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The Metaphysics of Free Will

Sarah Woods

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A Morally Consistent Character or Absolute Free Will: Which Should We Choose?

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” This Aristotelian notion of how to lead a virtuous life is one that philosophers and scholars alike have respected and praised for centuries. Consistency in choosing the right path is the key to leading a fulfilling life, which is a notion many agree upon. While one person may hold Aristotelian notions of consistent excellence in character on a pedestal, this same person may also believe that in order for one to have free will and moral responsibility, one must have the ability at all times to choose A over B, and vice versa. This theory of absolute free will is called incompatibilism. Incompatibilists believe that one cannot have free will and moral responsibility if any of our actions are determined by our past. This leads one to realize that the Aristotelian incompatibilist is constantly at odds with himself. He cannot constantly pursue excellence because that would mean his actions are determined, and thus lacks free will and moral responsibility. Either the Aristotelian incompatibilist must concede his notions of character are much too stringent to maintain in reality, or he must accept that one can still have free will and moral responsibility while determinism exists. I will assert that it is much more important to change our conception of freedom from “absolute without any limits” to “determined by the fixity of the past but still compatible with free will and moral responsibility.” The theory of pursuing a consistently excellent character should not be discarded simply because we cannot have absolute free will. I will draw from Aristotle’s views on moral

responsibility, character, ethics, and free will in order to defend my views on character. I will reference John Martin Fischer's The Metaphysics of Free Will to prove that determinism still allows for free will and moral responsibility. There are critics who believe that constantly pursuing a virtuous character is almost psychologically impossible due to environmental situations and overall human instinct. One of these is John Doris who wrote a book called Lack of Character, which analyzes whether Aristotelian notions of character are even possible when compared with moral psychological problems and facts. I will reference his book when providing counterexamples to Aristotelian notions of character. I will also be using arguments as counter examples from Fischer's work.

In order to better elaborate on my thesis, I shall break down my argument into premise form.

- 1) According to the Aristotle, free will and moral responsibility is determined by our character.
- 2) According to absolute free will (indeterminism), free actions cannot be determined in any fashion.
- 3) Therefore, you cannot endorse Aristotle's view, and also affirm absolute free will.
(1,2)
- 4) Aristotle's view is correct.
- 5) Therefore, the doctrine of incompatibilism is incorrect. (3,4)
- 6) Therefore, it is in our best interests to maintain the Aristotelian notion of character and change our notion of free will instead of holding onto an idealized notion of free will and discard consistency in character. (4,5)

I shall first tackle the Aristotelian notions that our free will and moral responsibility are determined by our character. I will then acknowledge John Doris' theories on character and moral psychology which declare that it is virtually impossible to maintain an Aristotelian character. In response to Doris, I shall consult Gavin Lawrence's essay on Aristotle and moral psychology, which defends that the weakness of character stems from a lack of maturity. Then, I shall move on to expound on the different versions of free will. In a separate argument for Premise 5, I shall demonstrate how incompatibilism fails, and then defend that compatibilism is the most practical and reasonable form of freedom that still allows for free will and moral responsibility. Finally, I will compare Aristotle's views of free will to compatibilism to demonstrate how a limited version of free will still leads to a flourishing life.

In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle elaborates on how we can determine if someone is morally responsible for his actions. He begins the discussion by addressing how blameworthiness and praiseworthiness is based on virtue or lack of virtue, whether they are compelled or not.¹ While this is true in many different situations, there are also situations in which how virtuous an act is is conversely related to blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. For example, if a woman used self defense against her attacker and killed him. She would be ultimately morally responsible for his death, but others would praise her for saving herself. It is clear then that moral responsibility can be mutually exclusive from blameworthiness and praiseworthiness in certain situations. Aristotle, though, shows that it can be hard discerning between a good and evil action due to the burden of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness it carries :

¹ Terrence Irwin and Gail Fine, *Aristotle: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 228.

