John Martin Fischer is the Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Riverside. Here he discusses semicompatibilism, freedom, determinism, moral responsibility, responsibility practices, different kinds of control, death, anti-Epicureanism, and issues relating to the meaning of life.

3:AM: What made you become a philosopher?

JOHN MARTIN FISCHER: I’m not sure, but I suspect that various factors played roles in this disaster! From early on, I liked the idea of going into teaching as a profession. Both of my father’s brothers were university professors, and I admired them greatly, and I especially admired their opportunities to travel all over the world as part of their profession and to be mentors to young people (and to keep in touch with their students, who sometimes became their friends). As an undergraduate at Stanford, I really enjoyed my philosophy classes, and slowly I became hooked. Michael Bratman was a huge influence on me—he was a great teacher, and he introduced me to Harry Frankfurt’s work in an upper division “action theory” class. In that class we read Frankfurt’s 1969 article in which he presented his famous (putative) counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (according to which moral responsibility requires access to alternative possibilities). I was definitely addicted to philosophy at that point—and how could I have done otherwise?

I had a wonderful experience in graduate school at Cornell University, where I was especially helped by Carl Ginet, Terry Irwin, and Sydney Shoemaker. I’ve always thought that I became a Semicompatibilist because Carl Ginet was an incompatibilist, while Terry Irwin and Sydney Shoemaker were compatibilists. One wants to please one’s parents, as it were! (Semicompatibilism is the
3:AM: Most people hold themselves and others morally responsible. And you think we need a philosophical foundation for this. Others might say that it’s just biology, or culture, or education or psychological biases or a supernatural element underwritten by a deity that makes us do this and that there’s not space for a philosophical foundation. How do you think we should answer this mix of challenges?

JMF: In some ways it can be helpful to have an explanation of our responsibility practices. Perhaps in the end they are just “brute” or unexplained by deeper philosophical ideas, but I think it can be fruitful at least to explore ways in which our responsibility practices can be explained by simpler, more basic ideas (where these are distinctively philosophical ideas). If we have such an explanation, we can (perhaps, at least) answer certain moral responsibility skeptics, and we might be able to provide answers to questions about moral responsibility in “hard cases,” such as psychopathy and other disordered agents. After all, our actual responsibility practices can (and should) be called into question, and they don’t in themselves answer questions about certain contentious or difficult cases. Can a severely depressed individual be deemed morally responsible? An individual suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease? How about an individual with unusual or atypical brain structures (suggestive of a higher probability of violent behaviour)?

Similarly, I think it is desirable to have a way of engaging more productively with the moral responsibility skeptics. That is, we want to take their worries very seriously, and seek to address them as much as possible on their own terms. This is perhaps a way in which I differ from the approach taken by Peter Strawson (although we both think that moral responsibility should be sequestered from certain metaphysical issues). I believe in a moderate sequestration of metaphysics, whereas Peter Strawson argues for a more extreme sequestration of metaphysics. Here (as elsewhere) I prefer the path of moderation.

3:AM: You take this to mean that we are committed to a framework involving freewill and moral responsibility and you argue that “control” is a key to working out this framework. So can you first tell us about the two kinds of control you identify—“regulative control” and “guidance control.”

JMF: Yes, regulative control involves a “dual” or “two-way” agential power. If an agent with regulative control does X, he or she could have refrained from doing X (and done some Y instead). I assume further that the agent would have been acting freely along either path, that is, along the X path and along the Y path. Alternatively, one might say that an agent with regulative control
exhibits guidance control along both paths—the actual path leading to X, and the alternative path leading to Y.

3:AM: It’s guidance control that you think is significant for morally free agency don’t you?

JMF: Yes. I claim that guidance control is all the freedom required for moral responsibility. An agent need not have regulative control over her behavior in order to be morally responsible for it: all that is necessary is for the agent to have guidance control of it. I have argued that the Frankfurt cases are situations in which agents have guidance control without also possessing regulative control.

3:AM: There are concerns about the impact of causal determinism on our ability to be free moral agents. On the face of it, it seems to deprive us of the control needed but you argue that the beauty of guidance control is that it is compatible with causal determinism don’t you?

JMF: Yes. And I do think it is a beautiful and elegant theory. On my view, guidance control is the freedom-relevant condition necessary and sufficient for moral responsibility. To exercise guidance control of behavior, the behavior must issue from an agent’s own, appropriately reasons-responsive mechanism. It is not simply required that the agent in question have the capacity for reasons-responsiveness; in addition, the behavior much issue from this general capacity. I further contend that “ownership” of the mechanism that issues in the behavior, and the “reasons-responsiveness” of the mechanism in question, are entirely consistent with causal determinism. So even if causal determinism would rule out regulative control, it would not thereby (or for any other compelling reason) threaten guidance control (and robust moral responsibility).

3:AM: You argue that moral responsibility is connected with artistic self-expression, in fact you argue that being morally responsible is a species of artistic self-expression. This is derived from your idea that the value of moral responsibility is connected to the value of exhibiting freedom. Is that right?

