

# Kane's Undesirable Responsibility

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## 1 Introduction

Properly attributing responsibility to individuals is far from a trivial concern. We want to be held responsible for the things that we control and not for those things that we do not control. Failing to appropriately hold someone responsible for an action or inappropriately holding someone responsible for an action is problematic at best and seriously unjust typically. With the goal of rightly discerning responsibility, one may adopt any of three perspectives regarding responsibility. First, one may adopt the hard determinist line and grant that determinism is true and that therefore individuals are not responsible for their actions. Second, one may adopt the soft determinist (or compatibilist) line and grant that determinism is true and that individuals are nonetheless still responsible for some actions. Third, one may adopt the libertarian line and deny that determinism is true and grant that individuals are responsible for some actions.

In light of contemporary science, anyone adopting the libertarian line is arguably saddled with some unsavory commitments. Since it seems possible to tell a causal story of action entirely in terms of brain events, the libertarian has the difficult task of explaining how indeterminism not only finds a place in the story but also makes the individual responsible for the resulting action. Robert Kane points to rare apparent indeterminism in brain processes to explain how individuals are responsible for the decisions they make. This indeterminism,

so Kane suggests, allows the individual to make a decision that is *undetermined* and for which the individual is accordingly responsible. In what follows, I explain Kane's view and then suggest that his view does not accord with the kind of responsibility that we care about. I ultimately conclude that Kane's view, regardless of its dubious empirical plausibility, results in a kind of responsibility that individuals should hesitate to endorse.

## 2 Ultimate Responsibility

Recognizing the problems that most libertarians face in grounding responsibility for particular actions in the possibility of having done otherwise, Kane suggests that responsibility is better grounded in something else. Since, according to Kane, individuals typically could not have acted differently than they in fact acted, rightly attributing responsibility to individuals cannot depend on their ability to have acted otherwise. Kane proposes that individuals are nonetheless responsible for their determined actions in virtue of being responsible for the sufficient reasons for those actions. He calls this kind of responsibility *ultimate responsibility*. If individuals are ultimately responsible for their actions, then the fact that most actions are causally determined poses no threat to responsibility on Kane's account.

Kane suggests an explanation for how agents are ultimately responsible by appealing to apparent indeterminacy present in those times when individuals must decide to act based on competing visions of the person they want to become.<sup>1</sup> Decisions in these rare moments, according to Kane, are undetermined and therefore the individual could have decided otherwise. Resulting from these decisions are the causal chains which include sufficient causes for the individual's other actions. Kane makes the case that while the actions are causally effected by the decision an individual makes in a rare moment of indeterminism, the individual is still responsible for his or her actions in virtue of being responsible for the sufficient causes of those actions. This story is purported to explain away the tension between the evidence that most actions are caused and the expectation that we can reasonably hold individuals

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<sup>1</sup>See Kane (2000, 132).

responsible for their decisions and actions.

To illustrate how Kane's account functions, suppose that a businessman must decide between engaging in fraudulent behavior to get a lucrative promotion or to maintain integrity, thereby forgoing the promotion. In this case, the businessman experiences phenomenological uncertainty that, according to Kane, has its analogue in the indeterminacy of neural processes.<sup>2</sup> The businessman must decide between being the kind of man who will behave in morally questionable ways for personal advantage and being the kind of man who considers integrity to be more important than career gains. Whichever motivation the businessman decides to act upon will shape his character and his future. The action he performs results from an undetermined *self-forming willing*, which is a will formed freely.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that he decides to refrain from acting wrongly and does not earn the promotion, he is responsible for being a man of integrity in virtue of having freely decided to act this way. By making the decision, he sufficiently causes whatever decisions and actions follow from it. So while the actions that follow are sufficiently caused, he is still ultimately responsible for them by being responsible for the decision which sufficiently caused them.

The suggestion is that occasions when individuals act on self-forming willings are rare but shape the individuals' character. Individuals are ultimately responsible for their actions because they are responsible for the sufficient causes of those actions. The sufficient causes are those actions that result from self-forming willings, which significantly influence the course of the individual's life despite their infrequency. Making a decision about the kind of person one wants to become effects a causal chain of resulting decisions. Individuals are responsible insofar as their decisions about who they want to become are undetermined and result from deliberation rather than strict causation. So, Kane suggests, it is appropriate to attribute responsibility to individuals for many determined actions when those actions result from an undetermined action that the individual decides upon in life-changing moments.

