

FREE WILL DENIALISM AS A DANGEROUS GAMBLE

– Saul Smilansky –

Abstract: Denialism concerning free will and moral responsibility combines, in its minimal form, the rejection of libertarian free will and the rejection of compatibilism. I will address the more ambitiously “happy” or “optimistic” version of denialism, which also claims that we are better off without belief in free will and moral responsibility, and ought to try to radically reform our moral, social and personal lives without such beliefs. I argue that such denialism involves, for various reasons, a dangerous gamble, which it would be morally irresponsible to follow. I conclude by reflecting upon the implications.

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1. Preliminaries

Denialism concerning free will and moral responsibility combines, in its minimal form, the rejection of libertarian free will and the rejection of compatibilism.¹ I will address the more ambitiously “happy” or “optimistic” version of denialism, which also claims that we are better off without belief in free will and moral responsibility, and ought to try to radically reform our moral, social and personal lives without such beliefs. I argue that such denialism involves, for various reasons, a dangerous gamble, which it would be morally irresponsible to follow. I conclude by reflecting upon the implications.

There have been numerous attempts in recent years to critically analyze optimistic denialist evaluations of the situation and the recommendations for radical change. These critical explorations involve a close analysis of the prospects and challenges facing a radical change such as those the denialists envisage, mostly but not exclusively concerning punishment.² In this paper I aim to take a broader, bird’s-eye view of the

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¹ I have chosen the term “denialism.” Some use the terms “hard determinism,” “hard incompatibilism,” or “free will skepticism” for roughly this sort of view, but each such possibility has in my opinion different unwanted connotations.

² See e.g. Lemos (2016); Smilansky (2017; 2019); Levy (2023).

situation. I concentrate not on specific dangers but on the radical nature of the broad *strategic* attempt to change things so fundamentally, in itself. My focus is on explaining the general reason to be wary of making anything like the radical change that the optimistic denialists aspire to.

In a more systematic way, denialism (on free will and moral responsibility; henceforth the disclaimer will be dropped) in its minimal version combines the first two among the following philosophical positions, whereas its broader version encompasses all five³:

- (1) NON-LIBERTARIANISM: There is no libertarian free will (LFW) and hence no LFW-based moral responsibility.
- (2) INCOMPATIBILISM: Compatibilism with respect to the possibility of free will and moral responsibility in a world without LFW (such as a deterministic world) is mistaken.

The combined implication of (1) and (2) is that there is no free will and no moral responsibility of either libertarian or compatibilist kinds. This, again, suffices for a minimal form of denialism. A broad version (which is the focus of this paper) adds the following three positions:

- (3) THE AWFULNESS OF THE STATUS QUO: The belief in free will and moral responsibility and the connected reactions and practices are, all considered, extremely harmful.
- (4) THE VIABILITY OF ALTERNATIVES: There are good and realistic alternatives to the beliefs in free will and moral responsibility and to the reactions and practices that typically go with them.
- (5) WE SHOULD OPT FOR RADICAL CHANGE: We should, all considered, aim to bring about a radical change; and to live without the beliefs, attitudes and practices which assume libertarian or compatibilist free will and moral responsibility.

This sort of denialism is very ambitious. It rejects what I have called the Core Conception of beliefs concerning free will, moral responsibility, and the concomitant beliefs, reactions and practices.⁴ This is quite general, and often quite vague, as well as an idealized version of prevailing views, which are often not so pure. According to this Core Conception, free will or control is the basis for moral responsibility, which is in turn a condition for deserving many sorts of evaluations, reactions and treatments. Self-attitudes, interpersonal relations, social interactions, institutions and practices, should all, in manifold ways and within constraints and limitations but nevertheless very broadly, *respond to* and *track responsibility-relevant control*. This is moral responsibility of the desert-involving kind, not only a forward-looking one. Hence, for example, pro tanto, we ought to create social orders where personal choice and responsibility can be widely exercised and rewarded, accept moral responsibility and blame ourselves for our negative free actions, be grateful to those who freely help us, appreciate people (including ourselves) who make significant sacrifices or take risks for good moral reasons, and take great care and even risks in order not to blame or punish the innocent who lacked control over their actions.