JMF: Yes. In my view, and based on Aristotle’s approach, there are two conditions for moral responsibility: an epistemic condition and a freedom-relevant condition. I contend that guidance-control is the freedom-relevant condition. But these are “first-order” conditions on moral responsibility. One can step back and ask the question, “Why do we value acting in such a way as to be fairly (or legitimately) held morally responsible?” Here we are asking a second-order question, “What is the value of acting from one’s own, reasons-responsive mechanism”? Here I suggest that this value is the same as the value
we place on artistic self-expression. In acting freely, we are (in a sense) writing a sentence in the narrative of our lives. Our free will transforms us into authors of the stories of our lives, and endows us with an irreducible “narrative” dimension of value.

3:AM: From this foundation you argue that death can be a bad thing for a person—even though of course that person can’t experience harm. Epicureans disagree. So how do you argue that they’re wrong?

JMF: I follow an anti-Epicurean tradition (at least if one interprets Epicurus in a certain way) in arguing that death can be bad for an individual insofar as it is a deprivation of what would be on-balance good (including some positive experiences). (It is anti-Epicurean in the sense that it holds that something can be bad for an individual without the individual’s experiencing anything unpleasant as a result of the thing in question.) I have sought to build on examples and arguments suggested by such contemporary anti-Epicureans as Thomas Nagel, Joel Feinberg, Jeffrey McMahan, and Robert Nozick. They have offered compelling (in my view) examples in which it seems that an individual can be the subject of a misfortune without experiencing it as unpleasant or bad in any way, and without being able so to experience it. I have offered a defence of the notion that we can extrapolate from these (and related examples) to the badness of death, where (I stipulate) there is not even an individual left to be the subject of the purported harm or misfortune.

3:AM: We’ve all been dead before and don’t worry so much about that; and we’re going to be dead again one day and it strikes me as a damn scary thing coming. Some people say there’s no reason justifying this asymmetry of attitudes towards death but you say there are good reasons for it. So why is my attitude rational and defensible?

JMF: Anthony Brueckner and I have argued that it is rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous non-existence as a special case of a more general rational asymmetry toward past and future pleasurable experiences. We here employ certain Parfit-style thought-experiments to motivate the idea that it is rational to care especially about future pleasures. Given that death deprives us of future pleasures, and the fact that we are born “late” deprives us of past pleasures, our commonsense attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous non-existence turn out to be a rationally defensible particular instance of a more general asymmetry.

The Brueckner/Fischer line has it that our asymmetric attitudes toward late birth and early death are a special case of a more general asymmetry. I have offered a sketch of an argument for the rationality of this more general asymmetry; in future work I hope to fill in this sketch a bit.
3:AM: Heidegger and Bernard Williams thought immortality would be a bore or worse but you think it could be good. How do you argue for living forever?

JMF: I think that there are two kinds of projects that could give us reason to live forever (assuming relatively favorable physical, economic and environmental circumstances). The first kind of project would be “other-directed”—scientific, artistic, social, and so forth. I don’t see any reason to suppose that we would necessarily run out of such projects, even in an infinitely long life. It seems to me that to suppose otherwise might be to buy into a misleading metaphor—the metaphor of the library of books with a large but finite collection. The idea is that our projects are the books in this library; with an infinite amount of time, one could read all the books, and one would be left then with nothing but oneself, as it were. But this is problematic for various reasons. I think the most obvious reason is that there we should not suppose that life’s projects are accurately represented by a finite set of books. After all, to stick to the metaphor, people are writing new books all the time. So by the time we would have read all the books in the original collection, there will be new books to read. Also, even if there were merely a finite set of books, why can’t we appreciate a book we have read before when we come to it after having had a new set of experiences?

So I don’t think we would necessarily run out of other-directed projects, such as finding the cures to diseases and maladies, economic and environmental challenges, writing compelling novels and poetry and philosophy, and so forth. But there are also “self-directed” projects, such as enjoying music, art, food, and sex, or meditating or praying. Suitably distributed over time, and given variety in the content of the experiences, I don’t see why these kinds of projects could not also give one reason to live indefinitely. I certainly would not reduce all value or meaningfulness to such projects; but they do seem sufficient to give one reason to prefer continued life to death.

3:AM: Is it your view that by reflecting on death we get a grip on what is of value in life? Is this what you’re getting at by saying that in acting freely our stories matter?

JMF: I do think that reflection on the badness of death can help us to illuminate questions about what makes life meaningful. Also, I think that reflection on immortality and whether immortal life could be choiceworthy and meaningful can help us to understand in a deeper way why our finite lives are meaningful (if they indeed are).

But my views about the relationship between acting freely and our stories are a bit different. I hold that in acting freely we transform the chronicles of our lives into genuine narratives. Our stories are not just descriptions—they are narratives. And in evaluating our lives, there is an irreducibly narrative
dimension. That is, the value of our lives is determined by a function that takes into account more than just the total welfare or happiness as aggregated over our lifetimes. This value also depends crucially on relationships between parts of our lives that have important structural similarities to the parts of narratives. In particular, the meanings or values of certain parts depend crucially on relationships with other parts. Here I rely on important ideas of David Velleman. I add the contention that our acting freely—exhibiting guidance control—is the crucial ingredient that transforms the chronicles of our lives into narratives and thus makes us artists (authors of the stories of our lives).