“It is sometimes hard, however, to judge what <goods> should be chosen at the price of what <evils>, and what <evils> should be endured at the price of what <goods>. And it is even harder to abide by our judgement, since the results we expect <when we endure> are usually painful, and the actions we are compelled <to endure, when we choose> are usually shameful. That is why those who have been compelled or not compelled receive praise or blame.”²

This demonstrates how the the value of virtue is not directly correlated with blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. One should not let the burden of an action determine the value of it. One is morally responsible for all actions (except when coerced or manipulated), whether it is blameworthy or praiseworthy.

Aristotle also wants us to be held accountable at all times for our actions, but there can be some disagreement when it comes to ignorance. Actions done in ignorance and caused by ignorance are different according to Aristotle as well, for example someone who consciously becomes drunk, but lacks the control over their own conscious when drunk.³ But even if decision is out of ignorance, it is “the most proper to virtue”⁴ and should not be taken lightly:

“Decision, then, is apparently voluntary, but not the same as what is voluntary, which extends more widely. For children and the other animals share in what is voluntary, but not in decision; and the actions we do on the spur of the moment are said to be voluntary, but not to express decision.”⁵

² Terrence Irwin and Gail Fine, *Aristotle: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 229.

³ Ibid. 228

⁴ Ibid. 232

⁵ Terrence Irwin and Gail Fine, *Aristotle: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996). 232

Aristotle shows here that it is not just enough to have the ability to make decisions; it is about the intent behind them, which stems from one's character. Any animal can make a rash action, but decision itself requires logic and reasoning. Since Aristotle promotes using reasoning to express decision, this in itself determines our actions when deciding whether to choose A or B. If A is the more virtuous option, an Aristotelian would choose A every time, thus allowing ethical code to determine our future choices when it comes to decisions in ethics. To many, this would sound like a limiting life in the sense that one is bound to choosing A over B every time. Even though there is a limited sense of free will, the Aristotelian is still able to lead a flourishing life worth living.

Doris is one that would heavily disagree with the notion that it is even possible to have a consistent moral character. In the beginning of his work, Doris uses moral psychological situations to demonstrate that one's decisions cannot be purely based off of reasoning alone. He explains that much of our decision making is based off of situations and our own personalities.⁶ One aspect of our personality is especially devastating for philosophers:

"Imagine my crippling shyness prevents my friendliness from being expressed and assume, as seems plausible, the same class of eliciting conditions is relevant to each trait; I have the disposition to friendliness, but the conditional would be false, because my shyness would cripple my friendliness... The burden of proof lies with someone attributing friendliness in the face of repeated failures to act friendly, while someone asserting the opposite view occupies an enviable rhetorical position."⁷

⁶ John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13

⁷ John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16

Doris posits a devastating argument against Aristotle's notions of character. I shall outline it in premise form for clarity:

- 1) To show that one is a morally conscious person, one must perform morally conscious acts.
- 2) A characteristic such as shyness can keep one from performing morally conscious acts.
- 3) Therefore, one cannot truly be morally conscious if they cannot perform morally conscious acts.

Well, as Doris points out, Aristotle does assert that it is one's activity as a virtuous person that is paramount, not the foundation itself.⁸ Unfortunately, this poses another separate problem: what is more important, the actions themselves or the intent and conscious decision making behind them? Would it be any worse if an innately selfish person saved someone's life only in order to make themselves look better? The consequentialist, whom only looks at actions themselves to determine morality, would say that only the action itself leading to saving a life would matter in this incident and would deem the selfish person virtuous. The deontologist, whom analyzes the objectives behind actions to determine morality, on the other hand would deem the action as not completely moral, since the intent behind it was not virtuous in nature. The deontologist would even go as far to say that the virtuous act itself would not have been performed if it did not make the selfish person look better to others, or if there was no kind of benefit for them from saving someone's life. Opposed from both consequentialism and deontology, Aristotle actually proposes a third different view called Virtue Theory:

⁸ Ibid, 17

“[Virtue Theory] deemphasizes rules, consequences and particular acts and places the focus on the kind of person who is acting. The issue is not primarily whether an intention is right, though that is important; nor is it primarily whether one is following the correct rule; nor is it primarily whether the consequences of action are good, though these factors are not irrelevant. What is primary is whether the person acting is expressing good character (moral virtues) or not.”⁹

This is important to consider because this actually helps support Doris’ argument in a way. If one is never able to express good character in their actions, then no one would know that they had a good character. Aristotle’s Virtue Theory leans more towards consequentialism than deontology. While in most situations I consider myself a consequentialist, having that virtuous foundation is definitely important when choosing A over B. Having that solid morality within ourselves is the only way we can consistently choose the more virtuous choice, despite character traits and situations.

In Gavin Lawrence’s essay Acquiring Character: Becoming a Grown-Up, Lawrence acknowledges that through Aristotle’s ethics, character is not necessarily something one is born with. Character requires maturity and consistency in action. If one is not able to maintain a good character, they are seen as immature and lacking of self control.¹⁰ This sense of character control changes one from just a reactionary being into a cognisant and reason driven individual:

“This is a transition (i) from attraction to evaluation, from acting and reacting simply ‘as we like’, with, or out of, pleasure and pain, to acting as we think fit, fine, and

⁹ Dr. Garrett, “Virtue Ethics,” Virtue Theory, last modified November 28, 2005, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://people.wku.edu/jan.garrett/ethics/virtthry.htm>.

¹⁰ Michael Pakaluk and Giles Pearson, Author: Gavin Lawrence, *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle: Acquiring Character: Becoming Grown-Up* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 237.

valuable; (ii) a transition from the rough and ready responses of nature and basic habituated practice to the more finely attuned, more situationally contoured, imaginative and creative, responses of reason-imbued sensitivities...”¹¹

This demonstrates that establishing character is not only about striving to pursue virtue. It is also about, in a sense, becoming more human by developing reasoning. The transitions one undergoes from no foundations to moral foundations comes with the benefits of imagination and creativity along with thinking logically and reasonably. Thus, one should not disregard Aristotle’s notions of character just because moral psychology shows that situations and personality traits can affect one’s actions contrary to their true character foundation. Developing a solid moral foundation within one’s self and pursuing the utmost good is of the highest importance in order to mature as a human being, even if we are prone to being swayed by our surroundings.

Since I have effectively expounded on the foundations of Aristotle’s notions of character and engaged the moral psychological counterexamples, I shall next take into account John Martin Fischer’s The Metaphysics of Free Will in order to properly elaborate on free will and what it means when we say “absolute free will.” There are three main theories on free will that effectively cover the whole range of possibilities: hard determinism, compatibilism, and libertarianism. Hard determinism is the extreme case of free will in which all of our actions are dictated by our past and character, so one has no sense of free will, and little sense of moral responsibility. Compatibilism is the middle ground in which determinism still exists, but one still has the ability to choose A over B if they have a second order desire to do so. For example, one is still able to conquer their addiction to cocaine if they have a stronger personal desire to be a good

¹¹ Ibid. 237

role model for their children. While determinism does guide one towards one option, there is still that sense of free will and moral responsibility in compatibilism since the other options can still be chosen. Libertarianism, or absolute free will, is the most liberal in the free will spectrum. Determinism does not exist to libertarians, and alternate possibilities are necessary for moral responsibility and free will, so we are able to fully freely choose A or B with no restrictions.

