

Free Will: A Pseudo-Problem? Schlick on a Longstanding Metaphysical and Ethical Debate

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Abstract

Free will, famously described by David Hume as “the most contentious question of metaphysics, the most contentious science”, has long been a subject of intense debate, particularly regarding its compatibility with a deterministic universe and its implications for ethical questions, notably moral responsibility. Moritz Schlick, a leading figure in the Vienna Circle and the neopositivist movement, challenges the validity of this debate, asserting that it arises from linguistic and semantic confusions surrounding terms like ‘freedom’, ‘determinism’, and ‘will’. Reflecting the neopositivist disdain for metaphysics and normative ethics, Schlick posits that once these concepts are properly defined, the problem of free will dissolves, though addressing it may be necessary when discussing moral and legal responsibility. This paper aims to elucidate Schlick’s perspective on free will and responsibility, placing it within the early 20th-century debate, and highlighting his efforts to reconcile these concepts with the principles of physics while avoiding theoretical ambiguities.

Keywords: Free will, Laws of nature, Moral responsibility, Moritz Schlick, Role of ethics.

1. Introduction

Free will—described by David Hume (1975: 95) as “the most contentious question of metaphysics, the most contentious science”—has been the subject of a longstanding debate. As those familiar with metaphysical and ethical controversies know, the debate centers on whether free will is compatible with a universe governed by deterministic laws, thereby grounding moral responsibility for action. However, not everyone agrees that this is a genuine philosophical issue. According to Moritz Schlick, a key figure in the Vienna Circle and the neopositivist movement (Stadler 2001; Uebel and Limbeck-Lilienau 2022), the question of free will—despite its prominence in the Western philosophical tradition—is a false problem. It arises from linguistic and semantic misunderstandings, and overall vagueness surrounding concepts such as ‘freedom’, ‘determinism’, and ‘will’.

Once the correct meanings of these concepts are fully clarified, the problem would dissolve rather than being solved.

In fact, as indicated by the title of a section (*The Pseudo-Problem of Freedom of the Will*) in the seventh chapter (*When is a Man Responsible?*) of his *Problems of Ethics* (*Fragen der Ethik*) (1939),¹ Schlick shares the typical neopositivist aversion to traditional metaphysical problems, which he views as centuries-old sandcastles. In the same period, Carnap famously quips, after all, that metaphysicians are comparable to musicians without musical talent (1931), while Wittgenstein argues that problems related to the world as a totality are meaningless, as the world itself is not a fact but a collection of facts manifested in language (1922: 2.04, 5.6).²

As an heir and innovator of a tradition that includes Hume among its modern predecessors, Schlick thus expresses a natural skepticism towards a *vexata quaestio* that remains unresolved because it is fundamentally ill-posed: the sheer volume of discourse on this topic over the centuries is indeed, in Schlick's view, "one of the greatest scandals of philosophy" (1939: 143).

As the general title of the chapter suggests, the real target of Schlick's discussion of free will, which is described as a necessary but somewhat unwelcome part of the conversation, is the concept of responsibility—still intricately entangled with free will in contemporary debates (Bonicalzi 2019):

The concept of responsibility constitutes our theme, and if in the process of its clarification I also must speak of the concept of freedom I shall, of course, say only what others have already said better; consoling myself with the thought that in this way alone can anything be done to put an end at last to that scandal (Schlick 1939: 144).

In this respect, Schlick's inquiry aims to elucidate the nexus between determinism and responsibility (both moral and legal) while crafting a theoretical framework that strives to attend to the subtleties of language, align with the principles of physics, and remain impervious to theoretical ambiguities. However, while briefly discussing early 20th-century physics advancements, the arguments presented by Schlick more significantly echo those employed by the British empiricist thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries, with a particular emphasis on Hume, as one might expect.

Although many of the theoretical principles that inspired the philosophy of the Vienna Circle have been abandoned, Schlick's discussion of free will and responsibility remains a model of conceptual clarity. As we will see, the book also lays the groundwork for ongoing discussions on topics such as the role of ethics and the justification (consequentialist versus retributivist) of punishment. The aim of this paper is to elucidate Schlick's views on free will and responsibility, contextualizing them within the related debates of the early 20th century and the framework of his *Problems of Ethics*. Additionally, the present contribution will highlight some of the intersections of Schlick's ideas with contemporary debates on these topics.

¹ The quotes are from the American edition of the *Fragen der Ethik* (1930), published in New York in 1939, with the title *Problems of Ethics*.

² The quotes are from the British edition of the *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung* (1921), published in London in 1922, with the title *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

2. The Role of Ethics

From the outset of the *Problems of Ethics*, Schlick makes it clear that just as the general task of philosophy is to clarify the content of scientific propositions rather than to become a science itself, the primary aim of ethics should be to uncover and illustrate the meaning of moral judgments, thereby helping to explain human behavior from a psychological perspective—in a spirit that both methodologically and substantively aligns with current trends in philosophical and empirical moral psychology (Doris 2010).

