Difficulty and Degrees of Moral Praiseworthiness and Blameworthiness

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Abstract

In everyday life, we assume that there are degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. Yet the debate about the nature of moral responsibility often focuses on the “yes or no” question of whether indeterminism is required for moral responsibility, while questions about what accounts for more or less blameworthiness or praiseworthiness are under explored. In this paper, I defend the idea that degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness can depend in part on degrees of difficulty and degrees of sacrifice required for performing the action in question. Then I turn to the question of how existing accounts of the nature of moral responsibility might be seen to accommodate these facts. In each case of prominent compatibilist and incompatibilist accounts that I consider, I argue that supplementation with added dimensions is required in order to account for facts about degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. For example, I argue that the reasons-responsiveness view of Fischer and Ravizza (1998) requires supplementation that takes us beyond even fine-grained measures of degrees of reasons-responsiveness in order to capture facts about degrees of difficulty (contrary to the recent attempt by Coates and Swenson (2012) to extend the reasons-responsiveness view by appealing to such measures). I conclude by showing that once we recognize the need for these additional parameters, we will be in a position to explain away at least some of the appeal of incompatibilist accounts of moral responsibility.

1. Introduction

We often judge some people to be more blameworthy than others for their actions, and we often revise our initial views about just how blameworthy someone is for an action after acquiring more information about her or her situation. Similarly, when it comes to praiseworthiness, we often make comparative judgments between agents, and we sometimes revise our initial views so that we attribute more (or less) praiseworthiness upon learning more. While many theorists writing about moral responsibility express their agreement that blameworthiness and praiseworthiness come in degrees, relatively few explore in detail the
question of why they do. This might be because it just seems obvious that blameworthiness and praiseworthiness are scalar properties and so not in need of explanation, and also because so much attention is understandably focused on what are typically thought of as “have it or don’t” conditions such as determinism. Yet I believe that a great deal hinges on what exactly degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness depend on.

In this paper, I will explore two related questions concerning degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. The first is how different existing accounts of the nature of responsibility accommodate—or could be extended to accommodate—degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness (or, in other words, as a shorthand in what follows, “degrees of responsibility”). The second is whether they can make room for degrees of responsibility to track some of the particular scalar features that we often take degrees of responsibility to depend on. For example, we often excuse people to an extent when doing the right thing would be very, very difficult. In turn, difficulty can be understood in at least two ways: on the one hand, it can be understood as requiring a great deal of effort, and, on the other, it can be understood as requiring a great sacrifice of one’s interests. These often go together, but they might come apart. For some, it might not require a great effort to do something that results in great sacrifice. It might be “easy” in the sense of requiring little in the way of either physical or mental effort for a particular soldier to jump on a grenade to save her fellow soldiers, for example. She doesn’t have to try hard at all, but the sacrifice is very large. So the question about whether any given account of the nature of responsibility can account for degrees of responsibility must be accompanied by the further question whether it can account for the idea that degrees of responsibility depend on (or at least seem to depend on) degrees of difficulty understood in terms of expenditure of effort and sacrifice required.
Now difficulty and sacrifice are not the only possible parameters for blameworthiness and praiseworthiness to track. But because these are at least among the parameters that have a pervasive effect on our practices, it will be important to reconcile accounts of responsibility with at least the appearance that these features genuinely affect the degrees of agents’ responsibility.

In sections 2-4, I explore three influential kinds of accounts of responsibility: an incompatibilist account that requires that responsible actions be undetermined, compatibilist quality of will accounts, and a compatibilist reasons-responsiveness account. Perhaps surprisingly, I conclude that these paradigm accounts all fail to explain the existence of degrees of responsibility and the appeal to them in ordinary practice without significant revision. In section 5, I assess the prospects for skepticism about the role of difficulty in determining degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, concluding that we have good reason to reject such skepticism if a plausible positive account of difficulty can be found. In section 6, I set out an account of responsibility that I argue naturally incorporates a role for difficulty in degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. Finally, in section 7, I show that pursuing a plausible account that recognizes a role for difficulty will allow for a potential contribution to the debate over whether responsibility requires the “have it or don’t” condition of indeterminism. For, interestingly, some of the phenomena that incompatibilists have explained by appeal to indeterminism might be explained equally well or better by attending to the features that undergird the measures of degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness.

Before beginning, an important clarification is in order. “Praiseworthiness” and “blameworthiness” are key terms in two relatively separate literatures. On the one hand, they are often central in discussions of moral responsibility as mentioned, and this will be the main focus here. On the other hand, they are sometimes used in discussions of the moral worth of actions,
sometimes interchangeably with “laudable” or “criticizable,” for example, or, at least, in the same family of terms. While it is an interesting question exactly what moral worth is, at least one way of understanding it is in terms of the expression of virtue or vice manifested by the action. Within discussions of moral responsibility, some (but not all) take there to be two notions of moral responsibility, attributability and accountability, the former of which can be seen to correspond to the evaluation of virtue and vice as manifested in an action and so to correspond to moral worth understood in this way. Thus, one is responsible in the attributability sense when one’s actions are of the sort as to embody one’s own ends in a way that makes them evaluable as virtuous or vicious. In contrast, as I will understand it here, in the accountability sense, one is responsible insofar as one is subject to the demands of others, which are in turn based in part on one’s possession of moral obligations. Further, when one acts wrongly or well and is responsible in this sense, one is deserving of blame or praise, respectively, and the reactive attitudes, such as resentment or gratitude are, other things being equal, appropriate.

There has been an active discussion of degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the moral worth literature. And while moral worth is not the main focus here, the idea of moral worth has been thought by many to be connected to praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the accountability sense. So we will have occasion in section 3 to briefly bridge these distinct literatures. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the ultimate aim is to discover how degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness are to be best understood in the best framework of moral responsibility in the accountability sense, an area where there has been less explicit discussion of degrees.

2. Degrees and Incompatibilism
By definition, incompatibilist accounts require that an action for which one is responsible (and so either praiseworthy or blameworthy) be undetermined. Although all share this requirement, incompatibilist accounts vary widely in their details. In some cases, incompatibilist accounts require that actions be undetermined, and then simply add various conditions that are compatible with determinism and so might be shared with compatibilist accounts. For example, Robert Kane’s view requires of fundamentally free actions a certain sort of underdetermined process, in which the agent makes opposing efforts towards two incompatible actions and the outcome is not determined. But beyond this, free (and responsible) action, on Kane’s view, requires that one endorse the action after the fact, to take one additional condition Kane places on free action. Focusing on the particularly incompatibilist elements in the account, we can ask whether they can somehow account for the fact that difficulty appears to mitigate blameworthiness and enhance praiseworthiness. Whether one’s action is determined or not appears to be one of those “have it or don’t” conditions. We can’t speak about how determined one’s action is, for example. It isn’t a scalar property. However, something in the ballpark is scalar, and that is the probability of your acting as you do. If your action is determined, we can say that the probability is 1, given the past and the laws of nature. But if your action is undetermined, then the probability is somewhere between 0 and 1, given that past and laws of nature. Can probability be related to degrees of responsibility?

