RESEARCH ARTICLE

On the Appropriateness of Holding Morally Accountable

Haozhan Sun* – Ivo Dragoun**

Abstract: Our everyday social interactions involve holding others morally accountable for their wrongdoings. Sometimes such holdings might be inappropriate. For instance, it feels inappropriate if the person holding another morally accountable is in some relevant sense morally compromised. Thus a thief chastising a thief would strike us as somewhat odd. We might, when witnessing such behaviour, want to remind the chastiser that he is not in a position to reprimand others. But what if none of us are ever in such a position? In this paper we will argue that all men are irremediably morally compromised, and conclude that, ultimately, it is never appropriate for us to hold others morally accountable.

Keywords: Blame; holding accountable; moral standing; the Principle of Plenitude.

*   Zhejiang University of Science and Technology

  ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4457-7595

  ✎ Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, 318 Liuhe Rd, Xihu, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

  ✉ hs370@sussex.ac.uk

** Sussex University

  ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4189-8657

  ✎ University of Sussex, School of Media, Arts and Humanities Sussex House, Falmer Brighton, BN1 9RH United Kingdom

  ✉ id41@sussex.ac.uk

1. Introduction

In our social interactions we often hold others morally accountable for their wrongdoings. It is generally recognized that sometimes such a holding might be inappropriate. An obvious case of inappropriately holding another morally accountable is when the holder misidentifies the agent behind the relevant wrongdoing and targets the wrong person. Similarly inappropriate is to hold someone morally accountable who had no way of knowing his actions would result in a wrongdoing. The case of an inappropriate holding of another morally accountable that we shall discuss in this paper is the one in which the holder himself is morally compromised, and as such is not in a position to criticize others for their wrongdoings. We will argue that, in fact, none of us are in the position to hold others morally accountable exactly because we are all essentially morally compromised. This argument crucially relies on the statistical interpretation of modality and a thought experiment designed to show that one's *future* wrongdoing can affect one's *present* moral status.

2. Blame, holding accountable, and the moral standing

There has recently been increased interest in the topic of *blame* among moral theorists.[1] The issues discussed in connection with *blame* are the nature of blame, its function and the conditions for the appropriateness of blaming.

Regarding the appropriateness of blaming others for their wrongdoing, there seems to be a consensus about what general facts must be taken into consideration when assessing the appropriateness. The facts relevant for the appropriateness assessment can be broadly sorted into three groups: (a) facts about the blamer, (b) facts about the blaming interaction, and (c) facts about the person being blamed. In what follows, we will make use of a concept that plays a crucial role in discussions of the first group, that is,

---

[1]   For an excellent collection of essays on blame see (Coates and Tognazzini eds. 2013).

in discussions of facts about the blamer. The concept we have in mind here is the concept of *moral standing.*

There are plenty of real and imaginary scenarios in which even if the agent was blameworthy, and even if all procedural norms were followed, it would be morally inappropriate for some people to blame. For blaming to be appropriate, not only the target person has to be *blameworthy* but the blamer himself has to be what Friedman (2013, 272) calls *blamer-worthy.* For instance, a serial thief blaming another for a petty theft would strike us as such a case of morally inappropriate blaming exactly because the serial thief is clearly not *blamer-worthy.* 'Who are *you* to criticize another for *that*?', we would want to interject if we witnessed an instance of such a morally inappropriate blaming. What gets brought into focus and questioned in such an interjection is the *moral standing* of the blamer. The background intuition here is that if the moral standing of a person is in some relevant sense compromised then it would be morally inappropriate for that person to blame another.

Uncontroversially, holding others accountable involves blaming. Thus, to the extent to which the appropriateness of blaming depends on the moral standing of the blamer, holding someone accountable will also depend— with regard to its appropriateness—on the moral standing of the holder. If the moral standing of a holder has been compromised, then the holding is (morally) inappropriate or wrong. A husband involved in a long lasting extra marital affair attempting to hold his wife accountable for a one-night stand with her ex would strike us as an instance of a morally inappropriate holding accountable because of the compromised moral standing of the husband.

3. Moral standing of human agents as essentially compromised

The moral appropriateness or rightness of holding another accountable depends crucially on the moral standing of the holder. Now, what if the moral standing is *always* compromised? What if a fundamentally compromised moral standing is in some sense *essential* to being human? If this was

the case, surely, we would have to conclude that our practice of holding others accountable is morally, and irremediably, wrong. There are reasons to believe that our moral standing is fundamentally compromised in some such way. Below, we shall formulate an argument to this effect. The argument will employ (a version of) a thesis known as The Principle of Plenitude and a thought experiment that allows its applicability in the context of evaluating the moral standing of all men. Let us first give a rough outline of the argument so that the logical role and the mutual relation of its individual steps is clear before they are later discussed in detail.

An outline of the argument:

1. The Principle of Plenitude (PP): For some states of affairs s, if s is possible then there is a time at which s obtains.

2. A state of affairs that has obtained is a possible state of affairs.

3. Plausibly, if a state of affairs involving a member m of a kind k is a possible state of affairs then a relevantly similar state of affairs involving any other member of the kind k is possible too.

4. Some men did or have done things that (have) corrupted their moral standing.

5. It is possible for any man to have their moral standing corrupted. [from 2, 3, 4]

6. [*A thought experiment designed to show that*] One's (present) moral standing becomes corrupted (not only by the past and present wrongdoings but even) by one's future wrongdoings.

7. [*For reasons discussed below*] PP can be applied to (5), that is: the status of one's moral standing belongs to the states of affairs that PP applies to.

8. For all men there is a time at which they do things that corrupt their moral standing. [from 1, 5, 7]

Therefore

9. The moral standing of all men is essentially corrupted. [from 6, 8]

The individual steps of the argument will be discussed in dedicated subsections below.