³ See Smilansky (2023).

⁴ Smilansky (2000: ch. 2; 2022a).

There is an intimate connection between the Core Conception concerning free will and moral responsibility, and respect for persons.⁵ To respect persons is to take their choices and actions in themselves seriously (not just for consequentialist reasons), to see them as autonomous and responsible agents who are appreciated and treated in accordance with their intentions, efforts and doings. As John Gardner put it, “moral agency and moral responsibility represent a significant part of what it is to be a human being.”⁶ We ought then to establish and cherish a Community of Responsibility,⁷ which follows the Core Conception values (as allowed for by libertarian or compatibilist beliefs). If one follows hard determinism or some other form of free will and moral responsibility denialism, then the Core Conception becomes largely impossible to apply, yet this in itself matters, as we shall see ahead.

2. Denialism as a dangerous gamble

The nature of denialism as a grave gamble can be seen in various ways:

2.1. It has never been done before

For all the obvious broad historical and cultural-social diversity of humanity, we hardly find any society which did not use the notions of free will or control as a basis for moral responsibility (and concomitant notions such as praise and blame). Recent comparative studies have revealed a surprising degree of cross-cultural convergence.^{8,9}

There is by contrast plenty of variety in how seriously people take the moral importance of individual responsibility. “Honor cultures” in particular are often happy to punish people who are innocent, because of their family or otherwise collective membership.¹⁰ But that of course is a very different matter, and even such cultures do not deny the idea of personal control and control-based responsibility. They just do not give it the morally required weight, i.e., not sufficiently valuing the Core Conception. History and comparative studies of current societies indeed show no indication of societies where people are not held responsible in any sense. This makes the mountain that optimistic denialists have to climb that much taller. Yet, at the same time, these studies

⁵ Smilansky (2000: section 2.1; 2005); see also Kant (1778/2015); Bradley (1927: essay 1); Hart (1970); Morris (1976); Berlin (1980).

⁶ Gardner (2007): 218.

⁷ Smilansky (2000): 83.

⁸ It might be thought that certain Protestant sects like Calvinists provide an exception, due to their views about predestination, which precludes free will. But it is very doubtful whether their members really did not think of themselves as responsible, or held others so; these were in fact societies with strict codes who held people strongly accountable. Admittedly, there is a difference between saying that almost everybody consciously held the belief that there is free will and saying that even if “officially” they denied free will, their attitudes/behaviors show that they were not really committed to this belief. Weber’s classical work on Protestantism and capitalism seems to lend support to the idea that the absence of free will was not really internalized, and, e.g., people saw themselves as chosen for salvation in accordance with their agency-based success. See Weber (1904/2002).

⁹ See e.g. Sarkissian et al. (2010).

¹⁰ See e.g. Sommers (2012).

also clearly show that in no way can we rest assured that elementary moral distinctions and constraints will be respected. Respect for persons and the idea of a decent society require that we take the Core Conception seriously, but this is not automatic. Humans have been and are all too ready to blame and punish collectively, disregard agency and innocence, not care about ability (in any sense) to have avoided the given sanction, and the like. Again, while all societies seem to hold people as agents typically with considerable control over their actions and with moral responsibility, not all consider these adequately when it comes to the way they treat people. Still, denialism is supporting a grand move that has not been done before and, thereby, taking an enormous risk.

2.2. It goes against human nature

Claims that things are inconsistent with human nature should be taken skeptically. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deeply understand ambitious forms of optimistic denialism except as suggesting that we can limit the aspects of human nature concerning comparative judgmental evaluation of human agency-based goodness and badness, and as a result of blame and praise. When people grow up they are then, on this basis, held more and more accountable for their actions, in the strong sense that involves being potentially a target for justified resentment and blame. Emphasizing this is a major contribution of P.F. Strawson's famous "Freedom and Resentment."¹¹ This argumentative direction has received a great deal of philosophical discussion, and there are complex issues of interpretation and evaluation applied to it, which we cannot take up here. But even if one does not altogether buy into Strawson's line, it seems hard to deny that it captures this crucial element, that belief in the sort of control that grounds moral responsibility is highly natural and central for human beings.