To see that probability is ill suited to this task, consider cases that are identical, except for differences in probabilities. Take the case of Drew (discussed in Mele (2006)). Drew takes an extra drink of whiskey before getting in the car to drive home. Suppose the odds that she takes the drink after thinking it over are 50-50, and that she meets the other relevant conditions on responsibility. Presumably, she is blameworthy on most incompatibilist views. But now,
keeping other things fixed, suppose that the odds are 99-1 that she takes the drink. Does this make her more or less blameworthy? One might think that it makes her less blameworthy because it is closer to her being determined to do so. But then should we also say that she is more blameworthy if the odds of her taking the drink are reversed, and only 1-99? This seems counterintuitive. But then how do probabilities affect blameworthiness? Consistent with these judgments is the claim that actions are freer--and thus one is more blameworthy for bad actions--the closer the odds are of so acting to 50-50. But this sort of view faces the challenge that many paradigm free and responsible actions do not seem to be of this sort, and, further, that some that are very likely or very unlikely, are ones for which agents might be blameworthy or praiseworthy to a high degree. At the very least, decisions that seem to us to be of the 50-50 variety are relatively rare despite our frequently holding people blameworthy and praiseworthy to high degrees, and thus, this view would seem to point to a significant revision in our attributions of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness.7

Suppose, though, that we could figure out a system in which probabilities track degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness in some way. Interestingly, it would still not be clear how probabilities will be relevant to difficulty in particular. Suppose that it would require a great effort to resist the drink, for example. Still, suppose that Drew is the kind of person for whom it would take a great effort, but who also has a great deal of will power, and fairly often expends great effort resisting temptation. In this case, the odds are 99-1 that she will walk away from the bar without taking the extra drink. This is perfectly consistent with her making a great effort--and needing to--in order to walk away. Similarly, we can imagine that the odds are 99-1 that our soldier will dive onto the grenade just before it explodes to save her fellow soldiers. This is consistent with its requiring a great sacrifice for her to do it. Thus, it seems that mere
probabilities can’t begin to capture difficulty in either a sense of effort required or sacrifice needed.

It is true that there is a wide variety of incompatibilist accounts, and it is possible that one of them has special resources to capture difficulty within it. But neither indeterminism nor probability appears to be well-suited in itself for doing so, and there is good reason to think that difficulty would have to be an additional and independent parameter in accounting for degrees of responsibility, even on incompatibilist accounts. For the purpose of accounting for degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, then, it seems that such accounts might look to compatibilist accounts, or at least to conditions in common between incompatibilist and compatibilist accounts for additional conditions that can do this work. Let us turn, then, to two of the most influential compatibilist accounts and explore ways in which they might explain—or be extended to explain—degrees of responsibility.

3. Degrees, Quality of Will, and the Real Self

The “Quality of Will” account of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness in the accountability sense takes it that one is praiseworthy for one’s actions insofar as they manifest a good quality of will and that one is blameworthy for one’s actions insofar as they manifest a bad quality of will or at least a deficiency of good will. Peter Strawson (1962/2004) suggests that blaming and praising attitudes (such as resentment, indignation, and gratitude) are responses to the quality of will in others. And recently others have argued forcefully for this sort of account.\(^8\) One way of capturing the idea is that praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the attributability sense are sufficient for praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the accountability sense.
As mentioned earlier, those who argue for such an account do not often examine in detail how degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness are determined and how exactly they are related to quality of will. In this section, I consider a notable example of the quality of will approach defended by Nomy Arpaly (2003) and a related view developed in Arpaly and Schroeder 2014. These accounts lend themselves naturally to talk of degrees, and they offer concrete suggestions for how degree of difficulty of a sort is related to quality of will and degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the attributability sense. Importantly, Arpaly and Schroeder do not present their views as accounts of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the accountability sense. But they do take it that the account they offer provides a necessary if not sufficient condition for accountability. Thus, it is a live hypothesis that their account can explain how degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the accountability sense depend on degrees of difficulty insofar as quality of will itself depends on degrees of difficulty. After examining their accounts, I then turn to a close cousin that takes responsibility to depend on one’s actions reflecting one’s deep, or real, self (see Faraci and Shoemaker (2010)).

Arpaly (2003) takes blameworthiness and praiseworthiness (in the attributability sense at least) to depend on the degree of “moral concern” with which one acts, where moral concern is understood in terms of a desire to act morally, or for the reasons that make actions right. Since moral concern seems like the sort of thing that one can have more or less of, it is itself a scalar notion, and easily explains how blameworthiness and praiseworthiness can come in degrees. On a pure quality of will account that takes moral concern to be the single dimension to evaluate, one who acts well with more moral concern is more praiseworthy than one who does not, for
example, and one who acts badly with less moral concern is more blameworthy than one who acts badly with more.\textsuperscript{10}

Can degree of difficulty find a place in a pure quality of will account? Before we can answer this question, it is important to make a distinction between two different roles for difficulty to play in any view according to which one who does do the right thing when it is difficult displays greater moral concern than one who does the right thing when it is easy. The statement is thus far ambiguous as between difficulty being an indicator, or playing an epistemic role, and it actually affecting the degree of concern present for evaluation.\textsuperscript{11} Let us take these possibilities in turn.

One might agree that in principle one could do something easy and do something difficult with the \textit{same} high degree of moral concern and so be equally praiseworthy. But doing something good when it is difficult allows us to see how high one’s moral concern is in a way that doing something good when it is easy does not distinguish between low and high degrees of moral concern. Can we say something similar about the blameworthy cases? Suppose it is easy to avoid wrongdoing in a given case, but one acts badly. This may show that one acted with ill will or at least without any moral concern. On the other hand, if it is very hard to avoid acting badly, then we won’t have a way of distinguishing between someone who acts badly without ill will and with a high but not the highest level of moral concern, and someone who acts with ill will or with very little moral concern. In other words, we will be able to get a lot of information at both ends of the spectrum--when people act well when it is difficult and badly when it is easy not to. But this is just to say that difficulty and ease are indicators that help us see what really matters in the degree of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness.
This is an interesting view, and it fits well with skepticism about difficulty as itself being relevant to degrees of responsibility. For now, it is worth noting that the view generates a potentially unstable view about the role of moral luck. On this view, as we saw, two people can be equally praiseworthy, say, for performing the same kind of action (say, volunteering their time), even though it was easy for one and difficult for the other. The reason is that even if it had been difficult for the first, she would have done it, and this shows that she acted with the same degree of moral concern as the one for whom it was in fact difficult. There is something appealing in the idea here that luck—luck in the difficulty presented by the circumstances which is not in one’s control—does not affect the degree of one’s praiseworthiness. But luck in other aspects of one’s circumstances does play a role. Imagine a third person who would have volunteered her time, too, but she was stuck on a plane on a tarmac. She cannot perform the action at all, and so cannot be praiseworthy for volunteering her time. On this view, then, luck in one’s circumstances can affect what one is in a position to be praiseworthy or blameworthy for, but once one acts, difficulty in the circumstances has no effect on one’s degree of praiseworthiness or blameworthiness. There is no contradiction here; but there is a possible tension to be explained. On the one hand, there is circumstantial luck, but, on the other, there is no circumstantial luck of a particular kind, namely, luck having to do with how difficult it is for one to perform a certain action. I return in section 5 to a direct assessment of the skeptical aspect of this view.