Randomness and luck are big factors that many criticize indeterminism for. If a indeterminist were to make a choice between a virtue and a vice, he would have to flip a coin in order to allow for alternative possibilities, even if the indeterminist were a virtuous person. How is one suppose to live a flourishing life if it is simply based on luck that one does the right thing? Even though there are such devastating claims against incompatibilism, Peter van Inwagen is one philosopher that still believes that if determinism existed, then we would have no free will whatsoever. van Inwagen believes that determinism cannot be in effect if someone wants to answer the phone, but calls into doubt his own free will and thus refuses to answer the phone, even though he reasonably should answer.¹² Fischer though makes the claim that:

“(1) the agent can generate the a desire of the second sort, (2) he can try and act on this desire, and (3) and if the agent were to try to act on this sort of desire, he would succeed, the the agent can (during the relevant temporal period) refrain from answering the phone, even though he lacks any desire to do other than answer the phone.”¹³

Fischer shows that even if the person is determined in their first order desire to answer the phone, he can still refrain from answering the phone if we have the second order

¹² John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1994), 52

¹³ *Ibid*, 52

desire. In this way, one can still have moral responsibility and free will, even though determinism is in effect. One does not necessarily need to give up the notion of determinism in order to have a sense of free will and moral responsibility.

Most people seem to hold the incompatibilist view, but after a closer look into compatibilism, it seems to be the most reasonable form of free will. Why is this? It seems to be that most people do not have a full concept of free will when they talk about it or think about it. It is a common occurrence for one to think initially that it is better to have as many options as possible, so absolute free will is the most ideal theory. But, indeterminism itself, once studied on an academic level, is quickly seen as not the ideal theory. Indeterminism does not allow for any factors of the past to affect our decision making, even though it is common knowledge that in order to be reasonable, logical persons, we must consult the past in order to lead a flourishing life and not make the same mistake twice. And hard determinism is too strict with decision making, so it is hard for most to see how one can have free will and moral responsibility when they can only choose A over B. Thus, it is the most reasonable to choose compatibilism as the most sensible form of free will.

As I have shown thus far, the notion of Aristotelian character and incompatibilism are not compatible with one another. One must choose either to believe absolute free will or a consistently moral character is a better one to pursue. As I have previously stated before, I hold that it is much more important to pursue an Aristotelian notion of character and have a limited sense of free will (in the form of compatibilism). Next, I shall expand on how compatibilism allows us the amount of free will and moral responsibility we need in order to lead fulfilling lives.

One of the ways compatibilists are able to show that one still has moral responsibility through determinism is by giving Frankfurt-type examples. One of the most famous Frankfurt examples is Locke's example. Locke describes a group of friends in a room and how they are enjoying their time together in a room. Unbeknownst to them, a mysterious figure locks the door while they are together. They are not aware of this, and do not wish to leave the room, so they stay of their own free will and continue to spend time together. When they get up to leave, the mysterious figure unlocks the door, and they are able to leave the room with no knowledge they were locked inside of it the whole time. These types of examples in which the agent has guidance control (control over their own actions) but lacks regulative control (control over the whole situation itself) demonstrate that one still has enough free will and control in order to have moral responsibility. Fischer expounds on Frankfurt examples later in his book:

"The Frankfurt-type cases, unusual as they are, may well point us to something as significant as it is mundane. When we are morally responsible for our actions, we *do* possess a kind of control. So the traditional assumption of the association of moral responsibility (and personhood) with control is quite correct. But it need not be the sort of control that involves alternate possibilities."¹⁴

As demonstrated through these examples, Fischer is able to prove that it is not the overall control of events that necessarily makes one morally responsible, but the control over the agent's own actions that makes one morally culpable.

Many incompatibilists would object to the Frankfurt examples based on the fact that it seems as though the agent still does not have any control over his situation. For

¹⁴ John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1994),133

instance, the mysterious figure is in control the whole time, so the agent technically cannot leave the room if the mysterious figure does not allow him to. Fischer introduces the counter theory “the flicker of freedom strategy”, originally formulated by libertarians, in order to demonstrate how the agent really does have moral responsibility with only guidance control.¹⁵ Fischer details four different versions of this theory, but I shall only expound on the first one. Fischer describes a scenario in which Jones is a free agent and Black is the one with the regulative control.¹⁶ Jones freely chooses to vote for Clinton over Bush, and Black does not interfere with this decision making because he wants him to vote for Clinton. But, if Black even for a second thinks or exposes in some way that he wants to vote for Bush instead, then Black will immediately interfere.