However, while moral psychology is now typically regarded, and rightly so, as just one branch of ethics, Schlick adopts a more radical position, asserting that the *main* task of ethics as a discipline is to provide an answer to the question “‘Why does man act morally?’” (1939: 30):³

And here lies the proper task of ethics. Here are the remarkable facts which excite philosophic wonder, and whose explanation has always been the final goal of ethical inquiry. That man actually approves of certain actions, declares certain dispositions to be ‘good’, appears not at all self-explanatory to the philosopher, but often very astonishing, and he therefore asks his ‘Why?’ Now, in all of the natural sciences every explanation can be conceived as a causal explanation, a truth which we need not prove here; therefore the ‘why’ has the sense of a question concerning the cause of that psychical process in which man makes a valuation, establishes a moral claim (1939: 25).

In other words, ethics shall not be framed any further as producing a set of action-guiding normative principles (ethics, indeed, “creates neither the concept nor the objects which fall under the concept” (1939: 3) and the moral philosopher should not turn into a ‘moralist’ (1939: 2))—which would merely amount to unverifiable pseudo-propositions (1939: 2)—, but rather as a theoretical endeavor: “ethics is a system of knowledge and nothing else; its only goal is the truth” (1939: 1).

The main role of ethics is thus to elucidate and describe the necessary behavioral laws to which all entities are subject, assuming that they adhere to the principles of universal causality. It achieves this explanatory target by detailing the causal connections that govern human behavior, thereby aiming to function in a scientific manner. An example of such causal connections is provided by the so-called ‘law of motivation’, which states that when an individual is faced with different options, “the decision of the will proceeds in the direction of the most pleasant end-in-view” (1939: 38).⁴

This principle does not merely reflect a simplistic adherence to hedonistic values; rather, it seeks to mirror the fundamental mechanisms regulating behavior, including acts of self-sacrifice, where an individual might forgo their own immediate pleasure for the benefit of another, finding such a sacrifice more appealing. Schlick illustrates this with the case of a child who gives up a larger piece of

³ While Schlick harbors doubts about normative ethics, his interests also encompass metaethical issues, including classic philosophical questions such as the meaning of ‘moral’ (1939: 79–99) or the existence of absolute values (1939: 100–119).

⁴ Regarding the difference between laws and rules of behavior, see Schlick 1939: 41. To underscore Schlick’s modernity, the notion that moral psychology serves to unveil the causal laws of motivation that underpin behavior remains pivotal in contemporary discourse. This is particularly evident in discussions exploring whether moral judgments and actions are driven by reasons or emotions (see e.g., Prinz 2008).

cake to offer it to another. In such cases, what superficially appears to be a less pleasant choice is linked to a range of emotionally charged mental states (such as thinking of a friend's disappointment if they were given the smaller piece). Therefore, opting for the seemingly less convenient choice may actually be—due to more nuanced factors beyond those captured by straightforward hedonistic considerations—the most pleasant choice, thus validating the law of motivation (1939: 42).

Challenging the Kantian division between the laws of nature and human freedom, Schlick thus establishes a more direct link between the realm of physics—the epitome of scientific rigor and empirical reliability—and the moral world as they are both governed by causal laws. Moral philosophers who attempt to isolate the moral from the natural realm, as if the two could be governed by distinct and irreconcilable systems of laws, are fundamentally mistaken, as this distinction lacks any valid foundation.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that while Schlick follows Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in understanding philosophy as a clarificatory activity,⁵ he diverges from him on the notion of 'laws of nature'. For Schlick, the laws of nature, as universal statements without precise references to space or time, cannot be directly empirically verified. However, their validity can be supported by the criterion of empirical verifiability. According to this criterion, a sentence expressing a law of nature must allow for the prediction of new data (Schlick 1948), including the future behavior of individuals in the case of human actions.

A notorious and significant limitation of Schlick's verificationism emerges here: a single empirical 'verification' or even multiple 'verifications' are insufficient to establish the universal validity of a law. Therefore, one should either refrain from considering the laws of nature as (universally valid) scientific statements or abandon the principle of verification altogether. Instead of being directly verifiable, the laws of nature may, however, serve as a model for individual statements (as rules through which such statements can be derived, primarily by scientists), which are more appropriately targeted by the verification process (Alai 1998: 120; Boniolo and Vidali 2003: 139–141).

For Wittgenstein, laws, regularities, and causal connections pertain instead to the domain of logic. Causality and the like—conceived of as the possibility of knowing future actions—do not pertain to the physical world, which is a totality of atomic facts: future facts cannot be inferred from present ones and the principle of causality has no specific role to play: "The events of the future cannot be inferred from those of the present. Superstition is the belief in the causal nexus" (Wittgenstein 1922: 5.1361) and "A necessity for one thing to happen because another has happened does not exist. There is only logical necessity" (Wittgenstein 1922: 6.37). In this respect, while the way we conceptualize the world is causally structured, this does not imply that the world is actually causally structured.⁶

⁵ "The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. The result of philosophy is not a number of philosophical propositions, but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred" (Wittgenstein 1922: 4.112).

⁶ This understanding of causality is reminiscent of Hume, but Wittgenstein might be closer to the Kantian idea of the necessity of a form that shapes and structures our knowledge (see Voltolini 2006).

In the second phase of his thought, Wittgenstein advances further in this direction, returning more poignantly to themes he had previously addressed only marginally. For Hume (1978), the experience of causal relations is needed to draw inferences about the nexus between causes and effects. For Wittgenstein, this experience is not even needed to the extent that the tendency to look for causal relationships is rooted in the spontaneous linguistic game of cause and effect. We instinctively react to a first event by considering it the cause of another event, without this tendency necessarily being supported by repeated experiences (1989; 2009; see Voltolini 2006).