For now, let us turn to the other way of understanding the pure quality of will view. Rather than playing a merely epistemic role, one might argue that the difficulty of the actual situation can directly affect, or at least constrain, the degree of moral concern from which an agent can act. So, for example, if it is easy to do the right thing, then there is a fairly low ceiling
on how much moral concern can be expressed in so doing. When the non-depressed, happy person volunteers a few spare weekend hours, she can only act from a limited amount of moral concern. In contrast, the depressed person who volunteers the same hours can act from a much greater depth of moral concern. While this fits nicely with the intuition that the depressed person is more praiseworthy, it is less clear that she is rightly described as acting from more moral concern. A different kind of case, borrowed from Arpaly, casts doubt on the idea that she acts from more moral concern. One person has “die-hard” concern. She would volunteer her time even were it extremely difficult. In contrast, another person acts from moral reasons on occasion, but is much more easily tempted not to. Were it difficult, she would not do so (call her the “fair-weather” philanthropist). As Arpaly concludes about the pair of cases, it seems that when the first volunteers her time, she acts from more moral concern than the second (and for that reason is more praiseworthy for doing the same thing) (2003, p. 88). But if this is the right way to think about the depth of moral concern, and degree of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the attributability sense is simply a function of how much moral concern one acts with, then ease of circumstances does not place a low cap on how much moral concern may be manifested in action. Thus, when we return to the case of the depressed and non-depressed volunteers, we cannot assume that the depressed person acts with more moral concern than the non-depressed person, contrary to the initial intuitively plausible claim that she does and is therefore more praiseworthy in the attributability sense for what she does.

Now there are several possible responses to this problem that aim to preserve the fundamental idea that quality of will, understood in terms of moral motivation, provides just the right explanation for cases involving ease and difficulty. One response on behalf of the pure quality of will view is that the depressed die-hard person who acts well is praiseworthy for more
things than the non-depressed die-hard person who acts well. The depressed person not only acts well in volunteering, say, but also overcomes her depression to do so. The suggestion works well for this particular case. But it is not clear how it will translate to blameworthy cases. For we can ask: What additional thing does the one who acts badly do when it is easy not to do? Nothing, it seems. Further, doing more praiseworthy things does not always add to one’s total praiseworthiness. Thus, this solution does not solve the problem of accommodating the cases.

A second response begins with the idea that there are different kinds of quality of will--character, judgment, and regard. Character refers to the general quality of will that allows us to say that one has, in general, a certain trait (e.g., generosity or cowardice), and that can also be manifested in a particular action. Judgment refers to the particular judgment with which an action is done (e.g., “I act because I will thereby relieve her pain”), and regard to something like general good will toward another. Once we distinguish between these, the initially challenging pair of philanthropist cases might be said to manifest the same level of regard, but not necessarily of character, for example. Again this is to add resources to the quality of will view. But it raises the following questions: Is degree of praiseworthiness in the attributability sense a function of all three? Or do they underlie three different parameters of praiseworthiness? How is difficulty related to each? Perhaps most importantly, it is not clear that the depressed philanthropist and the die-hard philanthropist diverge on any of the relevant parameters, even though it is clear that the situations in which they find themselves differ in difficulty.

A third response can be found in a recent development of a quality of will view by Arpaly and Schroeder (2014). There, they appeal not to the degree of good (or ill) will with which an action is done, but instead to the degree of good (or ill) will that the action manifests, where the degree of good (or ill will) an action manifests is determined by the minimal amount
of good will “it takes” to rationalize the right action in the circumstances. Understanding good and ill will in terms of intrinsic desires, they offer the following canonical statements of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the attributability sense:

“Praiseworthiness: a person is praiseworthy for a right action A to the extent that A manifests an intrinsic desire (or desires) for the complete or partial right or good (correctly conceptualized) or an absence of intrinsic desires for the complete or partial wrong or bad (correctly conceptualized) through being rationalized by it (or them)”

“Blameworthiness: a person is blameworthy for a wrong action A to the extent that A manifests an intrinsic desire (or desires) for the complete or partial wrong or bad (correctly conceptualized) or an absence of intrinsic desires for the complete or partial right or good (correctly conceptualized) through being rationalized by it (or them)”


This shift to how much good or ill will an action manifests, together with its conditions for manifestation in terms of how much good will it takes to act well, has the advantage of accounting for our intuitions about the various philanthropist cases. This is because it takes only so much good will for both the fair-weather and the die-hard to volunteer their time, an amount that is the same for both, while in contrast it takes more for the depressed person. So the first two philanthropists’ actions manifest the same amount of good will while the depressed person manifests more.
Despite this advantage, the view faces serious challenges. Here I will focus on one that has particular importance for the question of degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the accountability sense. The challenge is that there are some cases in which degree of difficulty for doing the right thing simply comes apart from degree of ill will manifested. Further, and importantly for our larger purpose, in those very cases degree of difficulty appears both to track and help explain degree of blameworthiness in the accountability sense.

Consider a case in which a person is blamelessly drunk at a party. In this state, she gleefully and loudly shares a scandalous secret, told to her in confidentiality, about another guest. Suppose that this person would never have done this if she had been sober, and she values keeping promises and respecting others’ privacy. Still, she harbors an intrinsic desire for the other guest to suffer embarrassment, and it is this desire on which she acts. This seems a case in which the action manifests significant ill will. She also has good will, which normally would overcome the ill. But she is drunk and it does not. Intuitively, it seems that the action manifests ill will to the same extent as it would were she sober, and yet it is more difficult (maybe impossible) for her to do the right thing with good motivations instead. For this reason, she is less blameworthy in the accountability sense. In general, it seems that one can manifest considerable quantities of ill will while being \textit{excused}, or having one’s blameworthiness mitigated either partially or fully, precisely because one couldn’t help it or because it would have been so hard, say. Thus, even in the face of difficulty in doing the right thing, one can manifest considerable ill will. So the difficulty does not decrease the expression of ill will, but it does mitigate blameworthiness in the accountability sense. Thus, insofar as difficulty has an effect on degree of blameworthiness in the accountability sense, it does not proceed \textit{via} the degree of ill will. Thus, we need another explanation.\textsuperscript{16}
Before turning to independent accounts of accountability, it will be helpful to consider a close cousin to the quality of will accounts we have just examined. On what we can call a “real self” view, one is responsible if and only if one’s action is truly attributable to oneself or is one’s own, in the sense of expressing one’s real self. Although there are different ways of identifying one’s real self, I set aside those different approaches here to focus on the common idea. One might extend the view to account for degrees of responsibility by recognizing that one’s actions might be reflective of one’s real self to varying degrees. Faraci and Shoemaker (2010) have recently suggested a way of making this more precise:

We have suggested that differences in degrees of assessment may correspond inversely to the degree of difficulty in the target’s coming to moral recognition. On this explanation, then, an advocate of the [real self view] could claim that the degrees of blameworthiness track the degrees of attributability of actions: actions are more or less attributable to agents in these sorts of cases depending on the degree of difficulty they are judged to have in recognizing various features of their actions about which they remain ignorant. (2010, p. 331)

The suggestion rests on two premises: degrees of blameworthiness depend on difficulty in coming to moral recognition (at least in part), and one’s action is more one’s own the easier it is to come to that recognition. This is an interesting suggestion, and definitely seems an improvement on real self views that are silent on the question of degrees of responsibility. It also has an advantage in recognizing a role for difficulty. Yet I believe that the account faces a serious challenge. First, it is not clear why degree of attributability to oneself should depend on
degree of difficulty. To see this, consider the case in which someone overcomes a serious difficulty in coming to moral recognition. Intuitively, we might think that she is more praiseworthy than if it had been easy. But if the degree of attributability tracks degree of difficulty in such a case just as in the case when someone acts badly, then it would seem that here, too, her action is less attributable to her, and she would be less praiseworthy.