3.1 The Principle of Plenitude

The Principle of Plenitude as we will understand it here is grounded in what is sometimes called the 'statistical interpretation of modality'.[2] The statistical interpretation (or model) of modality can be spelled out roughly in the following way: what is necessary is always actual, what is impossible is never actual and what is possible is at least sometimes actual. The Principle of Plenitude is then a thesis about a certain kind of relation between *possibility* and *actuality*. A good first approximation of the principle is given by Hintikka (1981, 58):

> [A]*ll genuine possibilities*, or at least all possibilities of some central and important kind, *are actualized in time.* Any such possibility thus has been, is, or will be realized; it cannot remain unrealized through an infinite stretch of time; in a sense, everything possible will happen in the long run.

A version of the principle (and/or the modal intuition behind it) has been endorsed by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Augustin of Hippo, St Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Hobbes, Leibniz, Kant and Russell.[3] Kant, for instance, seems to endorse the principle in the following passage:

---

[2] The term 'statistical interpretation of modality' was introduced into the modern discussion of modality by Becker (1952).

[3] All the names listed above, apart from that of Aristotle, Hobbes and Russell, are the names given by Lovejoy (1936). Lovejoy was not a philosopher and the list is somewhat controversial. Thus, for instance, Hintikka suggests that it would not be correct to take Plato as an adherent of the principle. Regarding Kant, Hintikka argues that Kant endorses the principle only in his pre-critical writings. (We tend to disagree with Hintikka on this point as there is, in our view, a passage in The Critique where Kant seems to say something which is very close to the Principle. We quote the passage below). And as for Leibniz, although there is a version of the principle that Leibniz embraced, it is a version that is rather different from the one given above. In fact, Leibniz explicitly rejected the version that we shall work with here. For details on these points see (Hintikka, 1976).

> The Schema of possibility […] is the determination of the representation of a thing at any time whatsoever. The schema of reality is the existence at a given time. The schema of necessity is the existence of an object at all times. (Kant 1966, 125)

And Russell, in his characteristically clear and unambiguous style, asserts:

> One may call a propositional function *necessary*, when it is always true; *possible*, when it is sometimes true; *impossible*, when it is never true. (Russell 1956, 231)

And on the next page in the same paper, Russell casually equates the notion of *sometimes* with that of *possibility*:

> It will be out of this notion of *sometimes*, which is the same as the notion of *possible*, that we get the notion of existence. (Russell 1956, 231-32)

Obviously, the first approximation of the principle given above allows for different versions depending on what kind of possibility one has in mind. Possible states of affairs? Possible kinds? Possible particulars? The plausibility of the principle might depend on the kind of possibility that it is applied to. Barnes (1977, 184), for instance, thinks that the principle does not apply to states of affairs involving perishable particulars because out of the numerous possible ways that a perishable particular can perish only one can happen: once the particular has perished, all the remaining (and previously) possible ways of perishing become impossible regarding that particular because the particular is no more. Later in this chapter (when discussing step 7) we will address this issue as we need the principle to apply to individual humans, that is, to perishable particulars. At this point, however, we have a bigger problem to deal with. The problem is that in contemporary analytic literature, the statistical understanding of modality has been fully replaced by interpreting modality in terms of what is generally known as possible world semantics. And, modality interpreted in terms of possible world semantics does not involve any temporal references. Consequently, there is virtually no discussion of the principle of plenitude to be found in contemporary analytic philosophers' writings on

modality.[4] Thus, not only are we unable to simply appeal to the principle and proceed to discussing the following steps of the argument, we must also assume that the principle will be perceived by our readers as weird at best and totally implausible at worst. A way forward at this point is to provide an argument for the principle. One such argument can be extracted from (Barnes, 1977).

Barnes gives his argument (or what could be reconstructed as his argument) for the principle in the context of discussing Hintikka's interpretation of some of the aspects of Aristotle's treatment of modality. In his review of Hintikka's paper, Barnes is not primarily concerned with providing an argument for the principle. What he is concerned with is complementing Hintikka's interpretation of certain passages from Aristotle in which the Stagirite seems to argue for the principle with some charitable reading of those passages. In the passages, Aristotle's argument seems rather obscure, and this is where Barnes steps in offering a sympathetic reconstruction of Aristotle's thinking behind the argument.

The argument for the principle as given by Barnes relies crucially on the assumption that, roughly, *that which always obtains is necessary*, or:

A: if *s* always obtains then *s* is necessary

The assumption is, however, rather controversial. It will be pointed out that it is easily conceivable that *s* always happens and yet *s* is contingent. Moreover, the way modality is, in (A), tied to temporality seems to be uncannily similar to the way in which we wish to tie modality to temporality in (PP). Thus, (A) could be seen as begging the question. Clearly, an argument for (A) is needed, and Barnes gives us one. Unfortunately, there seem to be several problems with the argument. The most serious one is the fact that the argument depends crucially on Aristotle's definition of possibility—a definition that is rather implausible. Aristotle thinks, roughly, that something is (can be defined as) possible if and only if nothing impossible results

---

[4]   Even though there are *historians* of philosophical ideas and their development, who discuss the principle in an analytic way. One of them is the above-mentioned Hintikka. Another one is, for instance, Barnes, whose brilliant argument for the principle will be discussed below.

from its actualization. Barnes puts this more rigorously in the following way:

> T: s is possible $=$(df) there is no state s^* such that s^* is impossible and if s obtains then s^* obtains. (Barnes 1977, 185)

It is immediately obvious, we believe, that (T) does not work as a *definition* of possibility, although it perhaps works as a *necessary condition* of possibility. Now, as mentioned above, Barnes's argument for (A) turns on the truth of (T). As a *definition* though, (T) is false. This collapses the whole argument for (A) as formulated by Barnes.[5] A different argument is needed. We have thought hard about (A) and we have come to suspect that there is no good argument showing how something's necessity could be *conceptually* derived from that something always obtaining. This, however, does not mean that (A) cannot be argued for. An alternative and common way of arguing for a claim is to show that accepting its falsity is theoretically too costly.

So, what are the theoretical costs of denying (A)? One way of denying (A) is this:

> A*: s always obtains and (yet) s is not necessary.