Even optimistic denialists have had to recruit substitutes for the familiar beliefs, reactions and practices based upon the belief in free will and moral responsibility. For example: "Instead of blaming people, the determinist might appeal to the practice of moral admonishment and encouragement. One might, for example, explain to an offender that what he did was wrong, and then encourage him to refrain from performing similar actions in the future."¹² One can also *protest* his intransigence.¹³ But for a genuine denialist, this cannot go very far. If the admonished offender does not respond adequately, even after we protest, he cannot, after all, be blamed in the familiar ways. Pereboom has tried to co-opt the term blame for denialists,¹⁴ but this seems to me misleading. If no one is morally responsible in a way which can make her *deserve* blame (and according to denialism, of course no one can), then we should not use the terminology of blame. Since inducing a sense of responsibility-based blame is forbidden, people are unlikely to grow up with a dependable set of dispositions to behave responsibly – they will not even be acquainted with the notion, except as that held by other, mistaken people, who have been misled into believing in personal responsibility and desert.

¹¹ Strawson (1962/2003).

¹² Pereboom (2001): 325.

¹³ Pereboom (2017b).

¹⁴ Pereboom (2012).

2.3. The Present Danger of the Future Retrospective Excuse

One central illustration of the predicament is that we confront here “*The Present Danger of the Future Retrospective Excuse*.”¹⁵ We cannot sensibly tell people that they should behave in a certain way, that it is morally crucial that they do, but then, if they do not, say that this is (in every case) excusable, or at least exempts them from blameworthiness. As Tony Honore put it “to treat people as responsible promotes individual and social well-being... It helps to preserve social order by encouraging good and discouraging bad behaviour. At the same time, it makes possible a sense of personal character and identity that is valuable for its own sake.”¹⁶ The denialist perspective is directly pragmatically dangerous. The thought that an escape from moral responsibility will be available in the *future* is likely to affect the view of the *present*, and hence cannot be safely fully admitted even in its *retrospective* form. Thoughts about automatic exemption are very likely to cause great harm, hindering the inner pressure to resist temptation and reform oneself, and conveying that, whatever one does, one will be safe from the (just) blame and punishment of others, as well as from guilt and compunction.¹⁷ Denialism lacks adequate resources to deal with such dangers. The ideas of free will and moral responsibility are crucial.

2.4. The rejection of “The greatest form of historical progress”

Morally, the idea that blame and punishment, and more broadly the evaluation and treatments that people ought to get, need to be related to their *individual* control and responsibility, is one of the greatest achievements of humanity, arguably its greatest one. Both historically and inter-culturally, societies have been all too happy to have people who are clearly innocent pay and even be punished. When the prophets decree the evil of having the sons pay for the sins of their fathers (Ezekiel 18), this was a moral breakthrough. A civilized morality and a decent society depend on it; on valuing the Core Conception and the moral importance of agency and (in the legal world) the parallel just accountability requirements and distinctions. Denialists are taking away the bulwarks of civilization and threatening us with a return to barbarity.

2.5. The devaluation of value

Under the Core Conception, life is in large measure about attaining individual merit and value, through the exercise of our agency. According to denialism, such attainment is impossible. We can still have enjoyable experiences, and can try to motivate people to act in useful ways. But fundamentally, life is not about (agency-based) value, which people come to deserve through their efforts. Once again, the damage of a widespread acceptance of denialism is likely to be enormous, and the view is highly toxic.

Moreover, it is difficult to reject the great dependency of forms of self-respect and respect for persons, or the appreciation of the efforts and sacrifices of others, on the

¹⁵ Smilansky (2000): 153.

