept of moral responsibility from experiences like the one described in this case:

Suppose you set off for a shop on the evening of a national holiday, intending to buy a cake with your last ten pound note. On the steps of the shop someone is shaking an Oxfam tin. You stop, and it seems completely clear to you that it is entirely up to you what you do next. That is, it seems to you that you are truly, radically free to choose, in such a way that you will be ultimately morally responsible for whatever you choose. Even if you believe that determinism is true, and that you will in five minutes time be able to look back and say what you did was determined, this does not seem to undermine your sense of the absoluteness and inescapability of your freedom, and of your moral responsibility for your choice. (Strawson, p. 10)

According to Strawson, it does not matter what stance you take on free will, both the compatibilist and incompatibilist cannot help but believe - in the moment that they make a choice - that there are actually multiple possible futures, that their

choice is undetermined, and that their choice is what brings about one possible future rather than the other. This experience of apparent freedom, he argues, is the source of our concept of moral responsibility. True moral responsibility assumes indeterminism is true, that each of us is a self-cause, the original author of our actions, not causally determined to act but at the same time not arbitrary. True moral responsibility is an incompatibilist account of moral responsibility.

Strawson believes true moral responsibility is impossible because he believes it is impossible for something to be a self-cause. Incompatibilists have long struggled to offer a satisfactory metaphysical account of what it would be like to be a self-cause of the kind described in Strawson's case, but have met with little success. However just because the incompatibilist cannot describe the metaphysics of authorial control does not mean that authorial control is not possible. In another work I argue that to deny the existence of self-causes, given our seemingly unending string of experiences of being self-causes, is to engage in radical skepticism, undermining the very foundation our moral beliefs are built on, rendering any moral debate to be a mistake. (Simkulet, forthcoming)

To be morally responsible is to be the original, non-arbitrary author of one's actions. Even if our actions are fleeting, though, moral responsibility is not. It will be useful to think of moral responsibility as sticking with us; permanently affecting what I call a *moral record*, where a moral record is a history of one's actions as a moral agent, things that she can be praiseworthy or blameworthy for. To be *praiseworthy* is to have your moral record effected in an objectively, intrinsically positive way. To be *blameworthy* is to have your record effected in an objectively, intrinsically negative way. By moral record I mean to pick out roughly what Zimmerman calls a "moral ledger" and I will use the two terms interchangeably in

the following sections. (*TLS*, p. 555) However, the term "moral ledger" evokes, I think, a particular method for determining what can be called one's total moral worth—the same manner that one might calculate one's financial worth: by tabulating the ledger's entries. It is outside the scope of this paper to offer a theory about how one goes about calculating total moral worth, where one's *total moral worth* is something like an ultimate moral assessment of a person. To those who might tabulate one's total moral worth by adding up the entries on one's moral ledger, luck is a big problem.

Consider two virtuous people,<sup>5</sup> Chris and Kris, with identical lives up until time *t*, at which point Kris dies and Chris lives. According to a simple moral ledger view, Chris's total moral worth, given her more virtuous acts, would be higher than Kris's, and is so because of the contingent fact that Kris dies instead of Chris. I reject this position. There are various quick fixes to this problem (One could divide moral responsibility over the chances to do good, or given a deterministic world we should calculate the total of Chris's actual and potential lives, and Kris's actual and potential lives<sup>6</sup>, etc.), but none *obviously* solve this problem.

## II. Resultant Luck

Consider the following example of the problem of resultant luck that Zimmerman adapts from Nagel:

Suppose that George shot at Henry and killed him. Suppose that Georg shot

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<sup>5</sup> By "virtuous people" I mean to evoke the concept of two agents who only do good. At this point, I leave it open to interpretation what "doing good" consists of. What matters is that Chris and Kris are objectively morally good people, and equally morally good people. What follows is that Chris, upon Kris's death, is good *for longer*, does more good, etc. than Kris, and thus they are *prima facie* no longer morally equivalent.

<sup>6</sup> This is similar to Zimmerman's concept of responsibility *tout court* that I discuss in section III below.

at Henrik in circumstances which were, to the extent possible, exactly like those of George (by which I mean to include what went on "inside" the protagonists' heads as well as what happened in the "outside" world), except for the fact that Georg's bullet was intercepted by a passing bird (a rather large and solid bird) and Henrik escaped injury. Inasmuch as the bird's flight was not in Georg's control, the thesis that luck is irrelevant to moral responsibility implies that George and Georg are equally morally responsible. This, I believe, is absolutely correct. (*TLS*, p. 560)

The fact that George is a murderer, while Georg is only an attempted murderer turns on resultant luck alone. Both George and Georg are stipulated to have the same relevant situational luck, and to act in the same way; only the results of their actions differ. Because moral responsibility tracks control, and thus is immune to luck, Zimmerman argues that both George and Georg must bear equal moral responsibility for what they've done; their moral records, so to speak, have been equally stained. The odd thing, of course, is that we describe what they've done as two radically different things: George killed Henry, while Georg merely wounded a bird. Intuitively what Georg is responsible for is not as bad as what George is responsible for. Surely both George and Georg are morally responsible for pulling the trigger with a certain shared intent, but George has done something Georg has not done—he has succeeded. How can they be held *equally* morally responsible when Henry's death, caused by George, is far worse than the bird's injury, caused by Georg? What is worse, Georg's transgression was accidental, a matter of luck, and since moral responsibility tracks control, it seems as if one's culpability for an accident ought to be less than had they actually *chosen* to act in that way. If Georg\* intended to shoot a bird and succeeds, surely he is more responsible for his

action than Georg for shooting a bird accidentally. Thus it seems that not only is Georg responsible for something *far less bad* (shooting the bird) than what George is responsible for, Georg is also *less responsible for it* than what George is, insofar as Georg's bird shooting was accidental.