Now the defender of this extension of the real self view might at this point argue for an asymmetry between blameworthiness and praiseworthiness when it comes to difficulty. To preserve our intuitions and the plausibility of the principles, one might say that when it comes to blameworthiness, difficulty corresponds with diminution of the reflection of one’s real self; but when it comes to praiseworthiness, the opposite is true--difficulty corresponds with enhancement of attributability. But while in principle there is no bar to an asymmetry here, this suggestion brings out the original worry that difficulty simply isn’t related to the degree of reflection of one’s real self in any fundamental way. Suppose someone who cares only about fulfilling his own desires fails to swim into a river with a strong current in order to save his child. It would have been difficult to do. Still, it is not clear that his choice is any less his in this case than in one in which there is a weaker current. It is plausible that we have a good indicator of one’s real self if one succeeds even facing great challenges. But it is not clear why a decrease in difficulty should--by itself--entail that one has acted to a greater degree from one’s real self when it comes to blameworthy actions.

Of course, these challenges do not show that the real self view must be abandoned. But they do leave the defender of the view with the options of adding a separate factor in determining blameworthiness and praiseworthiness or adopting a kind of skepticism about the role of difficulty and perhaps explaining its appearance away. Before we evaluate these options in more
detail, let us turn to another compatibilist account of accountability that might seem to have the resources to account for degrees and difficulty without pursuing either of these options.

4. Degrees and Reasons-Responsiveness

Reasons-responsiveness views might seem especially well suited to capturing degrees of responsibility because responsiveness is a scalar notion. Given that one can be more or less responsive to reasons, it would seem that we have a neat way to understand differing degrees of blameworthiness or praiseworthiness on views that take responsibility for actions to depend on the reasons-responsiveness of agents.

The influential account of John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998) is a paradigm of the reasons-responsiveness approach. This sort of approach captures the appealing idea that what makes someone a responsible agent is the ability to respond to reasons. What is it that one needs in order to be responsible for a particular action in a particular situation? Fischer and Ravizza offer a subtle answer which is motivated by the need to accommodate Frankfurt-cases, which are designed as counterexamples to the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, the claim that one is responsible for a particular action only if one could have done otherwise. Frankfurt cases are cases in which a person performs an act in a normal deliberative way (voting for a candidate, pulling a trigger), but in which, had something been different in the actual sequence, then someone else (a “counterfactual intervener”) waiting in the wings would have intervened in such a way that the first person would have acted in the way she in fact did. Persuaded that in these cases, the person who performs the action in question is responsible despite lacking the ability to do otherwise, Fischer and Ravizza search for an account of responsibility in terms of features of the actual sequence. On their view, it is irrelevant to responsibility whether agents
can do otherwise; what matters is how the actual sequence goes. With this in mind, they propose the following view: an agent is responsible for an action if and only if she acts on her own moderately reasons-responsive mechanism. In turn, a mechanism of type K is moderately reasons-responsive “to the extent that, holding fixed the operation of a K-type mechanism, the agent would recognize reasons (some of which are moral) in such a way as to give rise to an understandable pattern…and would react to at least one sufficient reason to do otherwise (in some possible scenario) (1998, 243-44). In a Frankfurt case, the agent acts on her (deliberative) mechanism, which we suppose to be moderately reasons-responsive and this--together with its being her own mechanism--is sufficient for her responsibility. The nature of the actual sequence depends on the dispositions of the mechanism in question, and so to determine the reasons-responsiveness of the mechanism requires us to assess how it would behave in different circumstances. But in the end, it is the actual sequence that matters, and not the actual accessibility of different circumstances.

Recently, Justin Coates and Philip Swenson (2013) have extended this account, which they understand as picking out only “threshold” conditions on responsibility. To see how it works, first consider a pair of examples. Marcia has promised to pick you up from the airport, but does not show up at the pre-arranged time. Naturally, you resent Marcia. But then you discover that she has been suffering from “serious but non-debilitating bouts of depression, and that she was having trouble getting off of the couch…” (2). Coates and Swenson suggest that the depression may not fully excuse her failure to pick you up, but it does seem to mitigate the degree to which she is responsible. Now compare Marcia to Thomas. On a later trip, Thomas also breaks a similar promise, failing to pick you up from the airport. In explanation, Thomas says that “although he knew that he was obligated to pick you up, he did not feel like it at the
time since one of his favorite movies was on television and he wanted to watch it” (2). In this case, in contrast to that of Marcia’s failure, it seems that Thomas remains “a fitting target of your resentment” and, if you revise your judgment of his responsibility at all, it would only be to think him blameworthy to a higher degree.

Coates and Swenson claim that the degree to which an agent is responsible depends on “the degree to which she is able to recognize and react to reasons” (1). And, in turn, this can be analyzed in terms of the degree of comparative similarity that obtains between the actual world and the nearest possible world in which the actual sequence mechanism reacts to sufficient reason to do otherwise. The more different circumstances would have to be for the mechanism to behave differently, the less blameworthy the action. Applying this analysis to Marcia and Thomas, it appears that we get the right results. As Coates and Swenson describe the case, Thomas would have acted in accordance with “the weight of reasons” with only very minor changes in how lazy he was feeling or in what was on TV at the time. In contrast, although Marcia would have left the house in the case of a fire, or an offer of a huge sum of money, possible worlds in which these sorts of things happen are farther away from (i.e., less similar to) the actual world than the worlds in which Thomas acts in accordance with the reasons. Marcia is less responsible, then, because the mechanism on which she acts is less reasons-responsive, and we can see this because the world in which she does otherwise is less like (and so “more distant from”) our actual world.

So far, we have an elegant explanation of how reasons-responsiveness, cashed out in terms of mechanisms reacting in possible worlds, can be seen to come in degrees, and an illustration in cases in which it gets just the right results. Thus, Coates and Swenson have addressed our first question, namely, how the account can be extended to accommodate degrees
of responsibility. But they go further, and address the second, as well: how can the account explain degrees of responsibility depending at least in part on degrees of difficulty or sacrifice? They write,

In our view, to say that it is “more difficult” or that it is “harder” for Marcia to keep her promise is to say that in the relevant sense, the world in which she does so is less accessible from the actual world. Of course, what makes worlds more or less accessible is a matter of comparative similarity…And we reductively analyze the notion of “difficulty” in terms of comparative similarity. (10-11)

Although this claim about difficulty is consistent with what is intuitive about Marcia and Thomas, I do not believe that distance of worlds really captures the notion of difficulty that intuitively seems relevant as a mitigating factor of blameworthiness. A weaker view would be that the distance of possible worlds in which one acts differently is a test or indicator of difficulty (and not simply an analysis in a sense of exhaustingly the meaning or even in the sense of a necessary and sufficient condition). But there is reason to question whether distance of possible worlds in which one acts otherwise is even a reliable test, at least if difficulty is understood intuitively in terms of degree of effort or sacrifice required.