¹⁶ Honore (1999): 125.

¹⁷ This is an instance of what I have elsewhere called “Teflon Immorality.” See Smilansky (2013).

ideas of free choice and moral responsibility. If everything that we and those we care about do is merely an unfolding of the given, which is ultimately beyond our control, then fundamental aspects of humanity, such as those concerning the attainment of value, gratitude and appreciation-based love, are under grave threat. If not altogether senseless, they become much impoverished. And denialism of course gives up even on compatibilist understandings of these matters, not only libertarian ones.

A brief illustration might be helpful. Consider the case of a mother who, for decades and at great sacrifice, overcoming poverty and hardship, conscientiously devoted herself to her children. Call her the Devoted Mother. On the ultimate hard determinist level, real appreciation and a real sense of her individual attainment make no sense. All her hard choices, her continuous and overwhelming efforts, her suffering and her triumphs, become embedded in what must be seen as only an inevitable chain of events beyond her control. What room, then, is there for a special sense that *here* one did “the best that one could”? What room for the pride of overcoming, an achievement which is never even thought about as being simply *given*? What room for deep appreciation and gratitude, an appreciation and a gratitude that are so different from merely being happy that something favorable happened?¹⁸

This is not to say that the notion of appreciation itself cannot operate under denialist assumptions (I can appreciate the speed or durability of my car, or the height of a basketball player), but for the sense of appreciation that not only locates the good features with e.g., the car or the player, but gives it credit, free will is required.

The connection of these to the issue of meaning in life seems direct.¹⁹ The implications of the denial of libertarian free will are enormous, and this is further enhanced if one also rejects compatibilist forms of free will and moral responsibility. For then, *all one's attainments would ultimately not be to one's credit*. This has strongly deflationary implications for the attainment and accumulation of meaning.

Beyond the pragmatic dangers (e.g., to motivation), human life risks losing a deep sense of value and of meaning that are intimately connected to the idea of free and responsible agency, and of what one acquires by the way in which one exercises them. This is not to deny that even without free will and moral responsibility we have some basis for being-glad-about, as we value babies although they lack free will, we value works of art, or the beauty of nature. But while we can be glad about these features of the world, no one, under denialism, gets any deep credit for them, nor merits our appreciation. All that is possible under denialism is clearly much more limited once the free will-based forms of evaluation and appreciation are given up. Denialism is “the great eraser,” disconnecting human life from central aspects of a backward-looking sense of desert for one's good-will, efforts and contributions; and these are crucial sources for generating (self)-respect, a sense of value and appreciation. Indeed, it seems appropriate to see denialism as a moderate form of nihilism; not, of course, denying all value, but fatally threatening the deep agency-based ones.

¹⁸ See Smilansky (2012).

¹⁹ For my detailed view, see Smilansky (2000: section 11.5; 2022a).

2.6. An over-dependence on consequentialism

This “self-denial” of denialism and its consequent impoverishment leave it largely at the mercy of forward-looking, consequentialist considerations. According to such considerations, human interaction is not supposed to follow notions of free will and moral responsibility-based desert, neither the familiar ideas, reactions and practices (the agency-based attainment of value, appreciation and praise, self-appreciation and self-respect, deep gratitude), but the altogether different idea of something like getting people to do what is socially useful.

There is surely a constant temptation to get things done, to use people, to achieve good social results at the expense of individuals, in short, to bypass “respect for persons,” particularly if interpreted in an individualistic and liberal manner. History, as we already noted, is full of examples. Whether in the form of bigotry that cares nothing for choice and responsibility, or the dominance of the need to manage things and the call for efficiency, which bypasses them, the temptation is always present. But constraining such natural social and political tendencies is no mean feat. And traditional free will-related beliefs have played a major role here. For example, the idea of the *sanctity of innocence*: the thought that the innocent must not be harmed, while those who freely chose to do bad may be harmed, at least if this would produce good results. Yet for denialism, everyone is in the deep moral sense innocent, whatever he or she has done or not done. Here the criticism of denialism connects to the detailed studies in the literature about the specific dangers of applying its principles.