Regarding the issue of free will, while Schlick maintains that the natural and human worlds must be homogeneous, Wittgenstein aligns more closely with Kant (compared to Hume) in supporting the distinction (*grammatical*, not real) between the two realms. In his *A Lecture on the Freedom of the Will* (1989), as in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserts that the causal model is just one among various types of explanations, while free will can be justified by referring to different systems. Both the determinist and the indeterminist models can be valid insofar as neither necessarily applies to the world, but both are foundational to its description: we can opt for the former when referring to the physical universe and for the latter when discussing the moral character of actions, which are subject to rewards and punishments. Depending on the grammar we choose, an action can be conceived of as free or unfree, as in the well-known example of the puppet, deceived into believing in its autonomy while being covertly directed:

We talk of making decisions. Is there a case in which we would actually say that a man thought he decided, but actually didn't decide? In a prison you are normally locked in, said not to be free. I am in this room, free to go wherever I please. Suppose in the room below, there is a man, and he has certain people with him, and he says: 'Look, I can make W. go exactly where I want.' He has a mechanism, and he regulates it with a crank, and you see (with a mirror) that I walk exactly as the man wants me to. Then someone comes up to me and says 'Were you dragged about? Were you free?' I say: 'Of course. I was free'. Actually, there are cases which come pretty near to this. Man who could make someone choose the card he wanted him to choose. This is of course a primitive case. Everyone would say he chose freely, and everyone would say he made him choose what he wanted him to choose. People would say that the man in room above thought he was free, and actually did any damn thing people below wanted him to do (Wittgenstein 1989: 90).

The puppet can be described as free or unfree depending on the grammar we choose. This does not detract from the fact that, if we were to discover that all actions are predictable (as mentioned, in the *Tractatus*, freedom was defined as the impossibility of foreseeing future actions), we should abandon the grammar of freedom in favor of another one (Voltolini 2006).

3. Free Will as a Pseudo-Problem

The Schlickian chapter of the *Problems of Ethics* from which we began does not aim to prove the truth (or falsity) of determinism but rather to emphasize that the validity of any science must assume the principle of causation. This principle, equivalent to the existence of necessary laws, cannot be proven but must be assumed in the practices through which we organize the world. This is especially true if we consider the possibility of a science of human behavior in the form of

descriptive or explanatory ethics. Therefore, to explain moral behaviors, we must assume that psychological events are governed by the principle of causality, in the form of psychological laws.

In the early days of quantum mechanics—especially referring to the Copenhagen interpretation, which asserts its intrinsic indeterminacy—, it was specifically the principle of deterministic causation that was under scrutiny. In this context, Schlick argues that even indeterminacy at the quantum level does not preclude the acceptance of the causal principle but simply reduces the probability of making correct predictions: one must not fall into the fallacy of believing that freedom can be safeguarded through references to quantum indeterminacy, nor should one succumb to the erroneous dichotomy between freedom and deterministic causation. The misconception that determinism is incompatible with freedom primarily stems from a misunderstanding of terms such as ‘freedom’ and ‘responsible’. This issue can be resolved by redefining these terms accurately. Hume (1975), indeed, already astutely observed that many metaphysical quandaries arise from the misuse of language, which has fueled centuries of philosophical debate.

If I may digress slightly, in more contemporary discourse, the issue of free will tends to be regarded as a profound philosophical problem rather than simply a matter of linguistic misunderstanding. Nevertheless, echoes of the Humean and Schlickian skepticism persist, cautioning us against falling into conceptual traps. For example, scholars like Chalmers (2011) argue that by leaving the definitions of free will and responsibility ambiguous, both compatibilism and incompatibilism risk being reduced to mere superficial labels. In fact, central to the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists is their divergent interpretations of these concepts. This ambiguity suggests that discussions may continue without reaching substantive conclusions. For example, the question of whether free will and responsibility can coexist remains tangled in vague interpretations of these notions.

In this respect, following in the footsteps of the Scottish philosopher and influenced by the empirical spirit of the Vienna Circle, Schlick endeavors to achieve a clarity that eliminates obscure and misused metaphysical concepts from philosophical discourse, including notions like ‘I’ or ‘consciousness’. Yet, it becomes evident to a contemporary reader that Schlick, while echoing early Wittgenstein in deeming the question of free will a pseudo-problem, does not entirely forsake metaphysics; instead, he proposes a solution that bears a striking resemblance to Hume’s, so much so that he is often cited among those compatibilists enumerated by van Inwagen (1983: 13), and with good reason. Besides, Schlick acknowledges his debt to the Humean thought when he writes: “this pseudo-problem has long since been settled by the efforts of certain sensible persons; and, above all, the state of affairs just described has been often disclosed with exceptional clarity by Hume” (1939: 143).