Zimmerman's solution to this apparent case of moral luck is that while George may be responsible for more (and different) things than Georg, he is not more responsible than Georg. Zimmerman claims we need to distinguish between the *degree* of one's moral responsibility, and the *scope* of one's moral responsibility: "My claim is that George and Georg bear responsibility to the same *degree*, despite the fact that George's responsibility has greater *scope*... My claim is that, although Henrik survived Georg's attempt to kill him, Georg's moral record as a person is adversely affected in precisely the same way" (*TLS*, p. 560-561, my emphasis).

Imagine two ledgers, one belonging to George and one to Georg. The first has some black mark, maybe in the form of a negative number, representing the degree of George's moral responsibility. Beside it, in another column, is a representation of the scope of George's action, a series of notes to the effect that he tried to kill, and succeeded in killing, Henry. Georg's ledger is much the same, except in his scope column the notes read that he tried to kill Henrik, and accidentally injured a bird. I'm not sure what role this scope column serves for Zimmerman's account; presumably this column has some relationship to the degree column. Maybe it somehow explains the mark in the degree column, perhaps by referencing the aspect of the actual world that is associated with that mark. However, at least part of the scope column cannot, in any way, affect the degree column, that which is a matter of luck. Why, then, on Zimmerman's account, is

part of one's moral ledger devoted to something that cannot count, morally?

Zimmerman contends that the scope of one's moral responsibility is subject to luck, but that the degree of one's moral responsibility is not. This strikes me as troubling as Zimmerman has made an apparently arbitrary concession; part of one's moral ledger is subject to luck, the column dealing with scope. This concession is not likely to satisfy someone who believes in the existence of moral luck; the part of one's moral ledger that is subject to luck does not count when determining one's blameworthiness or praiseworthiness! Maybe Zimmerman thinks this concession is a price worth paying to shield moral responsibility from the influence of luck while, at least in some sense, taking our concerns about luck seriously: although George is still blameworthy in a way George is not, it is only because of luck, and thus that way in which he is blameworthy does not count when calculating his moral responsibility, or total moral worth.<sup>7</sup>

In order to take the control principle seriously, Zimmerman argues that luck cannot play a role in determining one's moral responsibility. But he argues George is in control of Henry's death; had he acted otherwise (not fired the gun), Henry would not have died (at least he would not have died from a bullet shot by George with the intent to kill Henry). George was in control of bringing the gun and shooting at Henry, and this just is what killed him. Of course George only had partial control over Henry's death; what happened after he pulled the trigger was

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<sup>7</sup> I find it particularly troubling that the concept of scope seems to only "count," morally speaking, insofar as it allows us to say things like "George is responsible for Henry's death." Being responsible in this way does not contribute to the degree of moral blame George deserves, nor should it, on Zimmerman's view, influence any sort of moral evaluation of him. Zimmerman briefly wonders if this is trivializing Henry's death. (*TLS*, p. 561) This is the wrong question. Henry's death is an equally terrible thing if he dies from a bullet, a heart attack, or an asteroid. What Zimmerman trivializes is George's responsibility for Henry's death. It counts for nothing, morally speaking, on his view, and this is counterintuitive.

out of his control, purely a matter of luck. It is merely luck that a bird flew in the path of Georg's bullet, but not George's; so both George and Georg are equally in control, he says. Just as in matters of moral responsibility, Zimmerman claims that in matters of control one must distinguish between degree and scope. "George was *in control of more things* than Georg (his control had greater scope), but he was no *more in control* of what happened than Georg was (he was in control to the same degree). Insofar as degree of responsibility tracks degree of control, George and Georg must be declared equally morally responsible." (TLS, 562)

From this one might come to something like the following, what I'll call the *simple control thesis*—If Alpha has as much control over A as Beta has over B, Alpha is equally morally responsible for A as Beta is for B. This thesis is missing something important: if Georg\* was a bird hunter that had aimed at a bird and hit the bird, he is not as morally blameworthy for his action as George is for his action. But he is as morally responsible for his action insofar as responsibility tracks control; he is in as much control over his action as George is over his action. Obviously George does not bear the same moral responsibility, insofar as he is a murderer, as a bird hunter Georg\* would qua bird killer. Thus, the simple control thesis is false; moral responsibility does not track only control. But there is something else wrong with the simple control thesis. Zimmerman contends that partial control is sufficient to satisfy the control principle. He holds that George and Georg share the same amount of (partial) control over the results of their actions, and because of this, we are to hold them equally morally responsible. But consider the following two cases:

Georgy hates Henri for the same kind of reasons that George hates Henry and Georg hates Henrik. Georgy, however, also chooses to be a gambler and

attaches his rifle to a slot machine, such that when Georgy pulls the trigger, the trigger does not fire the weapon, rather it pulls the level of the slot machine. The slot machine will then fire the rifle if and only if it comes up three of a kind. Georgy sits atop a building and when Henri is lined up in his sites, Georgy pulls the trigger, the slot machine displays triple cherries, the weapon fires, and Henri is shot and killed.

Georgia is a devoted fan of *The Price is Right* who is upset with how the new host, Drew Carey, is running the show. She sits atop the show's Plinko board with a poison-tipped Plinko disc. When Carey walks near the board to pick up a decoy Plinko disc, she drops the disc, which is deflected by the Plinko board in such a way as to appear random and unpredictable to Georgia, and ultimately hits Carey's hand, killing him.

