

## **GBORSI: THE CANONS OF DESTINY, AND DESTINY RENEGOTIATION IN OGONI TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY**

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### **Abstract**

*Whatever befalls a man is believed to be what he/she settled with his bari (guardian angel) and Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being). Hence, the experience of an invincible external pull and irresistible constraints and the feeling of powerlessness and void, are indeed the common fate human all share. In other words, how the principle of destiny balance against individual will and freedom of action calls for great concern among philosophers and theologians alike. However, our consideration here is with particular reference to the Ogoni, as little or no attention have been given to the concept of gborsi (destiny) from the Ogoni-African perspective. This study therefore gives a deep philosophical reflection on the concept of 'Gborsi' (destiny), and the role of one's bari (personal god or guardian angel) in Ogoni ontology. The study further unveils the canons or principles believed to be responsible in the shaping of a person's life, as well as the understanding of the factors or means of re-negotiating one's destiny in the Ogoni religious experience. Through the description and philosophical method, the study argues that destiny is not fixed, static, and absolutely a predetermined reality, but rather as a framework in which the relationship between divine agency and human agency could be understood as compatibilism that admits personal efforts.*

**Keywords:** Ogoni, Gborsi, destiny, renegotiation, religion, philosophy

### **Introduction**

Destiny or fate (both used interchangeably) is a phenomenon that cut across almost all religious tradition and philosophy. The concept of destiny is commonly used to refer to a fixed order of things established by Divine decree, which no one, however Pious or powerful, could alter (Udoh, 2000). Hence, when St Thomas Aquinas disclosed that everything, however insignificant, must have a purpose, an idea derived from Aristotle, he was in effort raising the status of fate to a level of philosophical inquiry. The types of determinism include biological, psychological, religious, climate, cultural, economic, and geographic determinism.

According to Ferraiolo (2006) Determinism often meets the charge that if true, it would render all purposive deliberation and effort futile. If all that occurs is necessitated by laws of nature, antecedent conditions, the will of God, the gods, fate, or any other mechanism or government, then it seems that the course of one's life, as it is but a tiny stream of events in confluence with all other events in the universe are determined, and one's life is a series of events within the universe then one's life will unfold as necessitated by the irresistible powers that be, and attempts to masters fate are futile or even perverse. While the ancient stories insisted that everything happens by fate. Such as found in the hymn of Clean thus:

Conduct me, Zeus, and thou, O Destiny wherever your decrees have fixed my lot I follow cheerfully, and did I not, wicked and wretched, I must follow still (Epictetus, 1944, 52).

This suggests that whatever happens by fate. However, the epicureans think that necessity of fate is avoided by the swerve of atoms. In other words, the Epicureans hold that the universe is in-deterministic, and nothing could happen by fate. Hence, human beings are not bound by fate because they are composed of atoms. They however, fail to realized that the swerve of the atom is implausible, and thus cannot be explained why it should occur.

In other words, discussion about the concept of destiny in western scholarship is usually subsumed in discussions about predetermination, predestination, determinism, and fatalism, free-will and moral responsibility. Therefore, the concept of Gborsi (destiny) has not received the degree of attention as has been given to predestination, determinism and free-will in the western world. Hence, the essence of this study, as it explores the concept of destiny from the Ogoni-African perspective. The study argued that though human destiny seems to be blind, predetermined and inescapable, one's efforts cannot be completely ruled out of human success or failure, goodluck or misfortune, life or death etc. This therefore, raised the following posers: Is it possible for one to go against the infallible Divine foreknowledge? In what ways can one renegotiate his/her destiny? What is the belief on human destiny in the Ogoni contemporary society?

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theory is a set of interrelated, concepts and definitions that presents a systematic point of view of specifying relationships between variables with a

view to predicting and explaining a phenomenon (Fox & Bayat, 2007). This study therefore adopts the compatibilism theory. Compatibilism is the belief that free-will and determinism are mutually compatible, and without being logically inconsistent (Coates & McKenna, 2015). This idea is ancient and was certainly known about and investigated by the Greeks. They were the first to globalize the thesis and to consider what it meant for the conduct of human affairs-the tragedy of Oedipus being largely a brilliant essay on the thesis of predictability of human actions and its logical consequences.

