In The Stubborn System of Moral Responsibility, Bruce Waller explores this question: Why is belief in moral responsibility so strong? The question is intriguing because, as Waller notes, the belief in moral responsibility seems to be stronger than the arguments in its favor. To answer this question, Waller does not analyze the arguments for moral responsibility. Rather, he claims that he is going to “dig deeper than philosophical arguments” (p. 6). Waller believes that if he can uncover the causes of the belief in moral responsibility, then he will also be able to explain why that belief is held to so stubbornly in the face of mounting evidence against it.

The term ‘moral responsibility’ has traditionally been linked to desert. When we’re concerned with whether some agent is morally responsible, we are concerned with whether that person deserves praise or blame, punishment or reward. The question for moral-responsibility-deniers is whether it is just or fair to treat people as morally responsible in the desert-entailing sense. In Chapter 2 Waller points out that some philosophers have offered differing conceptions of moral responsibility (Waller calls these differing conceptions redefinitions). One example of the redefinition of moral responsibility is that an agent is morally responsible if and only if punishing or rewarding that person would be useful (p. 10). But Waller points out that whether or not holding someone responsible would be useful is irrelevant to the question of whether or not that person deserves to be held responsible. All of the redefinitions Waller considers fall prey to at least two problems, either the debate over desert is bypassed or the basic desert question seems to have been answered when it has not.

In Chapter 3 Waller makes the case that our commitment to moral responsibility relies on powerful emotions. The most powerful of these emotions is the ‘strike-back desire’. When one has been wronged or hurt, we all have the desire to strike back at the supposed source of the wrong or hurt. These emotions, rather than arguments, are one source of the powerful commitment to moral responsibility. Because moral responsibility is founded on these emotions rather than reason, we are sometimes led astray. For instance, when we are wronged or hurt, we want to strike back against someone even if that someone is a scapegoat rather than the genuine source of our hurt.

In Chapter 4 Waller argues that the belief that the world is just is another reason for deep commitment to moral responsibility (p. 53). Waller argues that the problem with the just world hypothesis is that we have absolutely no
reason to believe that the world is just and plenty of evidence to the contrary. (I'll say more about this later.)

In Chapter 5, Waller responds to P.F. Strawson’s claim that denying moral responsibility would impoverish our emotional lives as human beings. But Waller argues that Strawson’s argument rests on the mistake of *excuse extensionism* that results from denying moral responsibility from within the moral responsibility system by applying excuses to everyone. Typical excuses from within the system include insanity or mental derangement. If everyone fails to meet the conditions of moral responsibility, then no one is responsible. But Waller doesn’t deny responsibility from within the system; rather he attacks the system itself. Waller’s denial of responsibility is not based on excuse extensionism, so it doesn’t involve giving up our emotional lives. We can genuinely love, regret, and be angry even though we recognize that no one is responsible. The only emotion that we do have to get rid of is the desire to strike back, because this desire is a guide to unjust behavior.

In Chapter 6, Waller explores the deeply entrenched system of beliefs with moral responsibility at the center. This system results in a powerful hold that moral responsibility has over believers. But if we focus on the myriad of hidden causes of peoples’ behavior, then instead of moral responsibility being obvious, we might begin to doubt it (p. 111).

Chapter 7 deals with another factor that holds the system of moral responsibility in place: the confidence in the power of human reason. The blameworthy individual should have thought more carefully about what he was doing. If he had done so, then he would have been able to figure out a better course of action. People who are blameworthy could have always thought harder, longer, and more carefully (p. 119). Waller argues that this overconfidence in the capacity of human reason is based on a mistake: it simply is not the case that we can always think more carefully.

In Chapter 8 Waller claims that there are many fears that hold the moral responsibility system in place. One of those fears is that if we deny moral responsibility, then we’ll be forced to deny free will. But we need not worry about this. All that is needed for free will is the presence of open alternatives. Waller then provides a naturalized account of free will that is based on our ability to choose among alternatives. So the fear is groundless. Losing moral responsibility will, in no way, take away our ability to choose among alternatives.

In Chapter 9, Waller attempts to banish what he calls the “boojum of creeping exculpation” (p. 174). The gist of the idea is that as we discover more and more of the scientific understanding of the causes of our behavior, then we excuse the behavior. “This process of ‘creeping exculpation’ threatens to engulf all of our behavior, ultimately depriving us of freedom and dignity and