In both of these cases, Georgy and Georgia are in less control of their victim's deaths than George is in control of Henry's. However, intuitively, both are as morally responsible as George. In Georgy's case, he is intentionally in less in control of Henri's death than George is in control of Henry's death, but this is no excuse. Some might draw a distinction, and claim that Georgy is less morally responsible because he did not choose to kill Henri, rather he chose to risk Henri's life, but this is a mistake. Georgy chooses to kill Henri, but does so in a less reliable way. We can, of course, question Georgy's rationale for choosing a less reliable way to commit murder, but I think this is a separate issue.<sup>8</sup> In Georgia's case, her lack of control is the result of her choice of weapon, perhaps intended to

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<sup>8</sup> For example, say Georgy chose to drive to work, and then he chooses to drive his SUV instead of his hybrid to drive in. The proper moral evaluation of Georgy's driving to work is, I think, a separate question from his moral responsibility to drive to work in his SUV instead of his hybrid. Georgy can be completely morally justified in choosing to drive to work, while being completely morally blameworthy in his choice of what to drive to work.

be more entertaining than functional; but surely this does not excuse Georgia either.

Both Georgy and Georgia are in less control over whether their victims die than George and Georg; but, intuitively, they all are equally morally responsible for what they have done. It would be absurd if they were differently morally responsible, if one were less blameworthy for killing another innocent person only because his or her weapon was less likely to bring about the intended death. If George and Georg are in a different amount of control than Georgy and Georgia, but are the same in every other relevant way, and yet all four are equally morally responsible, how can one claim moral responsibility tracks control? Of course there is something that all four have the same degree (and scope) of control over: they have the same control over their free choice to try to kill their respective targets. George has the same control over whether he chooses to pull the trigger as Georgia has control over whether she chooses to drop the Plinko chip. The pair of George & Georg differs from Georgy & Georgia only in the degree of control they have over the results of their choices, but are the same in the degree of control over their free choice to try to kill. If all four are equally morally responsible, moral responsibility cannot track control over results because Georgy and Georgia exert a different amount of partial control over the consequences of their actions than George and Georg; *more things* can thwart their goals.<sup>9</sup> If all four are equally

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<sup>9</sup> It strikes me as odd to say that an agent exerts partial control over the consequences of their actions; an agent's control over the consequences vanishes the moment that they no longer have any say in how the results play out. Of course, agents might exhibit additional control for other things that we might mistake for a continued bit of control over the consequences of one's earlier actions. For example, after Georg fails to hit Henrik with his first shot, he might fire again and succeed with his second shot. However, we shouldn't mistake the fact that Georg gets another chance to choose to shoot Henrik as him having any additional control over the consequences of his first shot. One cannot, in any meaningful sense, be in further control, partial or otherwise, of

morally responsible, then they must exert the same kind of control. By stipulation, each of them exerts the same kind of control over their free choices. If Strawson's story of our experience of free will accurately describes how we make choices, then it makes sense to say that George and company exert complete control over their free choices.

If this analysis is correct the control required for moral responsibility just is free will. But moral responsibility tracks more than control, it also tracks severity. When George freely and intentionally kills Henry he does something more blameworthy than Georg\* does when he freely and intentionally kills a bird.

Consider a set of cases James Rachels presents in "Active and Passive Euthanasia:"<sup>10</sup> Smith stands to gain a large inheritance if his young cousin dies. One night while his cousin is taking a bath, Smith drowns his cousin. Jones also stands to gain a large inheritance if his young cousin dies, and one night, while his cousin is taking a bath Jones enters the room with the intent of drowning him. However before Jones can act his cousin slips and hits his head. Delighted, Jones watches his cousin drown.

Rachels argues that intuitively Smith and Jones are both equally morally blameworthy for what happened, despite the fact that Smith kills his cousin while Jones only lets his cousin die. This leads him to the conclusion that *killing* is (at least sometimes) morally equivalent to *letting die*. In "Killing and Starving to Death,"<sup>11</sup> Rachels presents his *equivalence thesis* to explain this equality: "If there are the same reasons for or against A as for or against B, then the reasons in favour

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the results of one's actions after one has finished acting. Once the choice has been made, and the trigger pulled, neither George nor Georg exhibits any control over whether the bullets hit their respective targets. What they had control over was choosing to pull the trigger.

<sup>10</sup> See Rachels (1975).

<sup>11</sup> See Rachels (1979).

of A are neither stronger nor weaker than the reasons in favour of B; and so A and B are morally equivalent – neither is preferable to the other” (p. 165).

The explanation of why killing and letting die are morally equivalent in these cases has to do with the beliefs that Smith and Jones had when they made their choices, and the reasons they chose to act on. Although Smith and Jones do very different things—one kills his cousin, the other refrains from saving his cousin—by stipulation, they each act for the same reasons. George and Georg are similarly stipulated to act for the same reasons, and as such it strikes me that the equivalence thesis can explain why in this situation they are blameworthy to the same degree. They are equally blameworthy because they (a) exert the same control over their free choice, and (b) have the same reasons for and against acting as they freely choose to do. The equivalence thesis also explains why George is differently morally responsible for freely and intentionally shooting Henry than Georg\* is for freely and intentionally shooting a bird; George has more reasons not to kill a person than Georg\* did not to kill a bird. George is blameworthy for the same *kind* of action as Georg\*, but he is blameworthy to a different degree because his reasons for acting were objectively morally worse. If this analysis is correct, we are truly morally responsible for our free choices, not their results.