First, notice that (A*) is a claim that will be embraced by a Humean. A Humean believes that the world has no nomological structure, that is, she does not believe that there is any causal law-likeness out there in the world. She sees only contiguity, temporal priority and constant conjunctions where others see Laws of Nature being instantiated. Uncontroversially, the notions of a '*nomological* structure' and the 'Laws of Nature' entail an appeal to the modal property of necessity. Thus, a Humean's denial of the world having a nomological structure or of (being governed by) the Laws of Nature entails her denying that there is any (physical) necessity out there in the world.[6] Consequently, she will endorse (A*).

---

[5]   Barnes is, of course, aware of the implausibility of (T). The task he sets himself in the review is to reconstruct what he thought was Aristotle's argument. Barnes's faithful reconstruction inherits the problematic definition of possibility from Aristotle.

[6]   This is not to say that a Humean denies *conceptual* necessity. She might do so, or she might not, depending on her other philosophical commitments. We focus on

The Humean view according to which there is no nomological structure (or Laws of Nature) behind the constant conjunctions that we observe is called a *regularity theory*. A regularity theory holds that there is nothing *beyond* the regularities that somehow hold the world together: nothing that *underlies* them, nothing that *explains* them. Now, it should be noticed that a regularity theory is a rather extreme theory. It implies that *s*'s regular and exceptionless obtaining is not grounded in the necessity that is intrinsic to the Laws of Nature but due to—given an infinite time—a mindbogglingly extraordinary coincidence. Strawson points out this implication here:

> According to [regularity theories]…, the regularity of the world's behaviour is, in a clear sense, a complete and continuous fluke. It's not just that we don't know whether or not there is any reason for it in the nature of things. According to [regularity theories], there is definitely no reason for it in the nature of things. (Strawson 1985, 21)

Strawson has no patience with this view calling it 'utterly implausible' and 'absurd':

> [T]he theory is utterly implausible in asserting categorically that there is no reason in the nature of things for the regularity of the world … it is absurd to say—to insist—that there is definitely no reason in the nature of things why regularity rather than chaos … occurs from moment to moment. (Strawson 1989, 21–2)

We are in agreement with Strawson here. There is more to be noticed about the view though. Regularity theory seriously clashes with one of the foundational assumptions behind any theorizing about the world: the assumption that the world can be made sense of; that it is *explicable*. In such a world, coincidences of this magnitude cannot exist. The assumed explicability of the world commits us to assuming that the world has a nomological structure, appeals to which play crucial role in anything that counts as an explanation of the world. What is at stake here is not only the project of natural sciences to understand and explain the world, but also the prospects

---

the *empirical* necessity here as we are arguing towards a modal claim about humans, that is, about empirical entities.

of *philosophizing* about it. A Humean—that is, a regularity theorist—rejects any talk of nomological structures or Laws of Nature because she denies the reality of causation. Without causation, there is no real *connection* between things that would allow the transfer of necessity between them. Thus, without causation, there are no *Laws* of Nature and nothing *nomological* about the world. But one cannot philosophize without taking causation seriously. As Beebee—who is a regularity theorist—admits,

> [there is a] huge range of fruitful philosophical theories that *do* appeal to causation: we have causal theories of perception, reference, action and knowledge; functionalist theories of the mind, consequentialism; and so on, and on. (Beebee 2006, 510)

A Humean is a philosopher. Thus, endorsing the regularity theory will cost her dearly: Not only will she have to embrace a rather unattractive claim that natural sciences don't *explain* but merely *describe* the world, she will also have to ditch (on pain of being inconsistent) a 'huge range of fruitful philosophical theories', and, perhaps, even stop philosophizing altogether because, as Beebee (2006, 510) notices, 'trying to do philosophy without ever using the concept of causation is practically impossible'.

Now, it is somewhat surprising that Strawson's objections, given how damaging they are, have not elicited much response from regularity theorists. A notable exception is the response given by Beebee in the paper we have quoted from above. The paper presents accurately and fairly Strawson's objections to regularity theories and raises several important and correct points about the objections that a Strawsonian should take into account. That's not all. Beebee takes on what we think is Strawson's strongest objection—an objection that plays a key role in our argument for (A). Above, we have appealed to the extreme implausibility and unpalatability of the implication (of regularity theories) that the highly complex orderliness of the world is a result of mindbogglingly extraordinary luck. Strawson invites the reader to appreciate the absurdity of the implication through considering the following analogy:

> [Imagine that] a true randomizing device determines the colour value of each pixel on a standard 800 x 400 computer screen, running on a ten-times-a-second cycle—so that each pixel can

take any colour value for each $1/10^{th}$ second period. On the screen
it appears that there is a film showing. A woman enters a house,
walks over to a stove, and puts on a kettle. Life—a world, as it
were—goes on in an ordered, regular fashion, exactly as regularly
as in our own world. But the image is being generated by the true
randomizing device. It is pure fluke that what happens on the
screen appears to tell a coherent story of a regular, ordered world,
rather than filling up with—or suddenly switching to—a fizz of
points of colour. (Strawson 1989, 24)

The analogy is powerful, vividly exposing the theoretical costs of endorsing
a regularity theory. Beebee's response is smart. She does not attack the
analogy itself - in fact, she urges a regularity theorist that she 'must [...]
accept that from a metaphysical point of view the analogy is a pertinent
one' (Beebee 2006, 527) - she, instead, argues that the implication can be
tolerated. Her argument in this respect is, roughly, this: True, a regularity
theory comes at the cost of accepting that the highly complex orderliness
of the world is due to just massive—and ongoing—luck. However, that's
nothing to be much upset about because we have already learned how to
tolerate 'outrageous runs of luck' (Strawson 1989, 26). Consider your own
life. You are alive as a result of an extremely long series of lucky events.
Think of all those things that had to happen in order for you to be born.
On countless occasions, your parents might have done something that would
have prevented you from having been conceived, or they might have not
even met in the first place. The same goes for your grandparents on whose
actions the existence of your parents—thus yours too - depends. Ultimately,
your existence and everyone else's existence depends on that spectacularly
lucky streak of events that resulted in Earth being a place that supports
life. Now, when you start thinking about all this, how much does it really
bother you? Most likely, not much at all. You do not really think there is,
or must be, any 'reason' why things happened in a way that ultimately led
to your coming into existence.

