

# **If our actions are a consequence of our capacities and preferences, and if those things are, in turn, a result of our genetic inheritance and the external world in which we happen to find ourselves, are we ultimately responsible for our choices?**

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## **1 - Introduction**

The majority of discussion regarding responsibility is carried out in the context of free will. While it is certainly relevant to the distinction of causal and moral responsibility,<sup>[1]</sup> analysing free will in isolation oversimplifies the possible arguments to be had about responsibility. Determinism also presents a stringent reality that appears to present an inflexible no. The truth or falsity of determinism does not always affect the arguments surrounding responsibility that I will discuss, as it only states that the future is directly necessitated by the past.<sup>[2]</sup> The fixed reality that determinism suggests can, in some circumstances, still attribute moral responsibility to agents through a compatibilist lens.

There are a few ways in which I will approach moral responsibility:

1. An agent's causality
2. An agent's moral sanity
3. An agent's quality of will
4. An agent's moral luck

They go together nicely in pairs, as the former two heavily deal with the sequence of events in a lifetime that makes an agent what they are in a metaphysical sense, while the latter two focus on what an agent does with what they are presented with. Hence, I affirm that though it is easy to dismiss free will and resign our existence to an uncontrollable sequence of events, there are in fact a few crucial circumstances in which we can assume moral responsibility for our actions.

## **2 - Causality**

Causality is the broadest way to encompass the responsibility we have for our choices. Galen Strawson's Basic Argument states that nothing can be *causa sui*, the cause of itself, and in order to be morally responsible one would have to be *causa sui*. Strawson posits that this is impossible, by extension deeming nothing to be truly morally responsible.<sup>[3]</sup> This is the most metaphysical argument approaching free will, and accepting this outlook does offer the closure that we are not responsible for our choices. However, Strawson's Basic Argument is based principally on the problem of infinite regress; that every action generates the reasons for the next action. Therefore, if we could engineer a situation in which infinite regress was nullified, the possibility of moral responsibility can be introduced. Consider Benjamin Kelsey's forfeiture,<sup>[4]</sup> which qualifies one forfeiting an opportunity as a choice of equal significance as taking up that opportunity; reasoning that the absence of choice requires as much thought as any regular decision.

Kelsey posits that forfeitures are not always derived from previously existing reasons - rather that the new possibilities presented in a situation can simultaneously give an agent new reasoning to choose a particular decision.<sup>[5]</sup> This so works that in isolation, neither opportunity led to the forfeiture/retaining of the other, but together they provide a more complex reason that only arose because they both occurred concurrently. Both options explain the agent's eventual choice but only at that moment in time, because without both of them, the action-forfeiture does not have enough previous reasoning, which Kelsey states as avoiding the infinite regress. Strawson's argument is founded in the idea that reasons are causal, so if they can sometimes be proven to be

mutually sustained instead, perhaps the infinite regress can be avoided, which could then make some agents meet the criteria for moral responsibility.

### **3 - Moral sanity**

If an agent cannot be deemed as having the capacity to reflect on their actions and hence choose the morally correct decision, they could never be morally responsible for their choices; the consideration with which one approaches the situation can be manipulated in a way that deprives an agent of their moral sanity, nullifying any degree of responsibility they could have.

Consider Susan Wolf's JoJo hypothetical,<sup>[6]</sup> in which JoJo was raised by a ruthless dictator who in turn sheltered him from any ideas but his own, so when JoJo inevitably becomes just like his father - brutal and sadistic - can we really affirm it to be his fault? Is he then morally responsible for his actions? Arguably not; a failure to comply with moral norms does not equate to actively breaking said norms, since the latter requires an understanding of the morality being broken. This allows for Wolf's Sane Deep-Self View;<sup>[7]</sup> that one can be morally responsible for their actions if (1) they can control their desires, and (2) their deep self is sane. JoJo is insane, and has not been given the opportunity to develop his moral compass. For an agent to be morally responsible, they must have received a sufficient upbringing such that they have the ability to reflect on what is good and bad by societal standards, in which they then reflect upon what kind of person they want to be. That is to say, agents can determine their inner self, not out of nothing, but out of the genetics and upbringing they happen to receive. This admits that since we are ultimately a product of our environment we can never truly be responsible in a metaphysical sense, but it does allow for agents to be responsible in a moral one.

### **4 - Quality of will**

The quality of will with which an agent approaches a situation can be seen as most representative of their inner desires and by extension most evocative of their true intentions. It is through this lens that an agent's actions might not explain the full story; as certain circumstances offer no preferable alternative. Consider Toshio Mifune's businessman in Kurosawa's *High and Low* (1963); forced to pay a 30,000,000¥ ransom in order to save his son from a kidnapper. However, once he discovers the kidnapped boy is in fact not his son but someone else, his zeal to pay disappears, as he would be ruining his life to save one of a stranger. Would he then be held responsible for not paying? The father's relationship with his son adds a consideration that justifies doing anything to ensure his well-being; remove that aspect and the matter becomes a question of whether he chooses to save himself and his family or save someone with no relation to him for no ostensible benefit.