It is outside the scope of this paper to offer a more detailed account of how we might go about calculating one's exact degree of moral responsibility for one's actions, however it strikes me that there is one important difference between control and severity. If one exerts no control over his choice (if he lacks any morally relevant control over what he chooses to do), then he cannot be held morally accountable for his actions because doing so would violate the control principle. However, if the severity of what one does is irrelevant (if there are no

compelling reasons for or against it, and thus one can be neither praiseworthy or blameworthy for doing it), then it makes sense to say that one is morally responsible for what he does even though this responsibility is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. In such a case, I think it makes sense to say that one is still morally responsible for one's action because one owns their action in the way that would be otherwise necessary to be praiseworthy or blameworthy for that action had there been reasons for or against that action.

In this section I have presented the view that the scope of moral responsibility is, roughly, free will; we are morally responsible for our free choices. In many cases, we believe that we have complete control over our free choices, but sometimes we believe our choices are less than completely free, tempered by our character, stress, biology or the like. In such cases, we can be said to exert partial control over our free choices, and someone who is less responsible for their free choice might then be ultimately responsible to a different degree than one who makes the same choice completely free. Our degree of moral responsibility for these choices is determined by our control over these choices and the reasons we choose to act on. If this view is correct, then resultant luck is not moral luck; our moral record is not affected by the consequences of our actions, but rather by our choices.

Zimmerman's view has one clear advantage over the view I articulate here. He can reasonably say that George is morally responsible for Henry's death, while Georg is *not* morally responsible any person's death. In contrast, I am committed to the position that George and Georg are actually morally responsible for their free choice to kill; on my view George is not, properly speaking, morally responsible for Henry's death because Henry's death was relevantly outside of his

control. Indeed on my view, *no one is ever morally responsible for the consequences of their actions!* Yet it certainly makes sense to say, “George is morally responsible for Henry’s death,” so it seems as if my view is deficient in some way. However, it strikes me that although this way of speaking is common, it is misleading. When we say that George is morally responsible for Henry's death, what we mean is that he is morally responsible for *something else*, namely his free choice to kill Henry. Henry's death by George's bullet is evidence that George freely chose to kill Henry. George is causally responsible for Henry's death, and his causal responsibility is no accident; it is the intentional consequence of his actions. Thus, we can say that George is derivatively morally responsible for Henry's death, where to be *derivatively morally responsible* for *x* is to be truly morally responsible for something else, *y*, where *y* is connected to *x* in some relevant way. In this case, George is derivatively morally responsible for Henry's death because he is actually morally responsible for his free choice to kill Henry, which had as a goal and foreseeable consequence the death of Henry. Georg, too, is truly morally responsible for the same thing. The difference between George and Georg is not what each one is responsible for; rather it is what evidence we have to hold them appropriately morally responsible. It is, in a sense, easier to prove that George did something wrong than Georg, all else being equal.

### **III. Situational Luck**

In the previous section I have argued that the consequences of our actions, things that are a matter of resultant luck, play no role in influencing our moral record. However, perhaps I have merely pushed the problem of moral luck back a step; the luck that influences our record is not resultant luck, but situational luck. In this section I look at Zimmerman's account of situational luck and offer an

alternative account such that situational luck plays no role in determining our moral responsibility.

Situational luck is comprised of three kinds of luck - circumstantial luck, constitutive luck, and causal luck. Zimmerman offers a robust and interconnected, but bizarre analysis of each kind of situational luck.

If anything is a candidate for moral luck, it seems the contingency of our existence would be. Zimmerman muses, “no one is in control of his being born – an event on which all of his decisions, actions, omissions, and the consequences thereof are contingent” (*L&MR*, p. 378) Because our coming to exist is outside of our control, in a sense it makes sense to say that everything that came afterwards is contingent on a matter of luck, and thus itself a matter of luck. Even if you possessed the kind of authorial control required for Strawson's true moral responsibility, you would not have control over your having existed (because, barring time travel, no one can have control over the past), and as such everything you do is contingent on a matter of luck. The problem with this worry is that it seems confused about what moral luck is; moral luck occurs only when luck plays a role in determining our degree of moral responsibility for what we do. However existence luck does not play a role in determining the contents of our moral record, it plays a role in determining whether we have a record at all. Existence luck is not moral luck, but *record luck*. Record luck no more determines the content of your moral record than receiving a diary as a gift determines what you write; receiving a diary as a gift might prompt you to write in it, but it does not cause you to write what you write.

Existence luck, or record luck, is distinct from the three kinds of situational luck in question here, however existence luck gives us a model for addressing

concerns about circumstantial luck. Circumstantial luck is luck in the circumstances one faces, including the opportunities to act morally or immorally.

In Natalie Abram's article "Active and Passive Euthanasia", she presents the following cases which, I believe, perfectly illustrate circumstantial luck:

(1) Diane and her brother are both at the beach. Diane sees her brother struggling in the water, and because of this she goes in and rescues him from drowning.

(2) Carol and her brother are both at the beach. Carol sees her brother struggling in the water, but just as she is about to go in and rescue him, he regains control and swims to the shore by himself. (Abrams, p. 259-260)

Abrams contends that Diane is more praiseworthy than Carol because Diane acts to bring about a good result - her brother's safety - while Carol merely allows her brother's safety to occur. This strikes me as odd. Carol is stipulated to have been about to go in and rescue her brother; this is to say that Carol had already made the same free choice to save her brother that Diane had. If the previous section is correct, then both Carol and Diane are equally morally praiseworthy for making this choice (in much the same way that George and Georg are equally blameworthy for freely choosing to try to kill). Of course we have more reason to praise Diane than Carol because we see Diane acting, but this is comparable to how we have more evidence that George is a murderer than Georg, because George actually succeeds in killing someone.