   This is an intriguing reply even though we do not think it works. Let's
have a closer look at what is going on here. Strawson formulates a thought
experiment designed to expose the extreme implausibility of the claim that
a purely random process can, at the same time, be a process that is highly

ordered and keeps being so for very long periods of time. In response, Beebee invites the reader to consider their own life to see that it, too, despite being ordered and coherent, is a result of a long series of lucky events. She notices that it does not seem to bother us much that luck plays such a fundamental role in our lives and concludes that we, in fact, already know how to tolerate the seemingly intolerable implication of regularity theories. Beebee's reply hinges on being presented as an *analogy* to Strawson's thought experiment. And if it is an analogy then whatever the analogy shows can be—by analogy—said to be shown about the thought experiment. In our case: if we stay unperturbed about our lives being a massive fluke (as shown by the analogy), then why be perturbed about (a) a movie with a coherent story being generated by a randomizing device, and (b) about, ultimately, the implication of regularity theories? The problem with the reply is that the little consideration that Beebee offers as an analogy to the thought experiment is an analogy only seemingly.

The intuitive force of Strawson's thought experiment depends crucially on contrasting a *true randomizing device* with the high level of orderliness and coherence of a movie. Beebee, however, does not mention any randomizing device at all. She, instead, talks about *luck*, and contrasts it with the orderliness and coherence of one's life. Presumably, a *true randomizing device* and *luck* are treated as conceptual analogues here. *Luck*, however, is a notion that is ambiguous in a way that a *true randomizing device* is not—it has both a metaphysical and an epistemological reading. A *true randomizing device*, on the other hand, has (at least in the context of the thought experiment) only a metaphysical reading. Now, it certainly feels perfectly natural to *see* your own life as a *miracle* of sorts: so many things could have gone wrong over such a long time, and if they had, you would not have been born. But they did not, and once you stop for a moment to appreciate this, you cannot but feel extraordinarily *lucky*. This feeling, however, is just due to you having an epistemological access to only a tiny fragment of the total facts that, as a whole, *produced* you. If you knew the totality of those facts you would feel about as lucky as you feel when you clap your hands and it produces a sound, that is: you would not find anything lucky about it. The huge gaps in your knowledge about the past events that gave rise to your existence give a strong impression that those relatively very few

facts you know are somehow floating in the ocean of randomness. This ocean of randomness, however, is, in fact, just your inevitable ignorance regarding the totality of events that, ultimately, produced you. If you knew the totality of the facts, the ocean would evaporate. Beebee's reply by way of offering and exploiting an analogy to Strawson's thought experiment does not work because Strawson contrasts a highly ordered and coherent state of affairs with *metaphysical* luck, while Beebee contrasts it with (what we call here) *epistemological* luck.

In a little bit more detail, the problem is this. Arguably, most people know, often perhaps in some pre-conceptual way, that the kind of *luck* they accept as being involved in their own and others' lives is something like the kind of luck we have qualified above as *epistemological* luck. Or, *at least*, they would resist understanding the luck involved in their lives as being conceptually equivalent to a *true randomizing device*. Why do we claim this? It is a safe bet to expect that the vast majority of people would find Strawson's thought experiment convincing.[7] That is, they would agree that highly ordered and coherent states of affairs lasting for long periods of time cannot emerge out of a *truly random* process. They, at the same time, accept that they are very lucky regarding their lives, which can only mean that people normally do not understand *luck* as a *truly random* process.[8] Thus Beebee cannot claim that we already know how to tolerate luck in our lives in the sense of tolerating the thought that our lives emerge out of a truly random process. She can claim so only in terms of (what we call) epistemological luck. In this sense, however, her reply misses the target.

To the best of our knowledge, Beebee's response to Strawson's thought experiment is the strongest challenge to it that can be found in philosophical

---

[7]   Recall that Beebee herself agrees that the thought experiment 'is a pertinent one'.

[8]   The following uncharitable answer is possible: The majority of people have inconsistent intuitions. Therefore, they would be convinced by Strawson's thought experiment and yet see their lives as lucky in the sense of being truly random. This reply is rather unattractive. Accepting that most people have inconsistent intuitions severely undermines any appeal to intuitions in philosophical arguments. Some of the most important arguments in philosophy rely on an appeal to (rational/conceptual) intuitions. Thus, the uncharitable reply would be far too costly.

literature. It fails nonetheless. Consequently, a Humean objection to (A) fails too.

Once the truth of (A) has been established, the rest of the argument for (PP) is relatively straightforward. Recall:

A: if s always obtains then s is necessary

The Principle of Plenitude (PP): For some states of affairs s, if s is possible then there is a time at which s obtains.

(PP) is then readily derivable from (A) in the following way. Suppose that s is a contingent state of affairs. That is, suppose that s is a possible, not necessary, state of affairs. Then s's not obtaining is a contingent (that is, possible but not necessary) state of affairs. If that is so, then s's not obtaining is not necessary. And from this it follows, by (A), that 's's not obtaining does not always obtain; hence there is a time at which the non-obtaining of s's not obtaining obtains; i.e. there is a time at which s obtains' (Barnes 1977, 185). This might feel too condensed, so let us unpack it here a little:

i.   Suppose: s is (a) contingent (state of affairs).

ii. (i) entails that s's not obtaining is contingent.

iii. (ii) entails that s's not obtaining is not necessary.

iv. A: if s always obtains then s is necessary.

v.   By (A): if s's not obtaining is not necessary, then s's not obtaining does not always obtain.

vi. If s's not obtaining does not always obtain, then there is a time at which s's not obtaining does not obtain.

vii. To say that 'there is a time at which s's not obtaining does not obtain' is to say that 'there is a time at which s obtains'.

We take it that it has been proved that (for some states of affairs):[9] if s is (a) contingent (state of affairs) then there is a time at which s obtains. This

---

[9] A reminder: (PP) does not apply to all kinds of states of affairs. As mentioned above, (PP) will not work for states of affairs involving, for instance, perishable particulars. This deficiency will be addressed when discussing step 6 below.

is, for our purposes here, close enough to (PP), thus we shall, from now on, assume the truth of (PP).

