A. J. Ayer
“Freedom and Necessity”
Compatibilism
(a.k.a. “Soft Determinism”)

1) The kind of freedom requisite for moral responsibility is compatible with the Principle of Universal Causation.  
   - i.e., moral responsibility requires merely that our behavior is voluntary, not that we have contra-causal freedom.

2) Furthermore, the Principle of Universal Causation is true.  
   - i.e., we do not have contra-causal freedom.

3) So, human beings are free and are morally responsible for (at least some of) their behavior,  
   - even though all our behavior is ultimately caused by factors completely outside our control!
Ayer claims:

“We began with the assumption that freedom is contrasted with causality, so that a man cannot be said to be acting freely if his action is causally determined. But this assumption has led us into difficulties and I now wish to suggest that it is mistaken.

For it is not, I think, causality that freedom is to be contrasted with, but constraint.”
Ayer’s thoughts on Indeterminism:

- Indeterminists believe that moral accountability presupposes *contra-causal* freedom (i.e., that the agent *could have acted otherwise*).

- Contra-causal freedom presupposes the absence of a determining cause.

- So, for indeterminists, moral accountability is possible only if the act in question *had no cause at all*. 
Problems with Indeterminism: Ayer’s criticism (Chisholm’s too)

- Indeterminists believe that moral responsibility for an act requires the absence of a determining cause.
- In the absence of such a determining cause, an act would be *uncaused*—the result of *random chance*.
- But no one is morally responsible for what happens by random chance.
- So, the indeterminists must be *mistaken* in believing that moral responsibility requires the absence of a determining cause.
Ayer’s Views on Moral Responsibility:

Moral responsibility requires not the absence of a cause (i.e., the absence of an explanation—which is what the indeterminist mistakenly thinks), but instead the absence of a constraint. I am constrained to do something when someone else forces me to do (prevents me from doing) something.
What this means:

- So, on Ayer’s view, moral responsibility does not require *contra-causal freedom* (i.e., the absence of a determining cause);

- but only that the behavior be performed *voluntarily* (i.e. the absence of *constraint*, which is nevertheless consistent with having a determining cause).
  - Remember, to say that an act was done voluntarily is to say only that it was caused by one’s motives. This does not necessarily mean that the motives themselves weren’t caused by factors beyond one’s control.
Voluntary and Involuntary (Again)

- **Involuntary**
  - Something we didn’t do *on purpose*.
  - We are not morally responsible for involuntary acts.
  - For Ayer, to say that an act was “constrained” is to say that it was involuntary.

- **Voluntary**
  - Something we did *on purpose*.
  - We are morally responsible for voluntary acts.
  - For Ayer, to say that an act was “not constrained” is to say that it was voluntary.
    » But this does not necessarily mean that “we could have done otherwise.”
Ayer’s Compatibilism:

- Ayer agrees with common sense that we can only be morally responsible for voluntary actions. (An “absence of constraint.”)
- Ayer agrees with common sense that a voluntary act is (in some sense) “caused” by a person’s motives (desire, or values).
- But, Ayer argues, these motives are _themselves_ caused by factors outside our control, and that, ultimately, _we could not have acted otherwise._
  - So, Ayer accepts the Principle of Universal Causality, and also denies that “Contra-causal” freedom is necessary for moral responsibility.
Ayer: Why do people (mistakenly) think there is a conflict between determinism and morality?

“If more than ...[absence of constraint] ... seems to be required [for moral responsibility], it is, ... because the ... very word ‘determinism’ is ... misleading. For it tends to suggest that one event is somehow in the ‘power’ of another, whereas the truth is merely that they are factually correlated.... [i.e., ] when an event of one type occurs, an event of another type occurs also.... The rest [of what people think “determinism” means] is only metaphor.”
Ayer’s account of causality:

- To say that one event causes another is not to say that it “forces” the other to happen, that it is in “its power.” (This is just “metaphor.”)
  - So, Ayer denies part of the classical account of causality, specifically, that causes necessitate their effects.

- To say that one event causes another really just means that events of one kind regularly occur after events of some other kind.
  - This is all that we can observe through experience. We can’t actually see one event “forcing” another to happen, but only that one regularly follows another.

- And if this is all that means to say that an event is “caused,” there is less reason to think that moral responsibility is incompatible with the claim that every event (including all human behavior) is caused by previous events.