But even where their cards are strongest, with punishment, the denialists should not be followed. For denialists, no one can be *justly* punished, and hence cannot be effectively threatened with punishment. At most, denialists can opt for “funishment,” incarceration joined with very generous living conditions (in order to compensate for the undeserved injustice of incarceration), which is then self-defeating for denialism.²⁰ Joining forces here with a utilitarian-like consequentialism (or other such ways of justifying punishment) means betrayal of the negative but true insights of a morally deep denialist position, concerning universal innocence and the concomitant injustice of punishment.²¹

Denialists have emphasized the drawbacks of traditional views which follow the free will paradigm,²² but these views are often also safeguards of equity, decency and human rights.²³ The grave dangers of the alternative of forward-looking consequentialism

²⁰ Smilansky (2011); for criticism of my “funishment” argument see Levy (2012); Waller (2015): 197–200; Pereboom (2017a).

²¹ It might be argued that if there is no free will in any sense, we must abandon the Core Conception, the very notion of desert ceases to make any sense, together with any sense of fairness or injustice based on it. And then perhaps the pragmatic justification of punishment (or of other attitudes and practices) can proceed undisturbed. But this argument is unconvincing. Desert is a way of justifying divergence from a moral baseline. If desert becomes impossible, this does not mean that the moral baseline has somehow disappeared, and “anything goes” (cf. Smilansky 1996a; 1996b). If the moral baseline is that everyone ought to be treated as innocent unless proven guilty (through his or her free actions), then, if no one can become guilty, the moral baseline of innocence remains. Not to respect it would be unjust. It is thus a mistake to believe that since denialism rules out control-based desert, there is no justice (or injustice) in a denialist world.

²² E.g. Waller (2011); Pereboom (2014); Caruso (2021).

²³ Vilhauer (2013) offers a Rawlsian attempt to safeguard the deontological constraints in a free will and moral responsibility-denialist world; which I argue also does not succeed. See Smilansky (2019).

cannot be explored here in detail.²⁴ One example concerns punishment of the innocent. Criticism of utilitarianism here has traditionally focused on extreme examples such as scapegoating. But as I have shown long ago, the most serious danger concerns a systematic, moderate lowering of standards for prosecution and conviction²⁵ with relevance to free will; see also the development of this argument in a critique of the denialist dominant quarantine model by John Lemos.²⁶

In sum, the Core Conception of free will and responsibility matters enormously for human life and respect for persons; yet denialism rejects this whole picture, offering but pale substitutes. We need what the denialist would consider as illusory beliefs, whether of the libertarian or of the compatibilist form, in order for society, human relations, personal life and self-respect to function adequately. Moreover, we need them if moral depth, fundamentals of justice, and the sense of value are to continue to make much of their sense. The optimism of much of contemporary denialism emerges as unsound.²⁷

3. Objections

Denialists are likely to respond in three ways or a combination thereof. One is to criticize the anti-denialist argumentation that has been presented. This would involve, for example, shoring up the viability of blame-and-praise substitutes and downplaying the dangers of a largely forward-looking approach towards punishment. We saw reasons to doubt the success of such a counter-push by denialists, but of course, as always, there is room for further debate.

A second type of response is to emphasize the evils of the present situation. Not surprisingly, the major focus of the denialist offensive has come in this form concerning punishment. Punishment is a good topic for moral responsibility denialists because it is an area where unnecessary evils are easy to show. Particularly in the US, which is the denialists' almost exclusive focus, there is clearly much public retributivism gone wild, over-criminalization, over-punishment and unnecessary cruelty. Contemporary practices of retributive punishment can easily seem antiquated, unnecessarily vindictive, and brutal.²⁸

Indeed, most contemporary denialist discussions have focused on punishment and on related beliefs and reactions such as blame. Pereboom emphasizes the moral and psychological vileness of retributivism, while

the good by means of which retributivism justifies punishment is that an agent be the target of harmful treatment just because of his having knowingly done wrong. This position would be undermined given free will skepticism, because if agents do

²⁴ See e.g. Lemos (2016); Smilansky (2017); Smilansky (2019); Levy (2023).