The major proponents of compatibilism are the ancient stoics and medieval scholastic – Thomas Aquinas – and by enlightenment philosophers – David Hume and Thomas Hobbes – (McKenna, 2009). Therefore, before Williams James came up with his *The Dilemma of Determinism* presented at Harvard University of Divinity in 1884, where he described compatibilism as “soft Determinism”, most philosophers, especially those with theological training, held a dualist view of free-will, in which freedom was God’s gift to humanity, a gift that operated in a mind outside the physical universe, for example in Immanuel Kant’s noumenal world beyond the deterministic phenomenal world (Doyle, 2010).

Within the context of this study, discussion on the metaphysical nature of ‘Gborisi’ (destiny) therefore falls within the gamut of compatibilism. In other words, the Ogoni believed that though ones destiny could be determined, free-will can still play it role. This view does not preclude moral responsibility from an agent of an action. That is to say that, everything is caused but some events are caused by human by means of their own minds or wills. Thus, ‘Gborisi’ (destiny) is nether completely free nor determined.

### **What is at Stake?**

The debate on whether human actions and events are being determined or out of free-will seems to have pulled scholars in a journey of no returns. In other words, the philosophical argument on free-will and determinism which dates back to the ancient period still takes the front burner in the contemporary theosophical discourse. Thus, making the doctrines of pre-determinism (or fatalism), determinism (or hard determinism), Indeterminism (or soft determinism), and non-determinism (or free-willism) (Shitta-Bey, n.d.), popular in western intellectual discourse on the human will questions.

Pre-determinism (fatalism) holds, that “human choice and action have no influence on future events, which will be as they will be regardless of whatever we think or do” (Craig, 2000). In other words, certain events are such that they cannot but occur no matter what happens. Fatalism believes that the future is already set fated, and that everything one does will drive one to complete one’s fate, even if one knows and attempts to avoid it. By implication, fatalism does not allow for possible human efforts, self criticism, and self involvement, hence the slogan, what will be will be.

Determinism (Hard Determinism) holds that every events, with respect to the past, presents, and future, has a cause. In other words, determinism is the view that everything that occurs in the universe must be the effect of a cause, produced by, is dependent on, and condition by what brought it into existence (Balogun, 2007). This doctrine denies human of being either in control or capable of exercising their will freely. Reflecting on the implications of determinism for morality, Spinoza characterized the human condition as nothing less than “bondage”.

Indeterminism (soft-determinism) holds that one can be free even if determinism is true. That is to say that some events and human actions though determined are also functions of human free-will.

Non-Determinism (free-willism) holds that human beings are endowed with the ability for choice of actions, for decision among alternatives, and specifically, that given an innate moral sense, man can freely discern good and evil (Marcoulesco, 1987). Free-will is therefore the ability to make choices unimpeded by certain factors. Such factors include metaphysical constraints, physical constraints, social constraints, and mental constraints. However, the seeming incompatibility of determinism and free-will brought the God’s foreknowledge and freewill dilemma.

This is an acute problem because the Ogoni tends to identify fore-knowledge with human destiny. The practical implication of this is that one is not permitted to make a separation between what God knows at a point in time and what she does with or about that knowledge in the future. That is to say that, if what God knows is as good as done, then any notion of free will and human responsibility is negated. Hence, the possibility for man to go against the infallible divine foreknowledge is a question that continuous to beg for answer.

In other words, human destiny is the mysterious power believed to control human events. It is believed that whatever happens or that will happen in the future has been preordained, and happened according to an earlier master plan (Balogun, 2007; Oladipo, 1992). That is to say that every person has his/her biography written before coming to the world which consequently implies that anything one does is not something done out of free-will but something done in fulfillment of pre-ordained history. Among the Ogoni, such a belief is usually accredited to Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being) who is said to have pre-existentially fixed all the events that, could possibly and would take place in human's earthly existence. However, this fatalistic conclusion seems to raise a lot of problem, which if carried to its logical conclusion, it will be unjustified to hold a person responsible for his actions since the causes of his actions are external to him/her and beyond his/her control. This therefore, calls for a detail explanation of destiny in the Ogoni religious experience.