I believe that there are two reasons for this. First, reasons-responsiveness, understood as a property of mechanisms, should not even aspire to capture everything relevant to the level of difficulty. Even if difficulty can sometimes depend on such features (such as how good the relevant mechanism is at resisting temptation), it can also depend on environmental factors in the actual sequence (e.g., when one’s life or the life of one’s child is at stake, as opposed to how
skilled I am—or my mechanisms are—at resisting temptation). Placing the whole burden of accounting for degrees of responsibility on the nature of the mechanism makes such features irrelevant when intuitively they are as important in determining how blameworthy a person is.

Second, it isn't clear that distance captures even one kind of contribution to difficulty understood in the intuitive way mentioned. Consider the situation of Marcia and the counterfactuals we imagine are true of her. Does the fact that she would only get off of the sofa for a large sum of money or in case of a fire show in itself that it is more difficult for her to do so here—in the sense of requiring greater effort or sacrifice? I think we could imagine a third person of whom the same counterfactuals would be true, but who just doesn't care about other people. He sees the reasons; he just does not care. Depression seems like an obstacle that could, at least in some cases, make it more difficult to do the same things that would be easy if one were not depressed. There is something to be overcome in such cases, something that requires a great deal of effort. In contrast, lack of care might in a sense be an obstacle, and perhaps it is mitigating of blameworthiness, but it isn't obviously a case of increased difficulty—at least not in either of the senses we have considered here, namely, effort and sacrifice required. Thus, though the distance of possible worlds might very well undergird something very important, there is reason to doubt that it is well correlated with difficulty understood in either of the two senses with which we began.

One possibility, then, is that distance of possible worlds in which one does otherwise is correlated with, and even explains, degree of reasons responsiveness. But this is not to thereby capture degree of difficulty. Yet if Marcia and Thomas are blameworthy to different degrees because it is harder for Marcia, as seems intuitive, then the account will be incomplete.
At this point, it might be tempting to turn to skepticism about difficulty, explaining away the appearance of difficulty as a potentially mitigating factor in blameworthiness and as an enhancing one in praiseworthiness.

5. Skepticism About Difficulty

In fact, even independently of the failure of the views explored so far to accommodate difficulty, there are some considerations that might seem to support skepticism about difficulty as an independent factor in underwriting degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness.\textsuperscript{21} I take these in turn in this section.

The first kind of consideration points to cases in which intuitions seem to go in a different direction. To start, consider a pair of cases: Abby and Bella are both positive and encouraging around their department. But “Abby’s behavior results from a natural disposition that she did not produce and that was never under threat, while Bella’s involves successfully resisting contrary motivations.”\textsuperscript{22} Do we think that Bella is more praiseworthy? If the difficulty is a result of one’s own “bad” motivations, in particular, do we think that one is really more praiseworthy? If not, then difficulty \textit{per se} does not seem to be mitigating of blameworthiness. Further, ease that is the result of what seems the most virtuous disposition might not seem to mitigate praiseworthiness either. But further reflection suggests there might be multiple dimensions of evaluation here. Bella is more praiseworthy on one dimension, while Abby is more morally admirable on another. It is natural here to appeal to the distinction between “aretaic” appraisal--appraisal of the person in terms of virtues and vices--and appraisal in terms of responsibility, or accountability. Perhaps Abby is more virtuous, but Bella more praiseworthy for her behavior around the department. Abby’s actions reveal her virtue and so, along at least one dimension of
moral worth, score very high. Bella’s might be praiseworthy on other dimensions of moral worth, as well as when it comes to accountability.

Here is another sort of case that might seem to challenge the idea that difficulty really mitigates blameworthiness. Imagine two people who openly humiliate a friend, finding it fun at the time. The first has no second thoughts and suffers no pangs of guilt or conscience. The second has to overcome a voice in her head telling her not to do it, and afterwards feels very guilty about having done it. If ease of avoiding wrongdoing makes one more blameworthy, then it would seem that the second person--the one with a conscience--is more blameworthy. She had to overcome obstacles and make sacrifices to her own well-being to do the wrong thing. In both ways, it was harder for her to do the wrong thing than the first person, and easier to have done the right thing. Yet intuitively, it seems odd to blame her more than the person who didn’t even feel remorse afterwards. But here, too, we may be mixing up different kinds of appraisal. If we focus on the fact that she had to expend more effort to humiliate her friend, and she really sacrificed her own well-being in a way that the first person didn’t, then her behavior does begin to seem more blameworthy. On the other hand, we are glad that she feels bad, and see her disposition to feel bad as a virtue. The fact that she feels bad, we might imagine, manifests itself in apology or penance or resolve to do better. And we might be importing these additional actions into the scope of our evaluation, so that we both judge her better on aretaic measures, and judge her praiseworthy for these subsequent actions. But insofar as it is possible to abstract away from these, it becomes less intuitive that she is really less blameworthy for doing the humiliating, and may in fact be more blameworthy.

Thus, these cases in which difficulty and degree of mitigation of blameworthiness (or enhancement of praiseworthiness) seem to come apart become less challenging to our thesis once
we have distinguished between different kinds of moral appraisal and distinguished between
different things for which we appraise. Putting this conclusion together with the pervasiveness
in our practices of mitigating blame when we see that agents are in difficult situations, and
enhancing praise when we see agents performing well in challenging circumstances, suggests
that the burden remains on skeptics about difficulty affecting degrees of responsibility.

Note also that increased difficulty need not always yield a difference in degree of
blameworthiness or praiseworthiness for it to be a relevant factor. Only when all else is equal is
that true; and given that difficulty is caused by something, it will not always be easy to tell when
difficulty is the only relevant factor.

Thus, the cases that seem to undermine the connection between difficulty and degrees of
responsibility can be accounted for in a way that preserves the connection after all. But there is
another way of challenging the connection. Perhaps what explains the appearance that difficulty
is related to responsibility is that difficulty is related to non-moral praiseworthiness. We praise
people who accomplish difficult tasks, whether climbing mountains or solving math problems.
Difficulty of the task yields greater praiseworthiness. Perhaps, then, in the cases in which
someone acts well, with great effort, there is simply a fixed amount of moral praiseworthiness
that does not track difficulty, combined with a variable amount of non-moral praiseworthiness
that is no different in kind from that which one deserves for, say, reaching the top of Machu
Picchu. This is an interesting suggestion, and it fits nicely with the idea that Abby and Bella
are really equally morally praiseworthy, but it still allows us to justify giving more praise (of a
non-moral kind) to Bella.