Before we proceed to the discussion of step (2) regarding the argument behind the claim that the moral standing of all men is essentially corrupted, let us briefly address a little issue regarding the plausibility of (PP). We strongly suspect that many readers—even those that have been convinced about the validity of the argument - will find (PP) and its implications just too fantastic to swallow. As Barnes notes:

> According to (PP), elephants will tell each other human jokes, the first daffodils of autumn will appear when the leaves fall upwards to the trees, and pigeons will hunt cats through city backyards. (Barnes 1977, 184)

This, indeed, is a rather unpalatable corollary to (PP). Is it, however, unavoidable? It is not, we believe. (PP) is a thesis about (some) possible states of affairs, i.e. it tells us something interesting (and perhaps unexpected) about (some) possible states of affairs. It does not, however, come with any prior commitment to what states of affairs count as *possible*. In this respect it is entirely up to the reader to decide what states of affairs she accepts as possible. In other words, the reader can, if she wishes, avoid the above mentioned unpalatable corollary to (PP) by refusing to accept as possible states of affairs the ones in which elephants tell each other human jokes, the leaves fall upwards to the tress, and pigeons hunt cats through cities. The authors of this paper are among those far from sure that these count as possible states of affairs. A deeper point here is this. (PP) could be taken as a metaphysical definition of possibility—this is, we believe, just a matter of choice. Once accepted as a metaphysical definition of possibility, it preempts any objection that appeals to the implausibility of its implications of the kind Barnes gives because the logic of such a definition serves as a constraint on what counts as a possibility in the first place. Be that as it may, the kind of possibility we will apply (PP) to below is nowhere close to as fantastic as the possibilities conceived of by Barnes.

3.2 A state of affairs that has obtained is a possible state of affairs

There is an obvious sense in which this assertion is correct. If s's not obtaining is necessary, then s never obtains. Hence, if s has obtained then s's not obtaining is not necessary. And, if s's not obtaining is not necessary then s is possible. This little argument appeals to a straightforward logical relation between the concepts of 'something never obtaining', 'something being necessary' and 'something being possible'. The verbal phrase 'has obtained' implies - due to the usage of the action verb 'obtain' - that there was a time when the state of affairs did not exist. This rules out the possibility that the state of affairs is a necessary state of affairs.[10] So far so good. However, there is a sense in which the assertion is false. It seems clear that a temporally determinate proposition referring to a past state of affairs is, if true, necessarily true because it is metaphysically impossible to change that state of affairs. Thus the proposition 'Donald Trump lost the presidential election in 2020' is necessarily true because it is true and the state of affairs it refers to cannot be changed. At the same time, the proposition 'Donald Trump lost the presidential election in 2020' can be understood as referring to a state of affairs that has obtained. Clearly, Donald Trump's losing the presidential election in 2020 has (as a state of affairs) obtained. But we already know about this state of affairs to be necessarily true. Thus we have here an example of a state of affairs that (had not always been the case and) *has obtained* and is a *necessary* state of affairs (as it cannot be changed). The two senses in which the assertion can be understood suggest that there are at least two kinds of necessity that can be associated with a state of affairs. A state of affairs that has obtained is necessary (a) in the sense that its past obtaining is fixed and cannot be changed, and (b) in the sense that there is no time at which the state of affairs is non-existent. The assertion that a state of affairs that has obtained is a possible state of affairs is true only when 'necessity' is understood in the latter sense. In this latter sense, and as explained at the very beginning of this subsection, once a state

---

[10] Compare it with the following claim: 'A state of affairs that *has existed* is a possible state of affairs'. The grammar of the sentence (present perfect tense + a stative verb) leaves open the possibility that the state of affairs that the claim is about might be a necessary one.

of affairs obtains (notice, again, that 'obtain' is an action verb, which indicates that the state of affairs did not always exist), it is describable as a *possible* state of affairs.

Now, things get a bit complicated once we go beyond a merely conceptual reading of the assertion. One might wonder whether and in what sense the assertion *works* out there in the world. Does the assertion as it stands imply that, for instance, if a state of affairs has obtained, then it is possible that it will obtain again? Surely, one would be justified in reading it in this way. A moment's reflection reveals, however, that, at least for some states of affairs, this cannot be true. There are possible states of affairs that, (a), involve perishable particulars and, (b), involve events that cause the involved particulars to perish. Clearly, once such a possible state of affairs has obtained and the particulars involved have perished, it is impossible for that state of affairs to obtain again (that is, to obtain in future). Thus, there are states of affairs that have happened and yet are *in a sense* impossible. For reasons that will become obvious later, we need to be able to read the assertion as implying that if a state of affairs has obtained then it is possible it will obtain again. To allow that reading, the assertion needs to be qualified in something like the following way:

AQ: If a state of affairs has obtained and if its relevant subject(s) has/have survived the obtaining, then it is possible that the state of affairs will happen again.

Not much turns on the notion of a relevant subject (of a state of affairs), and we do not intend to give a definition of it here. Its function in the qualified assertion is just to block the application of the assertion onto the states of affairs that happened but cannot possibly happen again because its relevant subject(s) has/have perished. Clearly, the death of Bertrand Russell implies that a state of affairs in which Bertrand Russell has died is, *conceptually* speaking, a possible state of affairs. It is not, however, a possible state of affairs in the sense of (AQ) as this state of affairs cannot happen again simply because the subject of this state of affairs does not exist any more.

We believe that our ordinary intuitions about possibility are governed by, among others, something like (AQ). Consider the case of climbing

Mount Everest without the use of supplemental oxygen. For a long time, it had been hotly disputed whether this was possible at all. Then, on 8 May 1978, Messner and Habeler reached the summit of Mount Everest without the aid of supplemental oxygen. This achievement has established that it is possible for man to climb Mount Everest without supplemental oxygen.[11] It has been established both *conceptually* and in the sense of (AQ). In the sense of (AQ), it has been established because it has happened and the subject of this kind of state of affairs—man—is still around to possibly repeat the performance.