### **The Concept of 'bari' (being) and Human Person in Ogoni Ontology**

According to oral tradition, the Ogoni indigenous people, originally known as the Khana (a corruption of Ghana) people who are believed to have migrated from the former Gold Coast (now Ghana), during a brutal civil war. They migrated through the Atlantic coast and eventually making their way over to the Eastern Niger Delta. Although, the dates are not specified in Ogoni traditional narratives, scholars believe that archaeological and linguistic evidence and calculation indicate that the Ogoni arrived in the Niger Delta around 15 B.C. (Williamson, 1985), making them one of the oldest settlers in eastern Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

The Ogoni indigenous people are spreads over six kingdoms - Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyor-Khana, Tai, including Ban-goi (special unit). Administratively, the Ogoni is made of Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme. The Ogoni speaks related mutually intelligible language of Khana as the central language, with Gokana and Eleme respectively. Their notable feature of expansion has been that of inter-marriage within the Ogoni and neighboring tribes.

The Ogoni indigenous people believe in the existence of two worlds, or the physical and metaphysical, or the sensible and the supra-sensible world. In the Ogoni worldview there is no sharp distinction between both worlds, as there is

cohabitation, inter-relation and interaction of both worlds. Parrinder must have the Ogoni people in mind when he writes:

There is no sharp dividing line between the sacred and the secular ... material and spiritual are intertwined, the former as a vehicle of the later (Parrinder, 1975:27).

This shows that among the Ogoni people, the spiritual beings are closely linked with important natural phenomena which they are believed to control.

The notion of a Supreme Omnipotent and Omniscient 'Being' is held very strongly among the Ogoni indigenous people. This 'being' is believed to be feminine and thus referred to as Kawaa-Bari literally meaning 'The Mother of Creation'. She is believed to be the first mother; the mother of all nature and the womb of all life. It is believed that she conceived the world in her womb and directs all human activities and events. Hence, no human can escape her apprehension if one performs an evil act (Deezia, 2018) and nothing escapes her knowledge. She sees all human even in their closet and rewards and punishes people accordingly of their deeds. This indicates the unfathomable depth of knowledge of Kawaa-Bari. Hence, the common expression in Ogoni, *Bari Sua dēē dēē nu* (God knows everything).

Apart from the Supreme Being that is being referred to as Kawaa-Bari with capital letter 'B' for 'Bari', other divinities - deities, ancestors, spirits, and persons - are also referred to as 'bari' with small letter 'b' for 'bari'. This is in recognition of their subordination to Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being). This bari therefore means the life from God, or the presence of God. It can also be referred to as 'over' or 'beyond soul', this means that bari is a metaphysical causality that binds or links up all beings to Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being). In other words, Kawaa-Bari is the source of all creatures, hence, bari is liken unto Her presence in every other created or emanated being. Thus, the Ogoni have bari as deity (bari-aayor deity of Luawii) bari as ancestors/ancestress (de-bari-the celebration of the ancestors); and bari as personal god or guardian angel. Hence, the common expression; *O bari le zege* (your personal god is very young). This expression compares the strength of young vibrant and hardworking youth to that of one's guardian angel.

This belief in the existence of an individual's spiritual counterpart, his guardian angel, is not peculiar only to the Ogoni people. This entity is called *chi* among the

Igbo, and Ikwerre. The Benin referred to it as *ehi*, while the Ijaw calls it *Tamuno*, and to the Ogoni it known as *bari*.

### **The Canons of Gborsi (Human Destiny) in Ogoni Traditional Religious Philosophy**

The concept of destiny is a metaphysical phenomenon, believed to pervade human life and activities and life events. Destiny among the Ogoni indigenous people is known as *Gborsi* (among the Khana) or *Kol* (among the Gokana). However, *Gborsi* seems to be the most generally acceptable version. *Gborsi* (destiny) is futuristic in nature and thus, entails one's calling or what God has for an individual. While *Poro-gborsi* is referred to as bad fate, they referred to *le-gborsi* as good fate. Hence, in the Ogoni traditional religious philosophy, there is a very well marked belief in *gborsi* (destiny).

*Gborsi* (destiny) in Ogoni may be teleological, collective, selective or communitarian in nature. It is teleological if it is designed for a purpose; it is collective if every member of a family or group is attended to by a particular fortune or misfortune; it is communitarian if it attends a whole community; and termed selective if different people with no ontological community come together without having any foreknowledge of the situation to face their allotted destiny at the appointed time (Airoboman, 2012).