In the end, however, I believe that there is good reason to think that this picture is at best
incomplete. First, it is not obvious what corresponds to the point when it comes to blameworthy
actions. Suppose two people do something wrong, and for one it would have been easy to avoid and for another it would have been difficult. It is not clear how to apply the point about non-moral praise to distinguish between the two cases. If anything, we might suppose that for someone for whom doing the wrong thing was positively difficult—because she needed to overcome her fear of getting caught, say—she is more praiseworthy overall because she met a challenge that her counterpart didn’t face. This case brings out a serious disadvantage to this attempt to explain away the role of difficulty in determining degrees of moral responsibility. The explanation in terms of non-moral praiseworthiness allows a role of sorts for difficulty in praiseworthy cases, but not in blameworthy cases. Thus, we can explain away intuitions that difficulty increases moral praiseworthiness, but are left without a corresponding explanation in blameworthy cases. And yet, we have intuitions that are equally strong, if not stronger, that difficulty is mitigating in blameworthy cases, and excuses based on difficulty play a large role in our moral and legal practices. This explanation then can only go so far; for blameworthy cases, it seems revision of a fairly radical sort would be required.\textsuperscript{24} Revision of our practices and judgments is sometimes called for. But in this case, it seems that the balance of considerations speaks against it. In addition to our practices and judgments that presuppose a role for difficulty in determining degrees of responsibility, we lack an adequate explanation that can start to explain away our judgments about cases. Still, the case against skepticism will be stronger if we can identify a larger account of responsibility that incorporates a role for difficulty.\textsuperscript{25} In the next section, I offer just such an account.
6. Rational Abilities and Quality of Opportunity

Recall that one serious challenge facing the reasons-responsiveness account explored earlier is that situational factors are relevant to difficulty, and the account does not offer a role for them. One way to address this challenge is to take reasons-responsiveness, understood as the agent’s capacities, as one factor in blameworthiness, together with a second set of factors, namely situational ones. But these need not be seen as simply two entirely distinct and independent factors. The quality of one’s opportunity in a given situation is a function of both one’s capacities and the situational demands. In fact, there is a sense in which even how responsive one can be--in a situation--depends both on one’s capacities and on one’s situation (see Brink and Nelkin 2013).26

Legal theorists sometimes write of legal responsibility as resting on two components, an internal one relating to one’s capacities and a situational one: one’s normative competence (or reasons-responsiveness) and whether one had a fair opportunity to avoid the criminal behavior.27 On the view described here, both one’s capacities and one’s situation jointly determine the quality of one’s opportunity. Expanding the concept of fair opportunity, we can say that what determines blameworthiness is whether one has a fair opportunity to avoid wrongdoing, where whether one has such an opportunity depends on both one’s capacities and one’s situation.28 But I believe that this focus on blameworthiness is ultimately too narrow since we are also concerned with praiseworthy action, and, even if correct as far as it goes, it tells only part of the story. To encompass both praiseworthy and blameworthy action, I suggest that we should instead say that responsible action is action performed with the ability to act for the right (or good) reasons. (Call this view the “rational abilities” view.) Ability here entails opportunity in the relevant sense, where opportunity itself depends on both the agent’s capacities and situational features.
How can we account for degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness on this picture? One idea is to borrow again from the legal language of “fair opportunity”. The more fair the opportunity the more blameworthy one is for not taking it and less praiseworthy one is for doing so. What can it mean to say that opportunities can be more or less fair in a non-legal context? One answer is that the more reasonable it is to expect or demand that one take it, the more fair it is. And so the more blameworthy one is for not taking it and the less praiseworthy one is when one does. This suggestion might very well be correct, but it does not follow that considerations regarding fairness or reasonableness are fundamental. I believe that what makes it reasonable to make particular demands of agents in particular situations is the quality of the relevant opportunities--determined by the agents’ capacities and the features of their situations.

There are two possibilities here: what it is reasonable to demand tracks a single property, which is itself determined by a variety of others, including difficulty of both sorts explored here, or what it is fair to demand directly tracks a set of properties, including both sorts of difficulty, without there being an overarching property tracked by the fairness of demands.

One natural candidate for being a single property tracked by fairness, or reasonableness, of demands is control. This is initially plausible because control, like difficulty, seems to be a function of the agent’s capacities and her situation. And it might seem at first as though difficulty is itself relevant insofar as it affects control. The harder it is to do the right thing, the less control one has. But on reflection, this is not true in all cases. For one might have a great deal of control, even when the stakes are very high, and either great effort or great sacrifice are required. The soldier who jumps on the grenade might have as much control as one ever has, for example. And tasks that take great effort, like working through a difficult proof or running up a steep incline, can be done with a great deal of control. Control and difficulty of both kinds
would seem to come apart. If anything, it is tempting to think that difficulty is the unifying property, and that having less control makes it more difficult to succeed in a given situation. This would make difficulty the unifying category, and control one of the determinants of it.

There are reasons to reject this picture, as well, however. The first is that, as we have seen, difficulty itself is a disjunctive category having to do with effort required and sacrifice needed. But perhaps it is no coincidence that these go together often, and also share the same label. Perhaps then, there is a more general but single property, picked out by “difficulty” in the broadest sense, that can fill the role of being the unifying property tracked by the reasonableness of demands. Still, there is a second reason to reject the picture that locates control as simply one determinant of difficulty. The picture will be more complicated when it comes to praiseworthy actions. An agent’s having less control does not obviously make good action more praiseworthy. On the other hand, it being harder--either in terms of effort or sacrifice required--to perform a good action does seem to make an action more praiseworthy. Thus, there is some reason to think that difficulty and control can come apart in both directions. This suggests that neither is properly identified as the unifying property that fairness or reasonableness tracks. Still, both are relevant to the overall quality of agents’ opportunities, and both are ultimately essential to what might reasonably be asked of people.

This conclusion is consistent with the idea that there is a single condition determined by a variety of factors that are in turn functions of both the agent’s capacities and her circumstances, to which the degree of the reasonableness of demands responds.29 For now, we can think of this simply as the quality of the agent’s opportunity. The full story of all of the factors in determining this quality, and so of the degree of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness will likely be longer. But keeping our focus on difficulty, the view sketched so far allows us to
identify a relatively simple relationship between difficulty as a factor and degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. The more difficult to act well--all else equal--the more praiseworthy for succeeding, and the less blameworthy for failing.

This sort of view shares with the reasons-responsiveness view discussed earlier a focus on the rational capacities of agents. By understanding reasons-responsiveness to depend on both the capacities of an agent considered independently of the actual circumstances, as well as the salient features of those circumstances, we can easily meet the challenge facing the reasons-responsiveness view that the modal qualities of mechanisms cannot alone account for difficulty. How does this view address the second challenge facing the reasons-responsiveness view, namely, the challenge concerning the attempt to capture difficulty in terms of the distance of possible worlds in which one does otherwise? For the reasons mentioned earlier, we should simply conclude that distance is not correlated with difficulty. Once we take the entire actual situation into account, and not simply the agent’s (or mechanism’s) modal properties, we should not expect the distance of possible worlds in which a person acts differently to capture degrees of responsibility by itself, nor should we expect it to capture difficulty. Thus, a view that gives a central place to rational abilities can account for degrees of responsibility, but it can do so only by taking a broader view of what goes into responsiveness in a given situation than the ones focused on modal agential properties.