3.3 Plausibly, if a state of affairs involving a member m of a kind k is a possible state of affairs then a relevantly similar state of affairs involving any other member of the kind k is possible too

We have assumed this in the last paragraph of the previous section where we treated a particular achievement of two Italian mountaineers as indicative of what is possible for man as a species. In a footnote related to that paragraph (footnote 11), we gave a brief consideration in support of this treatment.

Let us repeat and slightly expand the supporting consideration. There is a particular tree in California's White Mountains that has been named, quite tellingly, *Methuselah*. The tree belongs to the species of bristlecone pine trees and is believed to be almost 5,000 years old. This makes it the oldest non-clonal tree in the world. Now, as far as we know, no other bristlecone pine tree is as old as Methuselah, and the vast majority of the other bristlecone pine trees have lived nowhere close to 5,000 years. Yet, it is fairly common to generalize from what we know about Methuselah to what we take as possible about the species that Methuselah belongs to. When you start reading about these amazing trees, you will often come across

---

[11] Here we presume as unproblematic to generalize from a member of a species to species as a whole. It sounds very natural to say that a bristlecone pine tree can live (i.e. it is *possible* for it to live) for more than 5,000 years on the grounds that just one particular member of this species, Methuselah in California's White Mountains, has lived that long, even though vast majority of bristlecone pine trees have lived nowhere close that long. We will say more about this in the following section.

something like the following perfectly natural sounding statement: 'The bristlecone pine can live 5,000 years, making it the oldest individually growing organism on the planet, […] (Smith 2017). This statement is a good example of precisely the kind of a generalization from a single (past) achievement of a member of a species to what is possible for the species as a whole that we endorse here as plausible. The context of the article this statement is taken from makes it clear that 'the bristlecone pine' refers to a species, 'can' refers to possibility, and the figure of 5,000 years relates to Methuselah.

3.4. Some men did or have done things that (have) corrupted their moral standing

This is an uncontroversial empirical fact. The list of serious wrongdoings done by millions of men throughout the history is disturbingly long. In a suitable context, any of those serious wrongdoings would be deemed sufficient to critically undermine one's moral standing.

3.5. It is possible for any man to have their moral standing corrupted

This is step (5) of the argument, and it follows unproblematically from the previous three steps. Step (4), when slightly reformulated, says that some members of the species of Homo sapiens—that is, some men—have done things that have corrupted their moral standing. Step (2) says that a state of affairs that has obtained is a possible state of affairs. This then entails that a state of affairs in which a member of the species Homo sapiens does things that corrupt his/her moral standing is a possible state of affairs. Step (3) allows generalizing from a possibility about an individual member of a species to a possibility about the species as a whole. Hence, we can conclude that it is possible for any man to have their moral standing corrupted.

3.6. One's (present) moral standing gets corrupted (not only by the past and present wrongdoings but even) by one's future wrongdoings

On the face of it, this sounds rather unintuitive. How can one's present moral standing be corrupted by a future wrongdoing, i.e. by a wrongdoing

that has not happened yet? The unintuitiveness of the claim has to do with our common understanding of how causality and the arrow of time relate to each other. Normally, we will not take future events as being causally efficacious in the present because it seems a fundamental fact that the future is due to the present and not vice versa.[12] And it might seem like that's what we are being asked to do here: we are invited to consider and accept that one's *future* wrongdoing affects one's *present* moral standing. The appearance is misleading though. The relation between one's wrongdoing and one's moral standing is not a causal relation, or, at least, not a straightforwardly causal one. We do not wish to go into the metaphysics of causality here to illuminate the point. Instead, consider the following simple analogy: You have acquired insider information that in two months the government will introduce a drastic currency reform that will depreciate the value of the pound ten times. In response to this information you withdraw all the savings from your bank account and buy gold with it.

Now, there is a sense in which this little story could be described as a future event affecting your present state or actions: a currency reform happening in two months causes you to adopt (now) certain financial measures in response.[13] Thus, as we can see, there is a perfectly natural way of taking future events as affecting the present.

The analogy, however, will take us only so far. The target claim is that one's future wrongdoing corrupts one's present moral standing. In the case of the currency reform, its happening in the future—although it, in a sense, affected my *actions* in the present—has not done anything to the value of the *currency* in the present. Apart from a few insiders in the government

---

[12]   This is not to say that this seemingly uncontroversial fact has not been challenged. There is some intriguing literature on the issue of backward causation that seriously discusses the possibility of cases where the effect temporally, but not causally, precedes its cause. See for instance (Dummett 1954) or (Faye 1997).

[13]   This, of course, is neither the only nor the most natural reading of the little story. It could be insisted that it is rather a present *belief* about a future state/event than the future state/event itself that causally affects your actions in the story. And we would not want to object to this. Our point here is just that there is quite a natural way of taking future states/events as affecting the present, and that this little story is, by way of analogy, a first approximation towards understanding how one's *future* wrongdoing could be taken as corruptive of one's *present* moral standing.

and the Central Bank, no one knows about the planned reform, and, therefore, there are no bank runs that would depreciate the currency. Now, clearly, the currency and the moral standing are counterparts in the analogy. Thus, if we cannot conclude that the currency has devaluated then we cannot, by analogy, conclude that the moral standing has become corrupted. More needs to be done. Consider the following thought experiment: There is a time-machine device that makes it possible to find out what (if any) moral wrongdoing a person does in future. John's wife Mary has found out about John's extramarital affair. Mary reproaches John for cheating on her: 'You are a despicable person. How could you betray me like this?! You make me sick.' In response, John turns on the time-machine device. The device informs them that in 4 years from now Mary will also cheat on her husband. John breaks the silence: 'Who are you to call me a despicable person? You are no different!'.