Specifically, Schlick aims to dismantle the argument that if determinism holds, then all events, including human volition, are governed solely by the laws of nature, thus negating free will and responsibility. In essence, for those who could be termed, before the term was coined, ‘incompatibilists’, the concept of ‘responsibility’ presupposes the freedom of will: if individual choices were

inexorably determined by deterministic forces, notably the laws of nature, then our agency over our actions would be nullified.⁷

According to Schlick, the possible truth of determinism is no obstacle to the existence of free will. The incompatibilist stance harbors, in fact, a dual fallacy. Firstly, it misconstrues the essence of the concept of 'law of nature', erroneously conflating it with the notion of 'law' as it appears in legal statutes. Societies enforce compliance through sanctions, aiming to reconcile individual inclinations with legal statutes and suppress divergent behaviors. Conversely, within the scientific realm, the term 'law' denotes factual descriptions devoid of prescriptive mandates or coercive implications. In other words, it pertains to the realm of the 'is' rather than the 'ought'. Hume further underscores the perils of terminological ambiguity: the concept of 'necessity', particularly concerning the laws of nature, appears to insinuate the presence of force and compulsion. These elements, however, are imperceptible to us when we undertake actions that we consider free (Hume 1978).

If the conflation arises from the use of the same term, it is our usage of it in different linguistic contexts that makes it evident how we habitually, even if unconsciously, do not actually overlook this distinction. For instance, nobody would think that celestial mechanics dictate to planets the laws by which they must move; rather, they simply describe a certain state of affairs (or, we might say, construct a model of it).⁸ Similarly, according to Schlick, the psychological laws that govern the will should be understood in the same vein, akin to the laws of nature rather than the civil laws. It should also be evident that individuals' natural desires are not the products of a coercive mechanism but function akin to the movement of planets—on a similar note, Dennett writes that “a jail without a jailer is not a jail” to illustrate that when individuals are determined by impersonal forces, true coercion does not exist (1984: 8).⁹

The tendency to anthropomorphize the natural laws fosters the second fallacy that Schlick seeks to rectify. This consists in the erroneous idea that universal validity implies irrefutable compulsion when, in truth, universality denotes the absence of exceptions rather than the presence of some form of compelling compulsion. Schlick's confidence in the power of the clarificatory process leads him to believe that if the distinction between these spheres were delineated, misunderstandings would simply evaporate. While this process is unlikely to suffice, as evidenced by the ongoing debate on free will and responsibility, matters are

⁷ More precisely, Schlick's efficacious rendition of the standard incompatibilist argument can be paraphrased as follows: if determinism is true, meaning all events follow unchangeable laws, then my will is also determined by my innate character and motives. Consequently, my decisions are inevitable rather than free. If this is the case, I am not responsible for my actions because accountability would require the ability to influence my decisions, which I do not possess. My decisions necessarily arise from my character and motives, neither of which I control; my motives are external, and my character is shaped by inherent tendencies and external influences throughout my life. Therefore, determinism and moral responsibility are incompatible. Moral responsibility requires freedom, meaning exemption from causality (1939: 146).

⁸ See also Wittgenstein 1989: 85: “To say that the natural law in some way compels the things to go as they do is in some way an absurdity”.

⁹ And it would be difficult not to mention here the famous Humean definition of freedom, which is “a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may”. This kind of freedom is “universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains” (1975: 8.23/95).

further complicated by the conflation of meanings extending to the antonyms—i.e., ‘indeterminism’ or ‘acausality’—of such notions. True freedom, in its authentic sense, has nothing to do with the notion of ‘exemption from the causal principle’ or ‘exemption from the laws of nature’, which would entail liberation from causality and the natural laws (Schlick 1939: 149). Therefore, grounding freedom on immunity from such laws leads to the fallacious belief that proving indeterminism is necessary for preserving freedom. Conversely, the type of freedom essential for upholding human responsibility, which bridges theoretical deliberations on determinism or indeterminism with ethical considerations, operates within the realm of practical conduct, which is intricately entwined with moral issues.

While Hume made a pertinent distinction between ‘indeterminism’ and ‘freedom’ (1978), his usage of the term ‘freedom’ interchangeably for both the will and conduct (or action) inadvertently muddied the waters of the debate. According to the refined Humean perspective, which Schlick revisits, only freedom of conduct is unequivocally attributable to the agent, and this alone forms the basis for moral and legal responsibility. This freedom of conduct finds its logical antithesis in ‘compulsion’, which, if present, would nullify the agent’s accountability.

However, the configuration of this freedom of conduct raises pertinent questions. One might wonder whether this notion adequately captures our conventional understanding of freedom, or if it appears so counterintuitive compared to common sense that it becomes uninteresting. Additionally, can freedom, conceived of as the mere absence of compulsion in the tradition of Hobbes and Hume, align with our intuitive moral and legal sensibilities regarding free will and responsibility, or must these intuitions be discarded as illusory?

From both moral and legal perspectives, as Schlick suggests, a free individual is one who encounters no impediments in realizing their desires. Besides, the notion that free will and accountability originate from an individual’s capacity to act by their own volition is a recurring theme found in the works of numerous authors, ranging—just to mention a few well-known names—from Hobbes (Hobbes and Bramhall 1999) to Frankfurt (1971), representing a significant strand within contemporary compatibilism (Bonicalzi 2019). Schlick further highlights how the existence of intermediate scenarios between freedom and compulsion lends additional credence to this thesis: society typically deems someone responsible for a crime committed under drug influence if the drug was consumed voluntarily, whereas actions of individuals with mental deficiencies (internal compulsion) tend to be viewed as less culpable.