²⁵ Smilansky (1990; 2000: 28–30).

²⁶ Lemos (2016).

²⁷ For criticism of Illusionism on these matters, see for example Sommers (2012): 144–148, 169–170; Pereboom (2014): 194–199; Waller (2018): 20–23.

²⁸ There is, of course, criticism of punishment unrelated to the denialist critique; see for example Boonin (2008).

not deserve blame just because they have knowingly done wrong, neither do they deserve punishment just because they have knowingly done wrong.²⁹

Waller similarly says that

[w]e must not become comfortable with punishment. That is the great wrong of moral responsibility. When we can appeal to moral responsibility and just deserts, punishment becomes not only morally acceptable, but morally required; not a disturbing problem, but a positive good; not a troubling misfortune, but a celebration of personhood; not a deeply unfortunate wrong, but righteous retribution.³⁰

Moreover,

it is the belief in moral responsibility itself that is causing many of the worse problems, and real reform will be facilitated by dropping or at least minimizing the commitment to just deserts and moral responsibility.³¹

The combination of these two lines of argumentation then leads denialists to charge anti-denialists with over-conservatism. If indeed radical denialist reforms are possible and safe, and if the continuation of the present situation is morally unacceptable, then the denialists could have the moral high ground.

Yet, as I have argued in detail and in a variety of ways, denialists lack the positive Core Conception resources of both libertarianism and compatibilism, the ways of evaluating, justifying, reacting to and motivating people on the basis of their free will and moral responsibility-based desert, and this puts them in a very vulnerable position. It is tempting to go for radical change, and it seems progressive to do without the “judgmental” ideas of moral responsibility, praise and blame. But we must realize that the change would go very deep, and is a dangerous gamble, that is likely to do more harm than current practices, for (a) denialism goes into uncharted territory, since no society has tried to do what they propose, and live without assuming free will and moral responsibility; (b) it goes against basic aspects of human nature; (c) it risks giving up the greatest moral achievements of humanity; (d) what it proposes can only be understood as a devaluation of value, indeed as a moderate form of nihilism; and (e) toying with consequentialism, as it must, creates grave direct practical dangers, without sufficient Core Conception-based resources to counter them.

4. Implications

If indeed the grand denialist move must be rejected, what should we do?

First, work in what can be called the *consensus direction*. The rejection of denialism does not in any way mean that we need not be concerned with inhumane practices of

²⁹ Pereboom (2014): 157.

³⁰ Waller (2018): 20.

³¹ Ibidem: 16–17.

e.g., punishment. Such practices often ought to be revised both because they do no good and because they do harm. Similarly, changing social situations from which e.g., crime emerges is a good idea pragmatically and morally, irrespective of the denialist project. On such matters, there can be a great deal of agreement with the denialists, without sharing their view. This takes much of the positive power of denialism, and enables a reduction of the bads and wrongs which make it seem attractive in the first place.

Second, moderate forms of compatibilism should be “given another chance.” My own view is that the most persuasive position on the compatibility question is neither a full-blown compatibilism nor a full-blown denialism, but a mixed view, which combines the limited, but valid, insights of both. This Fundamental Dualism³² or compatibility-pluralism has been grudgingly beginning to find some support in the debate in recent years (and certainly more so than the alternative proposed by *Illusionism*, more about which below). Compatibility pluralism can in part be seen as context dependent, whereby in certain contexts compatibilism is more salient, and in others the ultimate denialist perspective is more helpful. But beyond that, often both perspectives matter together. I argue that in order to respect persons, we must create and maintain a Community of Responsibility that will follow the Core Conception, and in general track compatibilist distinctions in terms of the presence (or occasional absence) of responsibility-relevant control. This is not only a matter of forward-looking consequences and psychological needs, but an inherent ethical obligation. Overall, compatibilism is “the best game in town.” But even when ideal compatibilist conditions are satisfied, moral justification, evaluation, appreciation and meaning are inherently limited and shallow. And that, too, matters a great deal.