The difference between Diane and Carol is not a matter of resultant luck. Carol was, of course, free to jump into the water and drag her brother to safety, although this would be quite bizarre. If Carol were to jump in, she would bring about a good result in the same way Diane would, but I doubt we'd praise her for it.

The difference between Diane and Carol's cases is a matter of circumstantial luck; Diane faces a circumstance in which she has the opportunity to act heroically and save her brother. Had Carol jumped in and dragged her brother to safety, this would not be heroic, and thus Carol seems to lack an opportunity Diane has. This does not strike me as right; if the view I sketched in the previous section is correct, Carol and Diane are equally morally responsible for their free choice to try to save their brother. Where they differ is that Diane *continues* to choose this (she does not, after jumping into the water, decide that it is too cold and turn around leaving her brother to drown), however Carol is robbed of this opportunity because her brother regains control and swims to shore safely on his own. Diane and Carol face different circumstances, and thus the entries in their moral record differ.

However, much as it would be absurd to hold us morally responsible for existing, it would be absurd to hold us morally responsible for the circumstances we face. Both Diane and Carol, by assumption, exert the same control over what they do given the circumstances they face, and their choices are what determine the entries in their moral record, not the circumstances they face. Much like existence luck is a prerequisite for our having moral responsibility, circumstantial luck is a prerequisite as well; both kinds of luck are necessary for our acting morally or immorally, but play no role in determining whether we do, in fact, act morally or immorally given the circumstances we face. Circumstantial luck, like existence luck, is a matter of record luck, not moral luck.

The worry about circumstantial luck is that agents like Carol might be less praiseworthy overall because they had fewer opportunities to demonstrate their courage. This is a problem, but it is not a problem of moral luck, but of record luck. This is the problem of Chris and Kris above, and I think it is outside the

scope of this paper to offer a complete account of how we ought to calculate one's total moral worth.

Zimmerman offers an alternative solution to the problem of circumstantial luck, beginning with an examination of a variation of his George and Georg cases. Once again, George killed Henry, and Georg failed to kill Henrik. This time Georg sneezes right as he is about to pull the trigger, and the sneeze prevents him from pulling the trigger to kill Henrik. (*TLS*, p. 563) Much like the bird getting in the way of Georg's shot in the previous incarnation of this case, his sneeze gets in his way this time. There is something ambiguous about Zimmerman's case here—does he mean that Georg had already willed himself to pull the trigger, but the sneeze interfered with his motor coordination? If so, then the sneeze is merely resultant luck and irrelevant in determining George's moral responsibility. Suppose, though, that Georg has a sneezing fit around the time that he would have needed to choose to pull the trigger to kill his target, and this sneezing fit prevented Georg from making that choice. According to Zimmerman, there is no difference between Georg's responsibility here and in the previous section. In both cases, Georg is blameworthy despite not killing anyone. “The cases are united in that, in all of them, Georg would have freely killed Henrik but for some feature of the case over which he had no control” (*TLS*, p. 563)

But what is Georg morally responsible for in this case? He did not have the opportunity to freely choose to try to kill Henrik, so we cannot even say that he is responsible for attempting to kill Henrik. One answer that Zimmerman rightfully rejects is that Georg is responsible for being such that he would have freely killed Henrik if not for the sneezing fit. The problem with this answer is that it shifts the focus of inquiry, from circumstantial luck to constitutive luck, from the

circumstances in question to one's character. Although one's character may play a role in one's choices, Zimmerman argues that what makes it the case that Georg would have freely killed Henrik if not for the sneezing fit is that he would have freely *chosen* to shoot Henrik if not for the sneezing fit. Had things been ever so slightly otherwise, Zimmerman stipulates that Georg would have chosen to shoot to kill Henrik, and *this* is what he is morally responsible for. But of course this did not happen! Although Zimmerman contends Georg is as blameworthy as George, he cannot have anything like the same scope of moral responsibility as Georg! What then, is Georg responsible *for* in this case? Nothing. "Georg is responsible; he is just not responsible *for* anything," Zimmerman claims, "He is, as I shall put it, 'responsible *tout court*.'" (TLS 564) Although Zimmerman claims he is responsible for nothing - *tout court*, he is responsible *because* he would have otherwise shot Henrik. But this is akin to adding a third column to our moral ledgers, where the first column dealt with degrees of moral responsibility, and the second with the scope of responsibility (which itself could be divided, at least for Zimmerman, into the scope that contributes to the degree - our free choices - and the scope that does not contribute to our degree of moral responsibility). The third column, for Zimmerman, would deal with a counterfactual - not how things are, but how they would have been. George and Georg share something in common: Zimmerman has stipulated that if chance, fate, luck had only cooperated with them both, they'd have freely chosen to shoot their targets, and their targets would die. Much as Zimmerman introduces a scope column to shield degree of moral responsibility from resultant luck, this counterfactual column shields moral responsibility from circumstantial luck.