Fischer continues:

“But again a flicker emerges, for even here Jones has the power to show the relevant sign - to blush red or display the complex neurophysiological pattern, and so forth. And it is hard to see how a Frankfurt-type example could be constructed which would have absolutely *no* such flicker. ... Thus, it appears that, no matter how sophisticated the Frankfurt-type example, if one traces “backward” far enough, one will find a flicker of freedom.”¹⁷

Fischer defends that this is a weak argument from libertarians, since it is hard to even spot the “flicker of freedom”. One must remember that Frankfurt examples are meant to demonstrate that one still has moral responsibility even in the most extreme cases. We all hope that there really is not a mysterious figure controlling our every action. Overall though, the Frankfurt-type examples definitely do demonstrate how we can still be

¹⁵ Ibid. 134

¹⁶ Ibid. 136

¹⁷ John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1994). 136

morally responsible even if we do not have free will (in the sense of having alternate possibilities).

Thus far I have elaborated on all the main spectrums of free will and have shown the best and most reasonable method is compatibilism. Now, I shall demonstrate how Aristotle's own views of free will line up with causal determinism and compatibilism. In Anthony Kenny's work Aristotle's Theory of the Will, Kenny analyzes different aspects of free will in accordance with Aristotle's own works. He first focuses on the issue of voluntariness in Eudemian Ethics. Kenny begins with Aristotle addressing, "We are praised for virtue, we are praised for what we are responsible for or cause, we cause voluntary actions, so let us investigate voluntariness."¹⁸ Aristotle then continues to use geometry and math to show that principles are caused by consequential properties.¹⁹ This alone demonstrates how Aristotle believed that forms of causal determinism were in fact in effect. But, Aristotle did in fact believe in some things resting on luck:

"Either reading, it seems to me, is an expression of something which Aristotle believed: some things depend on men, in the sense of being within the competence of human nature, without being contingent in the sense of avoidable; and some things are contingent without being the results of human intervention: e.g. matters of luck."²⁰

Aristotle understood that certain factors in the world were beyond our control. This view of the world and voluntariness lines up very well with compatibilism, which demonstrates that one can pursue virtuous actions within their guidance control and lead a flourishing life while lacking regulative control.

¹⁸ Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 4

¹⁹ Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). 4-5

²⁰ Ibid. 7

In conclusion, it is much more important to develop and pursue a consistently good character, as exemplified by Aristotle's ethics, and appreciate the limited amount of free will we have rather than disregard the notion of Aristotelian character for the sake of absolute free will. As I iterated before, absolute free will is not what most people understand it to be. Most do not understand how randomized our choices would be if we decided to believe in having absolute free will. Logical reasoning altogether would be thrown out the window. As also defended previously, building and having a virtuous character is not all about demonstrating it all the time. It is part of the growth of a human being when it comes to emotional and logical maturity. One can still have a virtuous character and make situational or personality driven mistakes sometimes. This does not take away from their growth into a mature, reasoning person. Much like pursuing a morally consistent character, accepting a limited version of free will does not limit one from cultivating a flourishing life. One does not need full control over both the guidance and regulative controls in order to be morally responsible. One only needs guidance control in order to have moral responsibility, and as demonstrated before, compatibilism allows us this. At the end of the day, in order to lead fulfilling lives, it is of the utmost importance to pursue always the more virtuous path, even if in this goal we are determined to do so.

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Description of Revisions:

- 1) I clarified certain points throughout the paper, such as making an outline of Doris' argument and ignorance when drunk.
- 2) I did small edits such as cutting out certain sections you said to cut out.
- 3) I fixed my error of not giving the libertarians' credit for the "flicker of freedom" theory.
- 4) I did the small edit to one of the footnote bibliographies.