### **Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being) as a Canon of Destiny**

The Ogoni people believed that when *Kawaa-Bari* (The Supreme Being) gives the personal *bari* (guardian angel), she also gives *gborsi* (destiny). The *gborsi* is only know to be God and no one can change one's destiny except God. *Gborsi* is therefore believed to be an unalterable fixation, a set of life outcomes, sealed-up or preordained in one's *bari* (guardian angel). It is that which determines the uniqueness and individuality of a person and events. God's destiny is therefore, said to be unavoidable. This suggest that some people are destined to be healthy, strong, hardworking, honest, and wealthy; others are destined to be sickly, weak, lazy, poor, and dishonest.

This hard determinism or fatalistic belief indicates that whatever one has chosen in the present of *Kawaa-Bari* remains the blue print of an individual's life. That is to say that whatever actions human perform was meant to be that way and nothing otherwise, since they are not in control of what they do, there is nothing like chance. In other words, it is believed that personal *bari* (guardian angel) is in

possession of one's biography before one is born. This is one of the principles of Destiny where it entails that one is believed to be just what some superior force has predestined, planned and programmed.

### ***Anii Keē-akaba* (lines on one's palm) as a Canon of Destiny**

Another canon of destiny is the belief in *Anii Keē-akaba* (lines found on a person's palms) which the Ogoni people believed to be an operative in the shaping of a person's life. Among the Ogoni there is a belief that what one will be in life is all inscribed in the lines found on one's palms. What can prevent the actualization of what is inscribed on one's palms is the lack of a correct reading and interpretation of these lines as well as the lack of sustained effort in that direction. *Anii-keē akaba* (The inscription on each person's palm) is distinct and unique. It is such a personal thing that it is only the supernatural that could have been responsible for the individual differences. Hence, a child does not necessarily have the same *Anii keē-akaba* with his/her parents, brother sister or relatives etc.

### **Personal bari (guardian angel) as a Canon of Destiny**

Another canon of *gborsi* is the Ogoni belief in personal *bari* (guardian angel/personal god or destiny-spirit) which is believed to be an emanation of Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being). It is a sort of spirit double, guardian genius; personal providence, or a divine agent assigned to a person from the moment of conception, and remains with the person for the rest of his/her life on earth. When a person dies, his/her personal *bari* goes back to Kawaa-Bari to give account of one's work on earth. The Ogoni therefore believed that it is one's personal *bari* that determines One's success, abilities, misfortunes and failures in life. Hence, human continue to strive not just to bridge the visible with the invisible world, but to establish a special relationship between oneself and one's godly guardian. This places the human person at the forefront of interlinked activities that involve other cosmic forces.

From the above views, the principle of *bari* and *anii keē-akaba* really serves as an ideology of consolation for the Ogoni. For instance, if a person loses an only child, sympathizers would express this; *poror gborsi se* (this is bad fate). In other words, there is no better consolation to proffer than to tell the person that 'everything is in God's hand'. Another familiar case is that of an Ogoni man in search of a male child. He has about 5 female children from one wife, and blames the situation on the wife. Then, he married the second, third, and fourth wife, but

the same trend continues. He consulted many diviners and offers a lot of sacrifices, but all to no avail. When this is the case, the person resigns himself to fate, may be, *nu bari ye ere-ne lo* (that is what God has for him), he may also lay the entire responsibility to his personal *bari* or *anii keē-akaba*. To Opata (1998), at this stage, the person has reached the end of the road, where there is nothing else he can do.