Nagel presents a similar example. The problem of circumstantial luck, he fears, is not merely one of near misses as in Zimmerman's cases, but one of drastically different situations as well. "Ordinary citizens of Nazi Germany had an opportunity to behave heroically by opposing the regime. They also had an opportunity to behave badly, and most of them are culpable for having failed this test. But it is a test to which the citizens of other countries were not subjected, with the result that even if they, or some of them, would have behaved as badly as the Germans in like circumstances, they simply did not and therefore are not similarly culpable" (Nagel, p. 145-146). The difference between a typical German and, say, a typical American in this case is that the German had an opportunity the American did not, one to act heroically or terribly. Many Germans acted terribly, and we have good reason to think that many Americans, confronted with the same circumstances, would act equally viciously. Yet we hold the vicious Germans morally culpable for their viciousness, but Nagel points out we do not hold the would-be vicious Americans as responsible.

One benefit of Zimmerman's view is that these would-be vicious Americans would be as morally blameworthy as the cruel Germans, even if we could never, in principle, know that they are. Like Georg, these would-be vicious Americans would be responsible *tout court*, responsible because they would have freely chosen to act viciously in such a way given the opportunity.

Let us briefly turn to circumstantial differences dealing with the number of circumstances one faces. Recall the cases of Chris and Kris, where both live comparable lives until Kris dies, and thus has fewer marks in her moral record than Chris, who lives on. Because this disparity in the number of entries is a matter of luck, it cannot be the case that the number of entries into one's moral record

determines one's ultimate moral responsibility. Zimmerman's view offers a solution to this problem as well; Kris is to be held morally responsible not only for what she has done, but also for what she would have done if she was not killed. Thus if Kris would have acted in the same way as Chris actually acted, Kris and Chris seem to be equally morally responsible. More precisely, if Chris and Kris would have acted in the same way in *any given situation*, then their ultimate moral responsibilities are equal.

A bizarre result of Zimmerman's view is that to accurately and fully calculate moral responsibility, one should pay no special attention to what the agent in question *has done*, rather one should look at what the agent *would do* in *all situations*. This is quite easy to do if we can stipulate that Georg would have killed Henrik if not for the sneezing fit, or that Kris would have acted as Chris if not for her premature death. Zimmerman's analysis of circumstantial luck, it seems, is contingent on there being a truth to what an agent would have done in other circumstances.

There is something unsatisfactory about this solution to the problem of circumstantial luck; it is akin to solving the problem of resultant luck by concluding that one is not merely responsible for the actual consequences of their actions, but also for all possible consequences as well. Georg would be morally responsible for killing Henrik because it was one of the possible outcomes of his action (despite the fact Henrik did not die), but he is also morally responsible for curing cancer, uniting a nation, prematurely combating bird flu, starting a revolution, going to jail, and countless other possible consequences of his action - *all possible consequences of his action* - no matter how improbable.<sup>12</sup> Of course,

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<sup>12</sup> Presumably on this view, one is morally responsible for the consequences one's action would

one might insist that Georg is less blameworthy (or praiseworthy) for these things insofar as they are less probable and/or less intentional, but they would be as much a part of his moral record as his counterfactual murder of Henrik even if they had less of an impact on calculating his degree of responsibility. Georg's scope column would be obscenely large for every actual thing he does.

On Zimmerman's account Georg's degree column and counterfactual column would each have an incalculable number of entries, while his scope column would be mostly blank. The majority of things Georg is blameworthy and praiseworthy for would be things he is responsible *tout court* for, counterfactual circumstances he never encountered.

Even if we found this implication plausible, Zimmerman's solution to the problem of circumstantial luck stands or falls on whether it makes sense to say Georg would have freely shot Henrik. To determine this, we must look to Zimmerman's account of constitutive and causal luck, luck concerning one's character and luck in the antecedent causal influences behind one's actions.

To discuss constitutive luck, Zimmerman once more turns to Georg and asks us to consider a case where Georg failed to kill Henrik, not because of some bird or sneezing fit, but because he was contingently too timid. Here too Zimmerman would hold Georg as morally responsible as George because Georg would have killed Henrik if not for something outside of his control – his timidity. At any given time, one cannot be held responsible for the character one has at that time, since at that moment one does not have a choice in the character one has. But certainly it is at least intuitively plausible that we have some sort of control over

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have in all possible worlds, and as such there are more worlds there the bullet kills someone than where it cures cancer, and thus one is probably more blameworthy than praiseworthy overall, but this is still a bizarre and counterintuitive position.

our character, even if it is not control at that time. Our character at any given moment may be entirely formed by what came before it, but we may have some control in how it is formed. If this is the case, we can be derivatively morally responsible for our character at any given time, and actually morally responsible for our free choices that lead to us coming to have such a character. For example, one might be derivatively morally responsible for coming to be addicted to a drug if she freely took the drug knowing that she might become addicted. On this view, we are only morally responsible for our character to the extent that we have freely chose the actions that lead predictably to our character.<sup>13</sup>

To address causal luck, Zimmerman considers two more reimaginings of Georg's position. First he asks us to consider if Georg had been brainwashed such that he was incapable of killing. He claims Georg would have freely killed Henrik if not for this conditioning, the conditioning again a matter of luck, so Georg must yet again be held morally responsible *tout court*. Second Zimmerman asks us to consider if Georg had been deterministically caused not to kill Henrik, in much the same way determinists hold all of our decisions to be deterministically caused. *Even here* Georg is to be held as morally responsible as if he had killed Henrik, but only if Georg would have freely killed Henrik if Georg's causal history had cooperated. Because of this, Zimmerman concludes that the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists "loses much of its force" (*TLS*, p. 566)

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<sup>13</sup> The relevant control is mitigated by ignorance. For example, if I was ignorant of the fact that freely choosing to torture animals would contribute to a vicious character that might make it more likely that I would torture persons, then in the relevant sense I am not in control over coming to have such a repulsive character; it was an unforeseen consequence. I am still causally responsible for my character, but it is a matter of luck that my actions have such an undesirable result.