Now, we believe it will be agreed that John's reply to Mary's reproach, and his questioning of her moral standing, is totally appropriate. It seems clear that Mary has it in her to cheat on her husband and that she deserves the resentment that John has expressed against her. And if that is so, then we can conclude that one's future wrongdoing, in some sense, corrupts one's (present) moral standing. At the same time, it should be noticed that the way one's future wrongdoing affects one's present status might not work for other future facts or actions. Consider, for instance, a non-swimmer about whom the time machine reports she will become, in the future, a competent swimmer. Surely, we would not want to claim that due to this *future* fact she is a competent swimmer *now*. Similarly, we all are going to die at some point in future, and yet we do not conclude that we are dead now. The two examples suggest there is something unique about (at least some) morally-laden facts/actions when compared to (at least some) other kinds of facts/actions. The little story of John and Mary seems to show that the former can affect the status of relevant agents in a way that the latter cannot[14].

---

[14]   Notice also that a competent swimmer can, for whatever reason, become a non-swimmer. A murderer, on the other hand, will remain a murderer even if he never murders again. This again shows that morally laden facts/actions affect the status

3.7. (PP) can be applied to (5), that is: the status of one's moral standing belongs to the states of affairs that (PP) applies to

In section 3.2 we have identified an ambiguity in the notion of possibility. *Conceptually* speaking, a state of affairs that has obtained is a possible state of affairs. However, the same state of affairs will not be possible in the sense of it possibly obtaining again if it, (a), involves perishable particulars and, (b), the state of affairs is such that when it has obtained, the relevant particulars perished.

Now, in the following section, we will want to conclude that for all men there is a time at which their moral standing gets corrupted. We already know that it is possible for any man to have their moral standing corrupted. At the same time, many (perhaps most) men have not, yet, had their moral standing corrupted. This means that if we want to conclude that for all men there is a time at which their moral standing gets corrupted, then that time must be in the future. There is, however, something else waiting in the future for all men—their death. Any man is a perishable particular and it is certainly possible that they will perish before they manage to corrupt their moral standing. Surely, it would be extremely implausible to claim that none of the people presently alive will die before they manage to corrupt their moral standing. This possibility represents a serious challenge to our argument, because if it is possible for a man to perish before they corrupt their moral standing then we will not be able to conclude that for *all* men there is a time (in the future) at which their moral standing becomes corrupted.

One way to respond to this challenge is to appeal to certain implications that can be extracted from the following assertion:

L: *Luck* cannot make a difference in one's moral standing.

Nagel (1993, 58) refers to something like (L) when he says that it is 'intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their

---

of relevant agents across time spans in a way that other kinds of facts/actions cannot. It also shows that a moral wrongdoing has a permanent effect on one's status as it 'overrules' *the possibility* that one's moral status is, at the same time, uncorrupted.

fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control'. Nagel claims this in the context of discussing what has been known as the Problem of Moral Luck (PML). (PML), roughly, is a problem constituted by an obvious tension between the intuitively compelling (L) and the fact that in our common practice of holding others morally responsible, luck does seem to make a difference (for instance, a drunk driver that ran over a pedestrian will be blamed more than a drunk driver who was lucky that there were no pedestrians around when he was driving home from the pub). We do not need to go into the intriguing details of (PML) here. For our purposes, it suffices to notice that (PML) is a problem taken seriously by contemporary moral theorists, which can be the case only if the moral intuition that co-constitutes it—that is, (L) - is taken as sufficiently plausible. We will follow suit. So how exactly does (L) help us to respond to the challenge mentioned above? There is an essential aspect of luck that could be described as a lack of control. This should be uncontroversial. Surely, an event that is under one's control cannot be described as a *lucky* event. If that is so, then (L) could be reformulated in the following way:

> L*: An event that one has no control over cannot make a difference in one's moral standing.

We take it that (L*) is no less plausible than (L).[15] Now, one's mortality is clearly beyond one's control and as such it belongs to the kind of events that cannot make a difference in one's moral standing. In other words, death is not an *excuse* for wrongdoings that one would do if one did not die. Consider this:

A terrorist plants a bomb in a theatre full of people. The bomb is controlled remotely. The terrorist contacts the authorities informing them that a bomb has been planted in an unknown public place. He presents a list of

---

[15]   However, we do not wish to imply that *luck* and *lack of control* are synonymous concepts. They are not. There is going to be full moon in several days; an event that is totally beyond my control. To describe this as me being lucky (whenever there is full moon) would be rather weird. There is remarkably little discussion on the nature of the concept of luck among moral theorists. An intriguing exception is (Rescher 1995).

demands. After the negotiations with the authorities fail, the terrorist proceeds to detonate the bomb. He is about to push the button on the remote control when he suffers a sudden heart attack. He drops the remote control before he manages to press the button; he passes out and a few minutes later he is dead.

It will be agreed, we believe, that the terrorist in our little story is an extremely wicked person. He will be seen as such despite the fact that he has caused no harm to anyone. He would have done it, had he not been prevented by his sudden death, and that is enough for us to judge him as morally corrupted.[16]

We can conclude that in the contexts of evaluating moral standings, one's perishability is irrelevant. That is, in these contexts, a human agent must be seen as if she was imperishable. Above (section 3.2.), it has been shown that (PP) will not work for perishables. Thus, if man can be treated as imperishable in the contexts of evaluating their moral standing, then (PP) applies in those contexts.

3.8. For all men there is a time at which they do things that corrupt their moral standing

This follows from steps (1), (5) and (7) in the following straightforward way. (5) tells us that it is possible for any man to do things that corrupt their moral standing. (1) tells us that for some states of affairs, if they are possible then there is a time at which they obtain. And (7) tells us that doing things that corrupt one's moral standing belongs to the state of affairs that (1) applies to. Step (7) is crucial here, as it allows us to treat man as immortal. Without this step it could be objected that many men will simply die *before* they manage to do something that corrupts their moral stranding.

---

[16]   It could be pointed out that what makes us judge the terrorist as morally corrupted is his *intention* to do harm. This could then be taken as showing that it is not only future (or past or present) actions that corrupt one's moral standing but the *intentions* to do them as well. This can be conceded without any harm to the logic of the argument. The reader is invited to understand an action as morally corrupting only if it is intentional.