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<sup>2</sup>See Kane (2000, 132).

<sup>3</sup>See Kane (2000, 130).

### 3 Undesirable Responsibility

Kane's variety of libertarianism seems to resolve the incompatibilist conflict between the determinism of human action and the reasonable attribution of responsibility. By grounding individual responsibility in a few actions, Kane offers a view that avoids global indeterminism and the requirement that individuals are responsible only when they could have acted otherwise. I have some reservations about the plausibility of Kane's account and a more serious concern that even if the account is objectively accurate, it fails to establish the kind of responsibility that individuals should care about.

First, I am skeptical that Kane can successfully ground responsibility in indeterminism. While he maintains that the relevant decisions result from willing and are done for reasons,<sup>4</sup> it is not clear how his account avoids challenges leveled against substance dualists.<sup>5</sup> Second, I worry whether his move from phenomenological evidence of indeterminacy to actual neural indeterminacy is plausible. Certainly even *determined* actions can be accompanied by phenomenology of uncertainty. Choosing, for example, between chocolate and vanilla ice cream can feel uncertain and even require some deliberation, but it is hardly appropriate to identify this decision as an undetermined self-forming willing. I mention these criticisms only in passing, since the first variety is as old as critics of dualism and the second could be settled by empirical evidence one way or the other.<sup>6</sup> I will instead raise a more serious objection against Kane's variety of libertarianism which grants the truth of his account for the sake of argument.

Even assuming that Kane's is the right account of responsibility, I doubt that the kind of responsibility he can explain is the kind of responsibility that individuals want. Consider again the businessman who retains his integrity in lieu of a promotion. On Kane's account,

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<sup>4</sup>See Kane (2000, 133).

<sup>5</sup>That is, how can the individual as undetermined agent interact with the undetermined neural processes in a meaningful way? It seems that indeterminism is indeterminism, and an individual who can force the decision one way or another has a mysterious quality akin to that of immaterial souls.

<sup>6</sup>I also imagine that Kane addresses this further in what follows the *Précis*, so the criticism may prove irrelevant or unfounded.

since the businessman is responsible for deciding to be the kind of man who turns down immoral promotions, he is also responsible for the actions causally effected by his decision. Suppose as a result of maintaining his current position and salary, he much later must decide between paying his son's college tuition or paying for his mother's medical care. His limited salary precludes doing both, so he decides to care for his ailing mother. As a result, his son must take out student loans to fund his education. Given these kinds of dilemmas, it hardly seems fair to hold the man responsible for being unable to pay for all of his family's expenses. After all, he is in this position as a result of his morally praiseworthy decision to sacrifice a questionable promotion. If anything, his earlier decision for which he was immediately responsible seems to excuse his inability to financially support both his mother and son. On Kane's account, however, he is ultimately responsible for every decision causally effected by his self-forming decision. So, despite not anticipating this particular financial decision, the man is ultimately responsible for deciding to support his mother and not his son.

Since self-forming acts are rare, individuals are responsible for decisions that they could not possibly foresee when they make single decisions that shape the direction of their lives. Given the choice between being ultimately responsible for every decision resulting from an undetermined decision and being responsible for only those rare decisions, it seems preferable to be responsible for only those decisions about which individuals can meaningfully deliberate. While this would mean that individuals can reasonably be held responsible for only a few, rare decisions, that seems far preferable to holding individuals responsible for decisions that they largely have no rational part in making.

## 4 Conclusion

To provide an account of responsibility that is compatible with the evidence that human actions are largely determined, Kane suggests that individuals are responsible insofar as they form their own character in a few pivotal moments in life. Kane's ultimate responsibility

requires that individuals be responsible for things about which they are largely ignorant - namely those decisions which result from a mere few actions in their lives. Even if Kane's account is successful, it does not provide the kind of responsibility that we want to have. Since it seems unfair to hold individuals responsible for decisions that they could not foresee or truly reason about, we should hesitate to endorse Kane's account. Ultimate responsibility is too heavy a burden for individuals to bear, and the responsibility that Kane's account entails is simply undesirable.

## References

Kane, R. (2000). Précis of the significance of free will, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **60**(1): 129–134.