This leads, however, to a further inquiry, one which Schlick does not shy away from: what precisely is meant by ‘responsibility’? In what circumstances, beyond those already outlined, can we legitimately assign responsibility to an agent? From a legal standpoint, the issue of responsibility is intricately linked with that of punishment. Indeed, the notion of current or historical responsibility, akin to ‘accountability’ as discussed by Gary Watson and “in which one individual or group is held by another to certain expectations or demands” (Watson 1996: 235), must be carefully determined in anticipation of future repercussions.

Schlick argues that a truly civilized society cannot find the justification for punishment in the primal desire for revenge against alleged wrongdoing. The notion that increasing pain can somehow result in something good through further infliction of pain is surrounded by an almost barbaric aura. Conversely, Schlick understands and justifies punishment as an educational tool that serves to guide

and shape the motivations underlying behavior, to prevent the repetition of an act (by the same agent) and encourage different behavioral determinations (in other agents). In advocating this perspective—consequentialist and forward-looking—, Schlick outlines an approach to punishment opposing standard retributive conceptions. This viewpoint is still upheld by those, who, on various grounds, defend analogously forward-looking justifications of punishment, valuing aspects such as reconciliation, societal security, and the offender's reintegration into society (Caruso and Pereboom 2022).¹⁰

When the focus shifts to the individual perpetrating the act, the pertinent question becomes: who is the correct target of punishment (or reward)? The challenge lies not in uncovering the initial causal factors of the act—whether it be the family or social environment—but in identifying the individual in whom the decisive conjunction of causes culminates. Schlick maintains that this problem is solved once an agent is identified as the appropriate locus for the motivations behind the action (“the one upon whom the motive must have acted” (1939: 152)), being an apt target of either punishment or reward. To strengthen the intuitiveness of his forward-looking take on responsibility and punishment, Schlick further contends that the reluctance to punish those afflicted by mental deficiencies stems from the futility of attempting to modify their conduct through promises or threats. Thus, blame is not directed at those under threat but at those who impose the threat, as it is their behavior that society seeks to influence and alter for future societal harmony.

A fascinating aspect of Schlick's perspective on responsibility revolves around the connection between one's subjective sense of responsibility and the concept of punishment. How does one consider the autonomous judgment that individuals pass upon themselves, feeling somehow deserving of punishment and censure? If punishment primarily serves an educational purpose, what significance does the sense of guilt hold for those who perceive themselves as having committed wrongful deeds? For proponents of the nexus between freedom and indeterminism, the individual's assessment of their actions stems from a subjective awareness of having acted freely, devoid of external compulsion, while spontaneously pursuing their innate desires.

The absence of external imposition and the capacity to choose otherwise in similar circumstances represent key aspects of free will and responsibility within the contemporary debate. Apart from the agent's *subjective* sense of acting freely, Schlick's stance on the agent possessing an *objective* 'capacity to do otherwise' closely mirrors that of George Edward Moore (1912). Moore notoriously writes that this capacity must be understood as meaning that the agent could have acted differently, but only if they had chosen to do so. Embracing Moore's interpretation, one views the requirement for the possibility of alternative actions as compatible with a deterministic universe, as the hypothetical conditionals would maintain their truth even if alternative choices were not actualized. Schlick, echoing Moore, argues that under identical conditions, the agent could have acted differently if alternative motives were present—namely if they desired something different.

¹⁰ Indeed, the contemporary debate on punishment continues to be dominated by the opposing viewpoints of retributivism and consequentialism. Retributivists advocate for justice restoration through punishment of those deemed deserving, while consequentialists prioritize maximizing general utility (Altman 2021). However, proponents argue that a *mixed* theory of punishment, which integrates constraints from negative retribution with principles of act utilitarianism, provides a more nuanced and justified approach (Hart 1968).

The subjective feeling that one could have made a different decision under the same circumstances provides scant insight into the theoretical inquiry regarding the validity of the principle of causality, as individual consciousness is not germane to the validation of principles:

How this indubitable experience ever came to be an argument in favor of indeterminism is incomprehensible to me. It is of course obvious that I should have acted differently had I willed something else; but the feeling never says that I could also have willed something else, even though this is true, if, that is, other motives had been present (Schlick 1939: 155).

Moreover, such a feeling or experience does not necessarily imply the absence of action-determining causes but rather encapsulates a subjective sense of freedom derived from the perception of being able to act by one's desires—desires that, as Hobbes previously noted (Hobbes and Bramhall 1999), are not inherently voluntary. In other words, the assertion 'I could have acted otherwise' conveys nothing beyond the notion that, given different motivations and in alignment with the laws of volition, alternative behavior could have ensued. In this respect, I assume responsibility for an action to the extent that my desires align with the motives that instigated it, i.e., I am the locus where the causes converge.

Schlick's aims to reframe the debate on free will, circumventing his adversaries by illustrating not only the compatibility of determinism with responsibility but also the impossibility of grounding responsibility otherwise; indeed, it could not be sustained in a universe deemed indeterministic. This argument, previously articulated by Hume and echoed in various forms throughout the 20th-century discourse (notoriously, by Hobart (1934)), posits that an indeterministic cosmos yields pure randomness, thus obliterating any semblance of responsibility.¹¹

Moreover, from a pragmatic perspective, in an indeterministic universe, the presumed connection between responsibility and punishment would disintegrate. Since regulating an individual's conduct requires influencing their motivations through incentives and penalties, such regulation would become illogical if the agent's choices lack a determinable cause. Thus far, we have construed an agent as responsible insofar as their conduct aligns with discernible motivations. Indeed, if an individual were to possess freedom—defined as conduct devoid of underlying reasons—they might find themselves in a position similar to someone subjected to compulsion, as they would lack mastery over their actions, which would not arise from internal motivations.