3.9. The moral standing of man is essentially corrupted

Above, we have concluded that for all men there is a time at which they do things that corrupt their moral standing. It seems obvious that a wrongdoing done in the past or in the present corrupts one's *present* moral standing. It is much less obvious, however, that one's *present* moral standing gets corrupted by a *future* wrongdoing. Step (6) explains how that is the case nonetheless.

At this point we can draw something like the following picture of man's moral standing. It is possible for any man to do a wrongdoing. There is a time at which all men will do a wrongdoing. Regardless of whether the time of one's wrongdoing is in the past, in the present or in the future, the wrongdoing corrupts one's (present) moral standing. Therefore, at any present moment, all men's moral standing is corrupted. Another way of putting the last point is that: the moral standing of man is essentially corrupted.

Let us briefly return to an objection that we have touched upon above (section 3.6.). The objection: 'There is a time at which all men will die' is (in the context of our discussion here) analogous to 'There is a time at which all men will do wrongdoing'. From 'There is a time at which all men will do wrongdoing' we have concluded that 'Therefore, at any present moment, all men's moral standing is corrupted'. The logic behind this step seems to commit us to endorsing an analogous step from 'There is a time at which all men will die' to 'Therefore, at any present time, all men are dead'. This, of course, is a false conclusion, which casts serious doubts on the validity of our central argument. At the end of section 3.6., we gesture towards a reply to this objection. Let us slightly expand on the reply. The little story of John and Mary shows that it feels quite natural to *now* see a person as morally tainted on the grounds of the person's *future* wrongdoing. It will be noticed that the little story (once some of its inconsequential details has been changed) will not elicit the same intuition if instead of being about one's moral wrongdoing it is about one's death. Consider the following conversation:

John's wife Mary has found out that John killed their neighbour, Paul. 'You murderer!', Mary screams at John. John calmly replies, 'Inevitably, Paul was going to die at some point in future. This implies that Paul was

dead before what you seem to see as his 'murder'. Surely, you cannot murder a dead man'.

Paul's reply, unlike the one he gives in the original story, has no force. There is, let's assume, incontrovertible evidence that Paul was alive before John killed him, and the fact that Paul was certain to die at some point in future does not intuitively feel to have any bearing whatsoever on Paul's well-being prior to John's horrendous crime. We could speculate here about what exactly it is about moral wrongdoings that they can (unlike one's death and most other actions/events) affect, in some relevant way, ones's present status from the future. We will not do it here though as we can generate enough support for the claim (that one's *future* wrongdoing corrupts one's *present* moral standing) from the intuitive force of the little story about Mary's future wrongdoing.

4. Conclusion

Our moral intuition dictates that a morally compromised person should not hold others morally accountable. Above we have argued that, in fact, we all are morally compromised. This implies that our common practice of holding others morally accountable is always inappropriate.

The argument relies heavily on the statistical interpretation of modality and a thought experiment designed to show that one's future wrongdoing can affect one's present moral status. Even though the statistical interpretation of modality is not popular among contemporary philosophers and logicians, it rests on quite an intuitive conception of possibility and necessity. On the face of it, the statistical approach to modality seems to commit its advocates to some rather unpalatable implications. We have addressed the implications above showing, as we believe, that the statistical approach to modality is a defensible position.

The claim that we all are morally compromised and as such should refrain from holding others morally accountable could feel rather extreme. The following two brief comments might make it more plausible. First, the claim that we all are morally compromised is not a new one. It has a venerable precedent in the theological notion of original sin that has shaped

Christian ethics. Second, we do not, in fact, encourage abolishing the practice of holding others morally accountable. We believe there are reasons—psychological and utilitarian—for preserving the practice. We only wish the claim to be understood as a humbling reminder that the practice is not morally innocent.

References

Barnes, Jonathan. 1977. Review of "Time and Necessity: Studies in Aristotle's Theory of Modality," by Jaakko Hintikka. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97: 183–6. https://doi.org/10.2307/631049

Becker, Oscar. 1952. *Untersuchungen über den Modalkalkül*. Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain.

Beebee, Helen. 2006. "Does Anything Hold the Universe Together?" *Synthese* 149 (3): 509–33. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-005-0576-2

Coates, Justin D., and Neal A. Tognazzini, eds. 2013. *Blame: Its Nature and Norms.* New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199860821.001.0001

Dummett, Michael. 1954. "Can an Effect Precede its Cause?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 28 (Supplement): 27–44. https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/28.1.27

Faye, Jan. 1997. "Causation, Reversibility, and the Direction of Time", In *Perspectives on Time*, edited by Jan Faye, Uwe Scheffler and Max Urchs, 237-266. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8875-1_11

Friedman, Marylin. 2013. "How to Blame People Responsibly." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 47 (3): 271–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-013-9377-x

Hintikka, Jaakko. 1976. "Kant on 'The Great Chain of Being' or the Eventual Realization of All Possibilities: A Comparative Study.' *Philosophic Exchange* 7 (1): 69–89.

Hintikka, Jaakko. 1980. "Aristotle on the Realization of Possibilities in Time." In *Reforging The Great Chain of Being*, edited by Simo Knuuttila, 57–72. Dordrecht: Springer-Science+Business Media,B.V. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-7662-8_3

Kant, Immanuel. 1966. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by F. Max Müller. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Lovejoy, Arthur. 1936. *The Great Chain of Being*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Nagel, Thomas. 1993. "Moral Luck." In *Moral Luck*, edited by Daniel Statman. 57–71. New York: State University of New York Press.

Rescher, Nicholas. 1995. *Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Girou).

Russell, Bertrand. 1956. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism." In *Logic and Knowledge.* Essays 1901–1950, edited by R.C.Marsh. London: Allen & Unwin.

Smith, Scott. 2017. "Scientists: The Future of Oldest Tree Species on Earth in Peril." AP News. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://ap-news.com/776e453d15674f1e9eb20af289d6e46e/Scientists:-Future-of-oldest-tree-species-on-Earth-in-peril>

Strawson, Galen. 1989. *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.