Rather than sidestep the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists, Zimmerman's solution seems to ignore it completely. It is not clear what Zimmerman means by freely; compatibilists and incompatibilists have radically different accounts of free will. Both sides of the free will debate agree that if George *freely* shot Henry, he did so without any external constraints upon his choice. Where they differ is their concept of external constraints. The compatibilist, roughly, holds that George freely shot Henry if no one forced him to, no one blackmailed him to, and if his actions were consistent with his will. For the incompatibilist, George freely shot Henry if he was the sole cause of his choice and not causally determined by antecedent circumstances; this is to say that George's action is free if and only if it was his own.

Given the wildly opposing accounts of free action, it is clear the free will debate is crucial to Zimmerman's last cases. For the compatibilist, if George and Georg lived in a completely deterministic world, then both George and Georg are equally morally responsible. But, so too would everyone be equally morally responsible. After all, if we were put in the same position as George in a deterministic world, we would be causally determined by the actual past and the laws of nature to act just as George did; this is to say that for Zimmerman, if compatibilism is true, we are all morally responsible *tout court* for killing Henry.

One way the compatibilist might avoid such a bizarre conclusion is by asserting that in a deterministic universe, not everyone is a counterpart of everyone else. This is to say that there may be something *special* about you or I such that we could never be in the exact same position (having the same causal influences as) George even if things had been different. But whatever this something special is, certainly it is a matter of luck whether we have it or not. I have no control over

who am I anymore than I have control over whether I am born. It seems that on Zimmerman's account of moral responsibility the compatibilist is faced with a dilemma—either everyone is equally morally responsible, or what makes George responsible, and you and I not responsible, is solely a matter of luck.

In contrast, I think the incompatibilist effectively sidesteps the problems of constitutive and causal luck thanks to their account of free will discussed in section I, where one has free will if one is a non-arbitrary, undetermined self-cause. For the incompatibilist, we are the authors of our actions, not our character, although even if our character did partially control our actions it would be inappropriate to hold us morally responsible for the control our character determined our actions. We might, of course, be derivatively morally responsible for coming to have such a character in the first place, but this is a separate matter. Similarly, our biology, genetic traits, and human limitations might also play a role in curtailing and influencing our free actions, but we are not responsible for these influences either. Thus for the incompatibilist, constitutive luck plays no role in determining one's degree of moral responsibility, and the scope of one's moral responsibility is always their free choice, or, at least, the portion of their free choice over which they are the authors. Constitutive luck may play a role in determining what an otherwise free moral agent chooses to do, but this is not a matter of moral luck because it does not affect their degree of moral responsibility over what they have control over.

Similarly, for the incompatibilist, causal luck fails to influence our degree of moral responsibility—either an action is free, or it is not. If our action is free, we can be morally responsible for it and it leaves a mark in our moral record. If not,

then it leaves no mark. Causal luck, then, is a matter of record luck, not moral luck.

For the incompatibilist, to say that George *freely* shot Henry is to say that George's choice to shoot Henry was his own, and not causally determined by luck. It is a matter of record luck that he exists and had the opportunity to make a choice, but what he chooses in that moment is, for the incompatibilist, up to him alone, and not wholly determined by his character, his genetics, his upbringing, or the like.

Let us return to the cases of Chris and Kris. Poor Kris had quantitatively less chances to act than Chris, and as such Kris's moral record seemed to have less entries as a result. It does. The number of entries in Kris's moral record is, solely because of record luck, less than the number of entries in Chris's ledger. But having fewer entries does not affect her praiseworthiness or blameworthiness. For any given entry into Kris's moral record, we can compare her responsibility to Chris's, and we find they are equally morally responsible for the actions behind the entries. But we cannot hold Kris morally responsible for what she would have done at time  $t+1$  when she died at  $t$  because Kris was never presented with the opportunity to choose. Nothing in Kris's past, or in the situation at time  $t+1$ , for the incompatibilist, determines what Kris would have done; Kris's response, if given the opportunity to act, would have been her own.

Still Zimmerman wonders whether we cannot say Kris *probably* would have acted like Chris, that she *probably* would have acted in the same way, for the same reasons, etc. So, too, cannot we say that Georg, if not for the sneezing fit (or timidity or brainwashing), *probably* would have freely shot Henrik? "Suppose that there is a probability of .99 that Georg would have freely killed Henrik, had he not

sneezed. Then one of two things follows: either Georg is 99% as responsible as George, or there is a 99% chance that Georg is as responsible as George. It is not clear to me which we should say, although I lean toward the latter” (*TLS*, p. 573).

For starters, to hold Georg 99% as responsible as George is absurd. Either Georg would have shot at Henrik or not. In either case, 99% of the responsibility would be a mischaracterization of Georg’s moral record. So it seems we are left with Zimmerman’s leanings, that there is a 99% chance that Georg is as responsible as George. But how can we determine the probability of Georg *freely* shooting Henrik? If the incompatibilist were right, for Georg to *freely* shoot Henrik, his decision would not be causally determined by anything that happened previously, even his character. So even if Georg has the meanest character of them all, this is not enough evidence to show that he would have freely shoot Henrik, although I admit it is sufficient to say that he *probably* would.<sup>14</sup> But this is a guess; we do not *know* what Georg would have done. But let us give Zimmerman the benefit of the doubt; let us say we have good reason to believe that objectively speaking in 99 out of 100 worlds where a sufficiently nearby Georg counterpart has the option, he takes the shot. *This* is not one of *those* worlds – Georg was not given the opportunity to choose. Record luck denied Georg the chance to choose, much as luck denied Kris any further marks on her moral record. There simply *is no* mark in Georg’s moral record in the cases where he is stuck with a sneezing fit. Meanwhile, when he takes the shot and misses there *is* a mark in his moral record. Even where Georg is too timid to shoot Henrik, there is a mark in his moral record, although not the one Zimmerman expects.