Though the agent's self-perception in this regard offers scant theoretical insight, they nonetheless feel varying degrees of responsibility contingent upon the motives animating their behavior—a sentiment echoed by societal assessments,

¹¹ Regarding Schlick's view that there are no alternatives to the dichotomy between randomness and determinism, Popper, a longstanding critic of the Vienna Circle, states "Hume's and Schlick's ontological thesis that there cannot exist anything intermediate between chance and determinism seems to me not only highly dogmatic (not to say doctrinaire) but clearly absurd; and it is understandable only on the assumption that they believed in a complete determinism in which chance has no status except as a symptom of our ignorance. (But even then it seems to me absurd, for there is, clearly, something like partial knowledge, or partial ignorance.)" (1972: 227). Similarly, in rejecting the dichotomy between randomness and determinism, contemporary debates on free will often acknowledge the possibility of probabilistic forms of causation (Clarke 2003).

evident in the allocation of rewards and punishments based on motives and reasons. Given that no one in daily life challenges the validity of the principle of cause, there exists no excuse for conflating freedom with a sort of willful impulse devoid of causality. However, while no alternative to the dichotomy between causality and randomness exists, this does not imply that we can furnish evidence for determinism beyond the arguments presented. Rather, it underscores the impossibility of applying the concept of responsibility to conduct without presupposing the practical validity of the principle of cause.

4. An Early Libertarian Rebuttal of Schlick's View on Free Will

Far from settling the dispute regarding causality and free will, Schlick's intervention sparked a robust rebuttal from philosophers who contended that the enduring quandaries of metaphysics could not be neatly resolved through mere analysis of semantic nuances but warranted, if anything, a reexamination in light of newly acquired theoretical tools. The crisis of logical neo-positivism, particularly the erosion of verificationism, served as a catalyst for reigniting discussions—both within the Anglo-Saxon sphere and beyond—around the conventional themes of metaphysics, ethics, and a plethora of questions transcending linguistic realms.

This trend is reflected in the contemporary state of the debate on free will and moral responsibility, which is further enriched by insights from the sciences of the mind (Bonicalzi and De Caro 2022). However, its roots extend back to the 1930s.

In this section, we will briefly examine an early rebuttal of Schlick's thesis. In 1938, C.A. Campbell, a scholar in Glasgow, published a volume, titled *In Defence of Free Will*, advocating not only the continuation of the debate on free will and responsibility but also a response aligned with traditional arguments favoring the incompatibility between determinism and freedom. In 1951, Campbell revisited the book's arguments with his article *Is Free Will a Pseudo-Problem?*, positioning himself—as indicated by the title—as a libertarian counterbalance to Schlick's theses.

According to Campbell, though the logical underpinnings of Viennese-style verificationism have long been scrutinized and largely discarded, the philosophical scandal lies in the persistence of the anti-metaphysical biases that once bolstered the neo-positivist tenets. In this respect, Campbell's critique goes beyond a mere repudiation of Schlick's logical premises, as he contends that an analysis of terms alone cannot suffice to resolve theoretical conundrums that, for thinkers like himself, transcend linguistic misunderstandings. While Campbell articulates a traditional defense of free will, his aim extends to a broader objective: refuting the reduction of metaphysical inquiries to pseudo-problems—a stance reminiscent also of Carnap's renowned *Scheinprobleme in der Philosophie* (1928).

Given this chosen battleground, the exploration of free will becomes an inevitable endpoint, particularly as Campbell regards it as the quintessential problem of philosophy—a sentiment shared by many who opposed the neo-positivists.¹² Campbell's critique of Schlick's text operates on two fronts: challenging its portrayal of free will as a pseudo-problem and rejecting its compatibilist stance, which is untenable to a libertarian thinker like himself. Campbell's method of refutation, however,

¹² “We do know of one traditional problem that is definitely on the black list of the *avant garde*—the problem of ‘Free Will’ [...]. A plain obligation now lies upon philosophers who still believe that ‘Free Will’ is a genuine problem to explain just where, in their opinion, the case for the prosecution breaks down. To discharge this obligation is the main purpose of the present paper” (Campbell 2004: 18).

does not proceed from a denial of the logical assumptions of Schlick's chapter on free will and moral responsibility. It becomes clear that following its steps naturally leads, as we have experienced, to the same conclusions.

The Scottish philosopher's suggestion is rather to begin with a different question that identifies the underlying premise implicit from the outset in Schlick's theses (and explicitly stated already by Hobbes (1983)): does freedom consist solely in the absence of compulsion? In Campbell's interpretation, the most glaring fallacy of Schlick's argument lies in the fact that such a definition of freedom—as the absence of compulsion—fails to adequately account for the notion of responsibility, which implies something way beyond that.