The view can also be seen to give guidance of a sort on which of the variety of views of moral worth—or blameworthiness and praiseworthiness in the attributability sense—to select. The answer is that it depends on one’s aim. Insofar as we are looking for a particular condition to be a necessary condition for accountability, then it seems that the condition of quality of will that we are looking for is a function of whatever one does for reasons one adopts given the
quality of opportunity one has in the circumstances one finds oneself in. In other words, the quality of will one manifested in a given situation is itself determined by what one does and why given one’s opportunities. While this is very different from an understanding of quality of will simply in terms of the strength of the desire on which one acts, say, it also seems to me not wildly out of place to think that there is a notion of quality of will that is measured in these terms. At the same time, it suggests that it can’t be understood independently of opportunity, and thus, that the account at hand would be essential for its explication.

More needs to be filled out in order to make the suggested account maximally precise. For example, as presented, opportunities can be understood in a compatibilist way, so that one can have the ability and opportunity to act well, even if one acts badly in a deterministic world. To accommodate this point, we can see agents as having opportunities just in case they have all the general capacities needed to act well, and nothing relevant in the situation intervenes in their exercise. While this is not the place for a full defense of this account, I believe that it receives mutual support from the explanation it provides for the way that difficulty affects degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, and, as we will see in the final section, from its ability to explain some of the very phenomena that have been thought to require incompatibilism for explanation. For now, I hope to have shown that it provides an alternative to each of the extant views of degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, and one that has distinct advantages over the others.

7. Conclusion and Implications for the Larger Debate

We have seen that there is good reason to think that difficulty is a factor in determining degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness and that it is not captured by specifically
incompatibilist conditions. While it might be that it is a separate condition that must always be assessed alongside other conditions for blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, I have sketched a way that it can be seen as falling under a larger umbrella concept, quality of opportunity, which is in turn tracked by the reasonableness of demanding that such opportunity be taken.

The explanatory power of the picture of degrees of responsibility offers mutual support for the rational abilities view. By focusing on factors that are central to our evaluation of degrees of praiseworthiness, such as difficulty in the sense of effort required and in the sense of sacrifice needed, and by seeing that these are not so much as correlated with either probabilities or with the truth of indeterminism, we have resources to explain intuitions that might have seemed to require incompatibilism.

For example, suppose that a soldier makes a great effort to reach a ticking bomb and hurl herself onto it, thereby making the ultimate sacrifice. Intuitively, these factors contribute to her praiseworthiness. But as we saw earlier, neither of these factors requires that her action was improbable or probable, or even had 50-50 odds. And just as these factors could be present even if the probability of her so acting was .99, they could also be present even if the probability were 1. They could also be present even if in no relevant sense could she have done otherwise.

Of course, there is a consistent picture in which these factors indeed contribute to degree of praiseworthiness, but only in situations in which actions are not determined. Still, there is some reason to question why the difference between .99 and 1 should be the difference between whether these factors are relevant or whether they are inert when it comes to praiseworthiness.

At this point, one might appeal to the distinction between different kinds of appraisal, and suggest that her action in the situation reveals her character, and we can celebrate her virtue now that we have seen it. We can, in other words, make an aretaic judgment about her, even if she is
not responsible and praiseworthy in the accountability sense. While this kind of response is certainly available to the incompatibilist, it is also true that it must be weighed against the intuitiveness of the view that the soldier is responsible in the fullest sense for what she does. It is also true that at least one set of reasons for thinking indeterminism is necessary is now off the table. For seeing that indeterminism is not necessary for an agent to resist temptation, or to expend great effort, or make a great sacrifice, leaves the incompatibilist with fewer resources to explain why indeterminism itself is essential for praiseworthiness. This is not to say that the burden cannot be met, but so far the rational abilities account offers a simple and unified explanation both of what makes agents responsible, and also of what makes them more or less blameworthy and praiseworthy. It is a question of what agents do in light of the quality of their opportunities in all cases.

What about blameworthy action? Here, exactly the same requirements are in place. For an agent who acts badly to be blameworthy, she needs to have had an opportunity to act well. How blameworthy she is will then be a function of (in part) how difficult it would be for her to take that opportunity. More generally, the quality of her opportunity determines how blameworthy she is. But on a compatibilist understanding of opportunity as described earlier, it is not relevant here, as it is not for praiseworthy action, what the odds are that she take the opportunity in question.

In sum, by attending to factors that underlie differences in degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, we are able to explain a great deal behind our quite nuanced practices and judgments concerning responsibility. On the account advanced here, we are able to offer a unified explanation of what is required to meet a threshold requirement for responsibility and what accounts for differences in degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, and do so
without appeal to a requirement of indeterminism. Recognizing that the factors of effort and sacrifice required can be completely divorced from indeterminism helps us to explain as consistent intuitive judgments of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness even on the assumption of determinism, and judgments of praiseworthiness even on the assumption that the agents in question could not have done otherwise. Thus, attention to degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness, together with their determinants, can play an important part in a larger case for compatibilism.

It is possible that our focus on determinism has pointed the conversation about moral responsibility toward that aspect of our practices that concerns threshold attributions because determinism itself is a “have it or don’t” condition. It is interesting to learn, then, that focusing on degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness has significant potential for advancing the debate over determinism. At the same time, whatever the ultimate outcome of that debate, attending to degrees has value simply in illuminating a ubiquitous and fundamental aspect of our responsibility practices.31
References


van Inwagen, Peter (1989) “When Is the Will Free?,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 3, 399-422.


Notes

1 There is an important distinction between responsibility on the one hand, and praiseworthiness and blameworthiness on the other. One can be responsible for morally neutral acts, and one can be a responsible agent without doing anything at all. It is only for ease of exposition that I abbreviate “degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness” as “degrees of responsibility.”

2 In what follows, I will generally use “difficulty” to cover both the idea of effort and that of sacrifice, but will disambiguate when relevant.

3 See, for example, Holly Smith (1991, pp. 281-82).

4 For example, on Holly Smith’s account of moral worth, praiseworthiness and blameworthiness provide “answers to the question of what makes a person good or bad for what she does” (p. 280). Notably, Smith is quite explicit that the accounts she offers of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in this sense are not accounts of moral responsibility (p. 279).

5 For further discussion of the distinction between these two notions, see Gary Watson (1996) and Nelkin (forthcoming). As Watson notes in his discussion of the distinction, it is because accountability brings with it questions of fairness of responses by others that the issue of whether the ability to do otherwise arises in discussions of accountability. It is here, too, that related questions concerning determinism and the ability to do otherwise arise. Finally, the notion of excuse gets purchase when it comes to questions of blameworthiness in the accountability sense, but not when it comes to attributability alone. Though there are those who take it that being blameworthy in the attributability sense suffices for blameworthiness in the accountability sense, this is a substantive claim, and before this is settled, it is at least an open question whether someone can be vicious but have an excuse for his or her vicious actions.
See Robert Kane (1996) and (1999). It is worth noting that Kane’s primary concern is free action, which he takes to be necessary for responsible action, and that he believes that actions can be free if they are undetermined in the way described in the text or are actions that flow from the character one creates when one acts freely in that way (even if the latter are determined).

Some, like Kane, adopt a kind of “tracing” view, so that even fully determined decisions can be free as long as they are the result of earlier undetermined self-forming ones. Thus, although Kane does not mention a requirement for a specific range of probabilities of self-forming actions, one might combine a view like that in the text (that takes the range to be close to the 50-50 odds), with a tracing view, to be able to count actions with other odds as also free, blameworthy and praiseworthy. Others, like Peter van Inwagen (1989) and (1994), take free action itself to be a rare phenomenon, thus accepting a significant revisionism, while allowing that since one can be accountable for many consequences of those rare free actions, moral accountability is less rare.