### **Death and Reincarnation as a Canon of Destiny**

Sequel to this, the Ogoni also believed that *gborsi* (destiny) is concerned with the general quality and the ultimate end. Hence, issue of man's final destiny naturally involves the question of death and life after expiration. It also deals with the idea of judgment, the cult of ancestors and reincarnation, hence, they strongly belief in death and after-life. The Ogoni believed any ancestor who considers his work on this earth unfinished before he died may decide to come back to this earth again. This clearly shows that death is not an annihilation of life but rather an inevitable sojourn considered to be transitory. Reincarnation therefore becomes one of the hallmarks of the cannon of destiny in Ogoni religious philosophy. The Ogoni believed that *gborsi* (destiny) that befalls humans that brings suffering – deformities, bareness, blindness, impotence and other permanent disabilities – are as a result of the sin committed, customs violated as well as the negligence of the victim in his other world before reincarnating. Thus, the saying; *nu a bee doo bu alua sō nyoṛ-ue a, ne a ye sere doowaa yaah* (your suffering today is based on what you did in the later world). That is to say that the success or misfortune experienced today have their roots in the past already lived life without knowledge of the victim (Deezia, 2018). This therefore suggests that human responsibility cannot be ruled out while considering one's destiny. It is important to note that *gborsi* centers on wealth, riches, success, poverty, misfortune and failure (material success), with little or no consideration to moral character, and as such it does not affects all of human actions, inactions, and events.

### **Human Efforts and Moral Responsibility as a Canon of Destiny**

The idea of *gborsi* (Destiny) and moral responsibility enjoins good behavior and the need to struggle to achieve one's destiny. Hence, amidst the fatalistic and hard-deterministic cannons of destiny, the Ogoni believed that there are actions which human chooses to perform and which he could also choose not to perform. Free-will is therefore not an illusion as some scholars perceived; as the

Ogoni instinctively holds that they have free will given their common choices and self-decision concerning those choices.

Relating the above to human *gborsi*, there is the common saying in Ogoni, *ep kē nu obee su o ba da ā sere doo* (what a person has caused or done for oneself). This expression appears to have some kind of karmic implications in the direction of one having to suffer for what one has done. Thus, the expression; *o toora nu-o-noor* meaning what one has caused for himself, let him/her bear the responsibility or the consequences. In other words, what is implied in the statement is the notion of individual responsibility for action (Opata, 1998). This suggests that the human person has the personal freedom arising from a free exercise of the person's will to do or to refrain from carrying out certain actions. This principle of responsibility for one's actions is so strong in Ogoni worldview that they are quick to affirm: *mm-lee u nyoṛ nu mm suṛ tē* (let what another person has done lead not to my death). In the same vein, the Ogoni also have a proverb: *soṛ miā a nyoṛne neē a toora miā* (let the smoke follow him who is carrying the fire).

Juxtaposing the hard deterministic interpretation of the cannons of *gborsi* (human destiny) with that of the compatibilist interpretation, one will easily notice a problem with hard deterministic school which tends to have pressed too far and exaggerated the role played by personal *bari* (guardian angel), and *anii keē aka-ba* (the inscription's on one's palms) etc, in the Ogoni view of destiny. This exaggeration is in conflict with the concept of hard work, personal morality and good behaviour as upheld by the Ogoni.

In other words, if all human actions and events are predetermined exclusively, then could there be room for morality, sin and punishment and good behaviour and reward? This posits a great Philo-ethical problem. Thus, Wiredu observes;

...This may be the sense of destiny that is operative in the thinking of those Africans who insist that personal effort of the right kind is necessary for the realization of a good destiny, notwithstanding postulating the cosmological (an unalterable) predestining of everything (Wiredu, 1994:119).

A soft deterministic or compatibility conception of *gborsi* in Ogoni philosophical thought is truly reflective of and coherent with the belief of the people on moral responsibility and freedom. It is because of the freedom, morality and

responsibility which accommodated by this conception of *gborsi* that mark the renegotiation (alterability) of one's destiny meaningful and consistent. Therefore, situating *gborsi* (human destiny) within framework of compatibilism can help in taking care of the inconsistencies and problems associated with the fatalistic interpretations of *gborsi* in Ogoni religious philosophy.

### **Gborsi (Destiny) Re-negotiation in Ogoni Religious Philosophy: Towards a Compatibilist Interpretation**

The Ogoni indigenous people have no particular divinity in charge or known to be the custodian of people's destiny. However, the Ogoni people believed that an individual's destiny could be renegotiated for good or for bad. They believed one's *legborsi* (good destiny) could be maintained and achieved; and one's *poro-gborsi* (bad fate) could both be renegotiated for through good the aid of diviners who are believed to be fully knowledgeable in the affairs of human destiny. This is done through the use of particular mediums, the reading of one's *anii keē aka-ba* (inscriptions on one's palms), and Omens, as well as the movements of sacred animals or objectives etc. Their quest to know what the future holds for them is further shown in their daily activities, as the Ogoni consults deities before marriage, at their birth of a child, before the appointment of a king, and to ascertain the causes of one's illness and eventual death etc. This implies that one can consult a divinity to renegotiate one's unfavorable destiny. The possibility of archiving this depends on how one is able to marshals the favorable forces through rituals, sacrifices, prayers, offerings, vows, making good medicines, charms etc, to neutralize the machination of the evil forces.