According to Schlick, the question of attributing responsibility corresponds to that of assigning punishments, which serve a dual function of rehabilitation (towards the actor) and deterrence (towards others). Therefore, identifying the perpetrator of an act would simply consist in identifying whom to target with educational influence. As mentioned, what we seek is not the remote cause, which is deemed irrelevant in terms of punishment, since its contribution cannot be quantified and is beyond our reach anyway.

In Campbell's view, the implicit consequence of Schlick's position might be that an agent could be considered morally responsible only if we believe that the motives guiding their conduct are such that rewards and punishments could potentially influence them and serve an educational function. For instance, if a person acts under the control of an external agent, we cannot consider them responsible, nor can we expect our attempts to influence their behavior to succeed. From this perspective, the form of freedom that a libertarian would describe as 'contra-causal'—i.e., identifying the philosophical concept that an agent's actions are not wholly determined by preceding causes or factors external to the agent so that they have the capacity for genuine, undetermined choice or volition, independent of deterministic causality—appears to play no significant role.

As mentioned, Campbell finds untenable the reductionism that would diminish the issue of free will solely to a problem of terminological imprecision. Acknowledging that freedom entails a break in the causal chain (as in contra-causal freedom) has little to do with confusion between prescriptive and descriptive laws, but it is rather connected with the idea that an unbroken causal chain leads to further conclusions incompatible with moral responsibility.

The crux lies instead in what Moore (1912) had already highlighted and which Schlick himself acknowledges: the admission of freedom implies the possibility of doing otherwise. How should this latter concept be understood? Campbell believes that if we adopt the concept of responsibility in its pre-philosophical sense,¹³ which also concerns us from the moral point of view, we arrive at assumptions radically opposed to those underlying Schlick's reasoning: in a libertarian perspective, common sense dictates that an agent is not considered morally responsible unless granted the possibility of doing otherwise (in the actual world), a condition that cannot be fulfilled without breaks in the causal chain. Schlick may argue that determinism is compatible with freedom only insofar as he accepts a pale image of freedom that does not align with the concept of responsibility that we ordinarily value and that plays a role from the moral point of view.

¹³ Contrary to Campbell's suggestion, numerous scholars have recently highlighted that the pre-philosophical concept of free will is far less evidently aligned with libertarian principles (Nahmias et al. 2005).

Moreover, if punishment were solely presumed to have an educational and preventive function, as Schlick suggests, one might question why it would exclusively be imposed on agents deemed morally responsible. The same effect could also occur in those who are not responsible but could still benefit from the deterrent effect of punishment, as in the case of animals (whose behavior could be influenced by our actions). The real reason we do not consider an animal morally responsible lies instead in our understanding that it could not have acted otherwise, that its behavior is directed by a series of causes beyond its control, whereas responsibility implies a form of contra-causal freedom which Schlick seeks to deny.

While it is true, as Campbell notes, that for Schlick the meaning of punishment lies in its potential effect on the agent, this critique of Schlick's thesis is not particularly persuasive. What matters to the Austrian philosopher is not the actual ability to locate the culprit but rather the theoretical possibility of identifying the responsible agent as the endpoint where the determining causes of the action converge. This is a significant distinction, comparable to the difference between verificationism (according to which the truth value of a statement depends on the theoretical possibility of its empirical verification) and actual verification (which may be impossible due to our current cognitive-technological limitations) (Schlick 1938). After initial hesitation, Campbell himself appears more willing to credit Schlick, interpreting his opponent's statements in a less literal sense.

However, even assuming that Schlick only considers the theoretical applicability of punishment, a libertarian would find it difficult to accept his view: if we were to consider punishment solely in relation (even theoretically) to its effect, we should not accept the relevance, in the case of responsibility attributions, of (potentially excusing or exempting, in a Strawsonian fashion (Strawson 1962)) factors that the law typically considers when determining the severity of punishment, such as the role of the social environment or the type of education the culprit received. According to Campbell, if we are willing to follow Schlick in equating punishment with responsibility, it is solely because our concept of 'punishment' inherently includes a primal feeling of revenge, which however, according to Schlick, cannot legitimately be the foundation of our penal system.

Moreover, if one were to view punishment purely as an educational tool, as Schlick suggests, it ought to be disconnected from any association with the notion of 'moral blameworthiness' (a similar but converse argument would apply to moral desert and to associated feelings). Common sense indeed distinguishes between an agent considered morally blameworthy (because they voluntarily committed an action with full awareness of its consequences) and one who commits an action that should be avoided but is not inherently worthy of moral blame. For instance, imagine a man who, due to a misunderstanding and perhaps at great personal sacrifice, unwittingly performs an action deemed dangerous by the community. In this case, we might feel justified in punishing him, but we would not morally blame him for the mistake.

However, Campbell's argument lacks again complete persuasiveness as it assumes that Schlick's views preclude differentiation between (a) those consciously pursuing their desires and (b) those unwittingly engaging in perilous conduct due to misunderstanding. Nonetheless, in a classic compatibilist perspective, which rejects the notion of desert in favor of a consequentialist and forward-looking approach to responsibility and punishment, the distinction between (a) and (b) hinges on the specific causal history of reasons and motivations leading the agent to perform a particular act, rather than on the illusory autonomy of the subjects regarding the set

of determining causes. In this respect, Hobbes already observes that when we perceive that a force is driving us, we acknowledge it as a necessity; however, when we do not notice this force, we assume it does not exist and attribute our actions to freedom rather than to any causes (Hobbes and Bramhall 1999). Moreover, regarding the subjective sense of responsibility and guilt, Schlick clarifies that these can be elucidated through the agent's acquired awareness of acting on their motives, as opposed to being compelled by external forces (1939: 154).