That is the human condition — our being creatures who typically have a large measure of local limited but real compatibilist control, who ought to be treated as responsible agents, who are allowed to live out the consequences of our choices — but we are at the same time determined beings, operating as we were molded, and this often generates severe injustice and great limitations in value and meaning.

Third, insofar as the previous strategies do not suffice, my view is that we must opt for or at least passively tolerate Illusionism. Illusionism combines three elements: (a) a descriptive and normative claim that illusion concerning free will and moral responsibility is central in human life, including morality, justice, self-understanding, interpersonal relations, appreciation (with self-respect and respect for others), our understanding of history, and the meaning of life; (b) a claim that the role of illusion is, all things considered, positive; and (c) views on how the benefits of illusion as well as its risks and drawbacks are to be dealt with. These claims and views will be expanded upon below.

The claims of Illusionism are ambitious. They do not state merely that some illusions in the free will context are pleasant and make life easier to deal with. The claims are that free will illusions are central, life-enabling and morality-enabling features of the human condition: free will-related false beliefs, and the related reactions and practices, are central in human self-understanding, respect for persons, a moral order and a decent society. Maintaining the folk notion of personhood insofar as it involves belief in free

³² Smilansky (1993; 2000: ch. 6; 2003; 2011).

will and moral responsibility is crucial. Illusion is an enabling condition for many of the most important elements of our view of ourselves, for our ability to maintain moral seriousness, a sense of value, and indeed perhaps our very sense of self. Free will illusions, in other words, are not a sugar coating, but a large part of the very food that sustains us. For these reasons, we ought to maintain illusions. The free will illusion in question is so basic as to be, in part, constitutive of ourselves, value, and morality, while it is also in some ways fragile. We ought to take care of our largely positive illusions, for fear of the consequences.

It might be argued that in fact the challenge is not real; denialism is just a fairly marginal view endorsed by a rather narrow group of philosophers; there is no real danger of social or legal policy following its guidelines. But I disagree. In philosophy denialism is gaining ground, and is already affecting e.g., penal policy in some Western European countries. There are more popular books with denialist themes than ever before, and well-known scientists have declared that “there is no free will.” It would be complacent not to worry.

My concerned conservatism, which comes even at the expense of the realization and internalization of some of the truth, is unfortunate and indeed somewhat demeaning, but I claim that we cannot take the risks, for the reasons we saw above. I am not thrilled by what is involved, and take to heart Waller’s criticism of my “propping up a belief in moral responsibility and just retribution that serves as the philosophical underpinning for a profoundly unjust system.”³³ Nevertheless, we ought not to leave the “Bubble” safeguarded by illusion, except philosophically (and even then, without fully internalizing our conclusions). The good life needs to be lived, by and large, within the Bubble.³⁴ This is a condition for a truly human, morally deep life, which must be a life of responsibility and an agency-based sense of value. Denialism cannot replace it, and compatibilism can supply it with only a shallow and vulnerable basis.

Very little work has been done on evaluating the possibilities, risks and dangers of a transition to a new denialist order, and the abandonment of the Core Conception-based Community of Responsibility. The grave worries we saw above lead to the reasonableness of skepticism about the feasibility and safety of trying to move to a radically different, denialist order. Even if one rejects free will and moral responsibility (i.e., compatibilism as well as libertarianism), in pragmatic terms publicly following through with the rejection of public belief, reactions and practices grounded in free will and moral responsibility is very dangerous. Denialism seems like a dangerous gamble on the grandest scale, and thus we must responsibly reject it, at least in the forms it is presented by the optimistic denialists.

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³³ Waller (2011): 309.

³⁴ See Smilansky (2000; 2012; 2022b).

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