

FOREWORD

In ordinary life we routinely find ourselves in situations where we perform some activity that is subject to normative standards and where we expect to be evaluated by others on this basis. We may be asked, for example, to write an examination and solve a math problem; or to play a difficult piano sonata in a concert; or to give a speech in a foreign language to a group of visiting colleagues. All these performances may be judged as being done well or badly, as being either with or without mistakes of some kind. In all these cases we recognize and apply some accepted standard as to what is involved in getting it “right” or “wrong” in these activities. Beyond this we also expect, not only that the performance will be evaluated or graded, but that we (that is, the agent) will be praised or blamed depending on how well or poorly it is done.

How is all this relevant to the philosophical riddle of free will? In the first place, our moral conduct is subject to the same two-levels of assessment. As Maureen Sie points out, we draw a basic distinction between “merely wrong actions” and “fully blameworthy ones.” In the case of a piano performance, for example, we may say that the pianist hit the wrong notes too many times because the pianist was careless or sloppy, or we may say that we cannot blame the pianist because the piece was too difficult or because the pianist had a bad headache. Similarly, there are circumstances where we may judge that a person has violated “legitimate” moral norms but the person is not held (fully) blameworthy because of some excusing or mitigating consideration. It is this gap between “merely wrong actions” and “fully blameworthy actions” that gives scope to the free will problem.

The underlying worry motivating the free will problem is that if determinism is true, and all our actions are causally necessitated by antecedent circumstances, then the agent could not have acted differently—there are no alternative possibilities open to any agent. The implications of this are that while we may still judge (grade) a performance as good or bad (for example when the pianist hits the right notes or the wrong ones), we will no longer be able to praise or blame the performer for the quality of the performance. It follows from this that the truth of determinism would make it systematically impossible to “justify blame.” This holds true, the pessimist will argue, not just for piano players and math students, but also for all of us in so far as we view ourselves as morally responsible agents.

There are various lines of response to this pessimist argument and Sie does a first-rate job of taking the reader through the complex options and strategies that are available. Her particular concern is with a strategy that she labels “practical compatibilism” and she finds the most important representatives of this in the work of Susan Wolf and R. Jay Wallace. The practical compatibilist aims to deflate pessimism about the implications of determinism by providing an account of moral capacity necessary for holding agents responsi-

ble that does not presuppose the falsity of determinism. Central to both Wolf's and Wallace's accounts is the notion of "rational self-control" under some appropriate interpretation. Sie presents their arguments in a sympathetic manner but, eventually, finds their effort to refute incompatibilism unsuccessful. This moves her own argument onto an alternative strategy that she labels "practical semi-compatibilism."

What is distinctive and novel about the "practical semi-compatibilist" approach is that it invites us to reconsider what is involved in cases of "wrong" action that violates our recognized moral norms and expectations of the agent. There are, Sie argues, two quite different types of case that we may be presented with. A wrong action may show that the agent is in some way incapable of complying with our moral norms and expectations. The concern here is that the agent cannot recognize and/or respond to our legitimate moral demands. If this is the case, Sie suggests, we will naturally tend to exclude the agent as "a full-blown participant in our moral community." On the other hand, a wrong action may disclose "a normative disagreement of the agent" with the normative expectations that we have of her. In these cases, the agent challenges the legitimacy of the *content* of our normative expectations. This kind of case, it is argued, has very different implications for the agent's standing in the moral community.

According to Sie, when an agent challenges the legitimacy of our recognized or established moral norms we must not be too quick to simply dismiss this person as morally incompetent or incapacitated. On the contrary, "we should assume every agent to be a normal human being just like us, unless we have specific reasons to assume otherwise." Determinism provides us with no specific reason of a relevant kind. In these circumstances we must, inevitably, judge which of the opposing parties the deviant agents or those whose normative expectations have been violated—are in fact "the well functioning" or "normal human beings." Whether the thesis of determinism is true or not, some decision must be made in these circumstances. (Consider a disagreement about the correct rules of English grammar; we must decide who is a competent authority here irrespective of the truth of determinism—which is irrelevant to this issue.)

Where do these observations leave us with respect to the free will problem? Sie argues that in so far as we are faced with "deviant" actions that disclose or might disclose a "normative disagreement" we have an obligation to assume that these individuals are morally competent "normal human beings" unless we have some specific reason to assume otherwise. To do otherwise would be to refuse to "take seriously" these people and the moral challenge that they present to us. As long as we find ourselves in a moral community we will inevitably encounter transgressions of this kind (that is, involving normative disagreement). The truth of determinism can neither eliminate these conflicts nor settle which of the conflicting parties has the correct understanding of the

legitimate moral norms. It follows from this, Sie maintains, that in circumstances of this kind “pessimism” about the implications of determinism is irrelevant to us. What we must do is assume that the deviant individual is morally competent—in the absence of any specific excuse—and that our blame is, consequently, “fully justified” (that is, in so far as we retain confidence in the legitimacy of our own normative expectations of the agent).

I will leave it to the reader to decide whether Sie is successful in establishing her conclusions. In order to judge this one must follow the detailed and intricate set of arguments that are presented in the body of this book. Whatever the reader decides about this matter, I am sure that all readers will find that Sie’s discussion presents us with a challenging and fresh perspective on the contemporary free will debate.

Paul Russell
Department of Philosophy,
University of British Columbia,
Vancouver, BC, Canada.