See also, for example, Angela Smith (2000), Matthew Talbert (2010), and Michael McKenna (2012) for quality of will accounts. It is also important to note that it is possible to see the adoption of such an account as consistent with one of the other accounts under discussion. McKenna, for example, takes it that one important aspect of quality of will is that an agent act freely, and that this aspect in turn should be understood in terms of the kind of reasons-responsiveness account discussed in section 3.

This view has much affinity with accounts of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness (or laudability and criticizability) in the moral worth literature. To take just one example, it corresponds with one model of moral worth identified by Smith (1991). See note 17.
Arpaly claims only that “other things being equal” the degree of praiseworthiness varies with degree of moral concern. But she does not discuss other independent dimensions.

There has been an interesting debate in the secondary literature on Kant on moral worth with positions that parallel these two ideas in the interpretation of a key passage. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant describes a person who is moved simply by pleasure taken in “spreading joy” around him. He next asks his reader to imagine that “the mind of this philanthropist were overclouded by his own grief, which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others…” He continues: “…suppose that now, when no longer incited to it by any inclination, he nevertheless tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, simply from duty; then the action first has moral worth. (Kant 1997) [GW 388]. Some influential commentators, including Beck (1960), claim that the passage be interpreted as showing that acting without any favorable inclination (and having to tear oneself away from one’s sorrow) offers a chance for us to see the moral worth of the action (p. 288). As against this epistemic interpretation, see Henson (1979) and Herman (1993). While the debate is about Kant, a large factor in assessing the competing interpretations is what is most plausible philosophically.

Thanks to Chandra Sripada for this suggestion.

Thanks to David Shoemaker for this suggestion.

Arpaly and Schroeder respond in part to a challenge to Arpaly’s (2003) view from Julia Markovits (2010), who defends the skeptical position that degrees of difficulty do not have an impact on degrees of moral worth for actions, but only provide us with important evidence of greater virtue (p. 240).

See Arpaly and Schroeder (2014, pp. 189-90) for a discussion of the conditions under which actions manifest good or ill will in terms of the amount of good will it would take to do the right
thing. It is also important to note that Arpaly and Schroeder make a key exception: if what makes it hard to perform an action is one’s own bad will (e.g., “racial hatred”), then one is not more praiseworthy (or, for that matter, blameworthy) for performing the action than one would be without such an obstacle. In other words, the source, or type, of the difficulty affects whether difficulty makes a difference to the amount of good will manifested by the action. Ideally, we would have an explanation for this exception. Is it because the existence of the bad motive cancels out whatever additional praiseworthiness one achieves through its taking a stronger good motive? Or is it that the difficulty actually has no effect in these cases? It might also be asked whether the same sort of exception applies in some cases of morally neutral motives (say, self-interest), when they compete with good motives. Are these to be treated like depression, as an obstacle that can make one more praiseworthy if one overcomes it, or like racial hatred as something that has no effect on one’s degree of praiseworthiness?

In response, Arpaly and Schroeder could say, as they do about a related case, that the action in fact manifests less ill will than it otherwise would because when one is drunk it can happen that “it takes” more good will to stay silent (p. 190). This move allows us to accept that difficulty determines (in part) how much ill will a given action manifests. But there is some reason to think that this answer will lead to counterintuitive results in other cases, and, more importantly for our purposes, there is also reason to think that this view cannot by itself exhaust the relevance of difficulty for degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the accountability sense. While a more detailed discussion will have to await a later occasion, I am sympathetic to a general approach taken by Smith (1991) that recognizes multiple and distinctive models of moral worth (or praiseworthiness in the attributability sense), each of which captures something, but not everything, of moral significance. The interesting question for our purposes,
then, becomes this: given these choices, which conception of moral worth is necessary for praiseworthiness (or blameworthiness) in the accountability sense? As I will argue in section 6, if we can find a model of accountability itself that explains how degrees of difficulty affects degrees of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, then we can either avoid this question altogether, or else allow the model to guide us in answering it.

17 The term, “real self” comes from Susan Wolf. Contemporary classic statements of this sort of view include Frankfurt (1971), Watson (1975).

18 For example, according to Frankfurt (1971), one acts from one’s real self when one acts on desires that one wants (at the second order) to be effective; Watson (1975) suggests that one acts from one’s real self when one acts on one’s values.


20 See Sehon (2008) for an interestingly parallel suggestion about how to extend a reasons-responsiveness view to account for degrees of responsibility. Sehon’s view differs in that on his view one is more free and responsible the more one’s action is “rationalizable,” where this is understood as being part of an intelligible interpretation of behavior in terms of goals, beliefs, and desires. While Sehon accounts for degrees of responsibility, he does not mention difficulty in particular as a factor.

21 One could also be a skeptic about degrees of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness altogether. But it is harder to see how one would be skeptical of degrees of responsibility in general without being even more radically revisionary. Perhaps the view defended by Michael Zimmerman (2002) comes closest. Distinguishing between degree and scope of responsibility, Zimmerman suggests that when one denies moral luck, we are all responsible to the same (or roughly the same) degree. This isn’t to deny that one can make sense of degrees, however.
Another question that arises here is whether difficulty alone really is a completely independent factor in non-moral praiseworthiness. Suppose Hitler works really hard one night to devise a new sort of torture. Is he praiseworthy when he accomplishes his goal—even in a non-moral sense? Or suppose someone works really hard to collect as many blades of grass as she can over a year long period for no further purpose. Is this effort—all by itself—praiseworthy?

The rejection of skepticism is also consistent with simply adding difficulty as an independent factor to one of the accounts explored earlier. But I believe that the theoretical unity achieved by showing how difficulty can be incorporated into an account provides an extra advantage against the skeptic.

See Manuel Vargas (2013) for an account that might also be appropriately described as a “Quality of Opportunity” account. Interestingly, it is embedded in a revisionist account of responsibility according to which such practices are justified by their effects. A full exploration of the similarities and differences between Vargas’ rich account and the one described in the text will have to await another occasion.

Legal theorists typically use the term “fair opportunity” to refer only to the situational factors. (See, for example, H.L.A. Hart (1961), p. 152 and Moore (1997), pp. 54-561.) But on the picture described here, one’s opportunity is partially determined by one’s own capacities. So two people in a similar situation might have quite different opportunities that depend on their differing capacities. See Brink and Nelkin (2013) for a more detailed presentation of this view.
It is plausible that whether, and how much, one deserves blame or praise, also tracks the quality of opportunity here. While I believe that how reasonable or fair it is to make demands is related to desert, I do not think that these come to the same thing. I discuss the relationship between fairness and desert more generally in Nelkin (2013).

In (Nelkin 2011), I argue that determinism is not itself a relevant intervener. See also Wolf (1990, 94-116) for a different argument for a compatibilist account of the ability to do otherwise, and for other recent compatibilist accounts of the ability to do otherwise in terms of the possession of dispositions, see Michael Smith (2003), Kadri Vihvelin (2004), and Michael Fara (2008).

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