Campbell further contends that the crux of Schlick's fallacy lies in exclusively tethering punishment and responsibility to the potential for influence on the agent, neglecting contra-causal freedom—a concept Schlick outright denies. Contrary to the claims of determinists, Campbell assumes that this kind of contra-causal freedom underpins the pre-philosophical concept of responsibility. Moral considerations, particularly the attribution of moral responsibility, necessitate holding an agent accountable for actions they could have avoided. As Schlick is aware of, the question of what it means to say that 'the agent could have done otherwise' is therefore crucial. Depending on the interpretation one gives to this notion, the reasoning diverges significantly. According to Campbell, when we hold an agent accountable because we believe they could have acted differently, the moral weight of our judgment rests on our implicit belief in the real (rather than the conditional) possibility of alternative actions—specifically, that the agent could transcend the causal chain. However, the critical issue remains: where does this causal chain break? This question serves as a crucial juncture in the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists, highlighting significant variations among incompatibilist perspectives that advocate for such a break (Bonicalzi 2019).

To underscore the importance of considerations based on the availability of alternative possibilities, it is evident that we frequently excuse individuals whose actions appear to be significantly influenced by contextual or social pressures, acknowledging the impact these factors have on their behavior. In Campbell's libertarian view, when we speak of agent A and claim that in a given circumstance they could have acted differently, we simply mean that individual A, under the same circumstances and with the same natural desires, could have made a different decision and acted accordingly.¹⁴ Hence the rejection of the solution proposed by Moore and accepted by Schlick, as well as of a similar one developed by Patrick Howard Nowell-Smith (A could have acted differently, but not under the same circumstances and with the same natural desires).¹⁵

For Campbell, the ability to translate desire into action—which, according to Schlick and the classic compatibilist tradition, constitutes the entirety of

¹⁴ "What then does one mean in this class of cases by 'A could have acted otherwise'? I submit that the expression is taken in its simple, categorical meaning, without any suppressed 'if' clause to qualify it" (Campbell 2004: 32).

¹⁵ "To say that Nero might have acted otherwise is to say that he could have decided to act otherwise and that he would have so decided if he had been of a different character. If Nero had been Seneca, for example, he would have preferred suicide to matricide. But what could 'If Nero had been Seneca . . .' possibly mean? Unfulfilled conditionals in which both terms are names of individuals constitute, admittedly, a thorny philosophical problem; but it is clear, I think, that if 'If Nero had been Seneca' means anything at all, it is a quasi-general proposition which can be analysed either as 'If Nero had had the character of Seneca' or 'If Seneca had been emperor' or in some similar fashion. None of these analyses are incompatible with the Determinist's contention that, as things stood, Nero could not have abstained" (Nowell-Smith 1948: 50).

freedom—represents only one aspect of true freedom. Schlick and Campbell would both agree that A is not morally responsible for missing an appointment if they break their leg an hour beforehand. However, as Campbell suggests, there are situations where the agent's ability to act according to their desires is not in question (consider, for instance, a case in which A voluntarily tells a lie). In such cases, if we believe the agent could have chosen otherwise, we automatically consider them morally blameworthy. In these contexts, it is insufficient to interpret 'A could have done otherwise' as 'A could have done otherwise, had they chosen to do otherwise,' as in the Moorean interpretation. To preserve the concept of responsibility, it is essential to acknowledge that if an agent cannot break the causal chain, then true freedom—and thus responsibility—cannot exist. The agent must have the genuine ability to choose differently in the given circumstances.

Many other philosophers will similarly highlight the inadequacies of the conditional analysis of the possibility to do otherwise, leading to its increasing abandonment (though see Clarke 2009). In addition to this specific critique, Campbell deserves recognition for effectively rehabilitating the concept of free will, particularly in light of its connections with moral issues, as a legitimate philosophical topic rather than a pseudo-problem. Nevertheless, compatibilism will remain one of the most popular positions on free will, albeit with contemporary views that present refinements reflecting the more advanced state of the debate (Bonicalzi 2019).

5. Final Notes

This article aims to discuss Schlick's stance on free will and responsibility within the early 20th-century landscape, particularly in the context of his long-distance debate with Campbell, while also referencing contemporary discussions on the topic. Several key aspects of Schlick's position have emerged, including his advocacy for descriptive over prescriptive ethics, the neopositivist assertion that metaphysical issues can be resolved by clarifying the meaning of contentious concepts, the acceptance of the Moorean analysis of the possibility to do otherwise, the non-coercive nature of natural laws, and the idea that responsibility and punishment serve a forward-looking purpose. In the subsequent decades, some of these ideas, such as the skepticism about metaphysics and normative ethics and the acceptance of the conditional analysis of the possibility to do otherwise, will be abandoned or profoundly revised, while others, like the forward-looking role of responsibility and punishment and the importance of a causal understanding of moral psychology, will continue to develop. In any case, Schlick's clear and direct approach to intricate moral questions solidifies the *Problems of Ethics* as a philosophical classic of enduring value.

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