The Ogoni also believe that sadistic foes, in the form of *abeng* (witches and wizards), secrete cults and anybody with evil intention can through spiritual means renegotiate one's destiny and frustrate an otherwise a prosperous fate, thus, spoiling every opportunity of people's success.

It is also believed that an individual's character can negatively affect one's fate. In other words, a person's own rashness or impulsive behavior can affect his destiny for the worse, and bad character is recognized as being accountable for such a fate. Hence, the believe that *legborsi* (good destiny) without *dogo* (character) is worthless. This suggest that a man's failure or success all though his life may be his own responsibility. Hence, what must be, may not be in such situation, as one will need to work to bring the contents of his/her destiny to fruition.

In other words, the Ogoni hardly resign themselves to fate. Hence, an Ogoni person will need to consult diviners, move from one sacrifice to one deity to the other to make his good destiny a reality, or to renegotiate his bad destiny with the hope that somewhere they would succeed. At this point, the question that comes to mind is whether human attempts or effort can really, change one's preordained destiny. According to oral tradition, it works to an extent, but in a situation where it does not, there is this common expression *m-mee dora yibe-nu, kere-wo*, this is literally interpreted to mean that one's surrender to the things of life should only come after one had tried all one could. Even till today in the Ogoni contemporary thoughts, there is a strong belief in the existence of forces, beings that can thwart or harm one's destiny, hence, the urged to seek for solutions to bad destiny and human problems prompted man's resort to divination. Hence, some of the Ogoni Christians run from here and there, from one church to another, one pastor to another or one man of God to another for a perfect and fulfillment of one's destiny as well as to inquire about the secrets of events. That is to say that while the Ogoni people accept idea of destiny in their religious philosophical thoughts, they also believe that, their life is not completely predetermined. Hence, when one has a good destiny and does not work hard towards its actualization, there is no guarantee of good fortune coming his/her way. This is not peculiar to the Ogoni, as discussion on the Akan philosophical thought, Gyekye writes;

Determination therefore does not negate the effectiveness of human as causal and therefore moral agents. The spirit of a person is held to be developed: a weak power or capacity can be improved or strengthened, moral failures then, which are in fact spiritual defects, can be rectified. Therefore, neither, the Akan deterministic conception of the world nor Akan moral psychology is fatal to human free will and responsibility (Gyekye, 1987:121).

In other words, the Ogoni world is interlinked and interactive in nature. Hence, determinism and freedom both co-exist, working together towards the making of human person without contradiction. It is in this regard that Buber writes:

Destiny and freedom are solemnly promised to one another. Only the man who makes freedom real to himself meets destiny...destiny confronts him as the counterpart of his freedom. It is not his boundary, but his fulfillment; freedom and destiny are linked together in meaning (Buber, 1917:53).

### Concluding Remarks

Our discussion thus far shows that the notion of gborsi (destiny) is not a mere conceptual arithmetic, nor an outcome of logical construction but an inseparable existential phenomenon, which permeates the religious philosophy and socio-economic life of the Ogoni people in their daily activities and events. It was observed that determinism and freewill in relation to ghorsi (human destiny) is such that while some human actions, experiences, and events could be said to be determined, there is room for human free will in the making of one's destiny which provides a philosophical justification for moral responsibilities.

The study therefore, identified *inii keē aka-ba* (the inscribed lines on one's palms) believed to be associated with one's destiny; personal bari (guardian angel) which appear to direct and influence the actualization of what has been foreordained for individuals; and human free will or moral responsibilities as the cannons or principles of destiny in Ogoni indigenous religious philosophy. It is on the above premises, that the paper argued that discussions on gborsi will be better understood within the framework of compatibilism.

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