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<sup>14</sup> I doubt this probability is attributable to Georg. At best, it seems this probability is just a feature of the complete list of Georg’s counterparts that acted in this forum, but I doubt the counterpart relationship has a relevant moral relationship to Georg.

If I am right, the Georg who is struck by a sneezing fit is akin to Kris who was killed before her counterpart. Factors outside of their control rob them both from entries into their moral record that they otherwise would have had. This is not to say that Georg is not morally responsible for *planning* to kill Henrik, or for all of the steps he took up until the sneezing fit, George has still done some morally terrible thing and these things contribute negatively to his moral record in much the same way that Carol's praiseworthy decision to save her then-drowning brother contributes in a positive way to her moral record, even though as luck would have it she never has to follow through with her choice because her brother saves himself. Still, if the incompatibilist is right, none of these steps make it such that Georg could not have changed his mind at the last minute, or that Carol could not have, against all reason, decided not to bother saving her brother's life. Of course we all think Georg would have taken the shot if not for the sneezing fit, but this is because we are presented with cases in which he is stipulated to be like George in every possible way, and George did take the shot. However it is these changes that make it impossible to tell what Georg would have done otherwise in cases of situational luck for the incompatibilist, because for the incompatibilist nothing Zimmerman has stipulated about the various Georgs is sufficient to determine how he will act.

On my account of moral responsibility, sneezing-fit Georg is not morally responsible for being such that he would have shot Henrik, but is morally responsible for the choices he made along the way. But George is responsible for all of this *and more*. Indeed, the final act might make George quite a bit more blameworthy than Georg. If the incompatibilist is right, Georg could have changed his mind and freely abandoned his goal of killing if not for his sneezing

fit. Indeed, it is this ability to be a self-cause that makes us the appropriate object of moral praise or blame in the first place. We can trace our actions back to us, *qua* moral agents, and no further. In contrast, for the compatibilist, each of us is capable of doing the right thing *only* when our causal history cooperates; every entry in our moral record would be a result of situational luck.

Note that once again Zimmerman's position is capable of doing something my position has trouble doing—explaining why Chris and Kris's *total moral worth* are not affected by moral luck. For Zimmerman although Kris dies, if it is true that she would have continued to act parallel to Chris, her ultimate moral worth is the same as Chris's, her degree column on her moral ledger has the same marks. But this assumes a deterministic view of human action, and one that likely leads to the conclusion that everyone is equally morally responsible for everything.

In contrast, according to the view I set out here, each entry into one's moral record is free of luck. It is a matter of record luck that we have a moral record in the first place, and a matter of record luck that we encounter situations in which we can freely act, but what we do in those situations is entirely within our control, at least the part of what we do that we are properly morally responsible for. The question that remains to be answered on this view is whether one's ultimate moral worth, the sum total of one's moral history, is a matter of luck or not. I am not prepared to offer a theory about how one would go about calculating total moral worth here, but I think the topic is sufficiently distinct from the problem of moral luck discussed here as to be the topic for another day.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The problem of moral luck is that luck appears to play a role in determining our moral responsibility. In this paper I have looked at five kinds of luck: resultant

luck—luck in the consequences of our actions, existence luck—the luck that we exist at all, circumstantial luck—luck in the circumstances we face, constitutive luck—luck in who we are, and causal luck, or luck in how we are caused to act.

Above I have argued that resultant luck does not contribute to our moral responsibility, because the scope of our moral responsibility is our free actions, not their results, and our degree of responsibility is determined by the reasons we freely choose to act on, not by the consequences of our free choices. Existence luck is not a matter of moral luck, it is a matter of record luck. That we have a moral record is a matter of luck, but the content of the entries in our record are entirely up to us if we have incompatibilist free will of the kind discussed in section I. Circumstantial luck is a matter of record luck as well, although different circumstances might allow us to act viciously or virtuously, what reasons we choose to act on are up to us, and thus our degree of moral responsibility is our own doing. It is uncontroversially true that some of us may be less free to act than others; our constitutive luck might influence our free choices, either by presenting us with different circumstances than others, or partially determining our free choice. The former is record luck, the latter, however, is irrelevant because the scope of our moral responsibility for our free choices is limited to the portion of those choices that are free. Finally, causal luck, too, falls under record luck—either we are free, or we are not. If we are not free, it would not make sense to hold us morally accountable at all. However, if we are free, our choices are not determined by our being free moral agents.

The control principle states that we are only morally responsible for what is in our control, shielding the individual entries in our moral record from things outside of our control, from luck. It is possible that the control principle does not

shield one's total moral worth in the same way that it shields individual entries in one's moral record, but to determine if this is the case we need a theory about how one might go about calculating total moral worth. I have argued that the compatibilist account of calculating total moral worth might end up judging everyone to be equally morally responsible, but this account is unsatisfying. I am however hopeful that there is a non-arbitrary means of calculating one's total moral worth that is resistant to moral luck, but I do not provide such an account here.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Another possibility is that what I am calling "ultimate moral worth" *simply is not* morally relevant.

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