3:AM: “Deep control” is the moderate position between the extremes of “superficial control” and “total control.” Why is it “deep control” we need for the distinctive sort of self-expression you contend we need to be morally responsible?

JMF: We need more than “superficial control” because of obvious inadequacies in various “superficial” analyses of control, such as the conditional analysis of freedom (and so forth). One clear set of problems pertains to the possibility of manipulation. On the other hand, “total control” is too much to ask—it is manifestly impossible and intuitively just too much to ask for. (Well, at least in my opinion, and not Galen Strawson’s!) I think that a certain kind of reflective maturity will naturally issue in a middle-ground here: we need more resources than mere invocation of certain “springs of action,” such as choices, but we do not need to travel back to the very beginning of the sequences that issue in our behavior. This then gets us to the Middle Way represented by guidance control.

3:AM: You dismiss total control as a kind of “metaphysical megalomania”—what’s the error here?

JMF: The error here is kind of like the error of the kid who keeps asking “why?” and never stops. But admittedly it is an error which is such that it is hard to explain exactly why it is an error! (And I grant that there are those who do not find it an error at all!) Well, in most contexts it just is inappropriate to keep asking “why” and not to recognize that certain answers are perfectly reasonable or fitting in the context of what is being asked. Since we can’t be the cause of ourselves, some (following Galen Strawson) conclude that we can’t be morally responsible for our behavior (I’ve oversimplified unconscionably here). I’d rather turn this point on its head and conclude that the requirement that leads to the need for self-causation is over-rigorous, since it apparently leads to absurdity. We do need to own the mechanisms that issue in our behavior, but it does not follow that we must be the first causes of that behavior. I think it is a kind of intellectual maturity to realize that, if one’s perhaps initial
thought that we need to be originators of our behavior leads us to a manifest absurdity (that we are causes of ourselves, as it were). It should be reconceptualized so that it is not extreme.

**3:AM:** “Judgment sensitivity” and “conditional freedom” get it wrong not by wanting to go all the way back but by not going back far enough. You think they’re too shallow to contribute to moral responsibility don’t you?

**JMF:** In my opinion these ideas might “contribute” to an understanding of moral responsibility, and they—or something like them—might be elements of a more comprehensive account of moral responsibility. But they don’t get it right, in my view, just as they are (or without further supplementation). For instance, it is well-known that the conditional, “If I were to choose to X, I would X” is insufficient for “I can X,” since it might be the case that I am unable to choose to X. Similarly, I do not think that judgment sensitivity is necessary for moral responsibility, since a Frankfurt-style counterfactual intervener could render an agent judgment-insensitive without interfering in the actual sequence leading to the behavior (and thus not etiolating the agent’s moral responsibility.) So a more nuanced, refined set of conditions must be developed. I would suggest that such an account must make use of devices similar to the two key elements in my account of guidance control: ownership and reasons-responsiveness. The mix will involve holding some factors fixed, while allowing others to vary. At a deep level my approach arguably shares these abstract elements with the approach of the so-called “New Dispositionalists,” who contend that even in Frankfurt cases the agent has a certain sort of ability to do otherwise. Note that I need not disagree with these theorists about the presence of alternative possibilities interpreted in their more abstract way in the Frankfurt cases.

**3:AM:** You’ve argued that your position is compatible with causal determination but it is also compatible with causal indeterminacy as well isn’t it?

**JMF:** Yes, my account of guidance control has the virtue (in my opinion) of being compatible with causal determination and also with the lack of causal determination. This helps to achieve a goal I think is worthwhile: rendering our responsibility practices resilient with respect to certain scientific discoveries. Our moral responsibility should not “hang on a thread.”

I do believe that our moral responsibility practices presuppose certain contingent, empirical features of the world. I think they presuppose that we are “in the space of reasons,” just for one example. By this metaphor I mean at least that we are reasonably good at identifying reasons for action and responding to them. (This is, of course, a somewhat contentious view these days.) But I just don’t think that these deep and important features of our lives presuppose
either the truth or falsity of causal determinism. We wouldn’t, and shouldn’t, give up our view of ourselves as morally responsible if we were to wake up to the New York Times headline, “Causal Determinism is True!” Nor would we be obliged to give up our basic view of ourselves as morally responsible if we were to wake up to the headline, “Causal Determinism is False”! It is an advantage of an account of moral responsibility that it does not conceptualize responsibility as dependent on these sorts of empirical theories.

3:AM: And for the readers here at 3:AM are there five books other than your own (which we’ll all be running out to read straight after this) that would help us get to grips with this philosophical world of yours?

Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*.
Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*.
Gary Watson, *Agency and Answerability*.

**John Martin Fischer** is the author of:


(Cambridge University Press, 1998)

*Introduction to Philosophy: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (with John Perry and Michael Bratman) (Oxford University Press, 2009)

*Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2009)