According to Strawson's argument,<sup>[8]</sup> the predicament is by no means his creation, it is the kidnapper's, so there is no obligation to pay, and Mifune cannot be responsible for anything that happens, no matter the consequence. Refusing to pay the ransom is perhaps *prima facie* wrong as it endangers a life he could save, but all-things considered such a decision is made within a sensible self-interest. Here, we see a moral dilemma in which both options are undesirable. The distinction in whether Mifune can be held responsible for his choice is his quality of will.<sup>[9]</sup> Not paying is remorseful, but it is his lesser of two evils. Some agents also have the opportunity to permissibly suboptimize.<sup>[10]</sup> He could merely say he'll pay so the police can attempt to catch the kidnapper; something he has no obligation to do, yet is deontically better than doing nothing, ergo more than the permissible minimum, demonstrating a good quality of will.

However, in a hypothetical where he took pleasure in condemning the kidnapped boy to his death, he would be responsible for the lack of moral regard held for other people. It is noteworthy that Mifune will seem to do some sort of wrong no matter what since the situation is beyond his control. Here, I posit that any act in a situation where every option is undesirable cannot be wrong, as 'wrongness' implies that the agent could have done otherwise. However, they could be blameworthy, as the action - though out of their control - still makes a negative impact, which cannot be alleviated by the context of the situation. Whether one chooses to factor in an

agent's circumstance or strictly look at the severity of their actions determines their degree of moral responsibility.

Consider Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov instead, who wholeheartedly believes that his murdering the old pawnbroker benefitted society.<sup>[11]</sup> Murder is morally reprehensible, yet he consistently affirms that someone who extorted and enslaved merited being killed. This is an example of Aquinas' Apparent Good, which can be a wrongly-reasoned good or a correctly-intentioned wrong; Raskolnikov displaying the latter. Hence, would he be morally responsible for the murder? Once again, this may depend on where one draws the line between intention versus impact, but my issue with focusing too heavily on intention is that it blurs the facts of reality. In another reality, an agent's well-intentioned crime may have been carried out in a moral manner instead; we are, however, not in such a reality. I concede that minor grievances can be overlooked in the face of good intentions, but there is a limit until societal order is completely lost, which is why Raskolnikov cannot be praised for his actions, as they have gone too far to be forgiven by his beliefs.

Both mentioned examples present situations where moral wrong is inevitably committed, it is the will and consideration with which an agent approaches the situation - whether they think they are acting morally - along with the severity of their wrongdoing, that can help determine their degree of responsibility for it.

## **5 - Moral luck**

What an agent does is limited by the opportunities and choices that are available to them at any given moment,<sup>[12]</sup> so judging them strictly based on said actions could be insufficient, as those actions are fulfilled due to their moral luck.

Thomas Nagel presents four types of moral luck;<sup>[13]</sup> causal, constitutive, resultant, and circumstantial - the former two having already been largely covered. Both circumstantial and resultant depend on the agent's reality and the random events outside of their control. Consider two assassins; one does not enjoy nor want to do their job, while the other does. Both are tasked with carrying out respective assassinations, but the one who does not want to kill is successful, and the one who relishes in killing is unable to due to unexpected circumstances. On any other day, both might have succeeded, or neither might have, but in this case, it is the one with the better quality of will that is unlucky enough to have committed the crime. Conversely, the other assassin truly wanted to kill, but ended the day without having committed any crime. Who, then, can be considered blameworthy in this situation? If one blames the impact rather than the intention, the unwilling assassin's responsibility is vested in whether their victim was in the right place at the right time to receive the fatal bullet. This seems inadequate, however, because can one be culpable based on an action they otherwise would not do given the circumstances?

It can be doubted that an agent would still do their share of good or bad deeds had they not ended up in their respective situations. Again, this deprives an agent of being responsible in a metaphysical sense, as anything they do at a given moment is determined by opportunities that randomly coincide with their routine. Moral luck therefore does not offer much closure in terms of whether an agent can be morally responsible, but it rather demonstrates the incidental complexity that goes into an agent's actions, and by extension the importance of considering all aspects of an agent's being - intention, circumstance, and impact - before assigning moral responsibility.

## **6 - Conclusion**

To summarise, it is causality and the circumstances outside of an agent's control that overwhelmingly suggests that one cannot be responsible for their actions. Once we go beyond the metaphysics of existence and deal with what an agent does with what they're given, it is then possible to assign moral responsibility to those that fit the conditions. The specific details of an agent's morality, whether it be their quality of will or sanity, are helpful in determining their responsibility on a merely societal level. Thus, I conclude that there are situations in which we can be responsible for our actions, as it is what an agent does with what they are given that is most important.

## Footnotes

- 1 John Martin Fischer, Causal Determinism and Moral Responsibility, 244.
- 2 Benjamin Kelsey, Freedom and Forfeiture, 4.
- 3 Galen Strawson, The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility, 38.
- 4 Benjamin Kelsey, Freedom and Forfeiture, 30.
- 5 Benjamin Kelsey, Freedom and Forfeiture, 36.
- 6 Susan Wolf, Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility, 367.
- 7 Susan Wolf, Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility, 365.
- 8 Galen Strawson, The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility, 1.
- 9 Michael McKenna, Conversation and Responsibility, 58.
- 10 Ishtiyaque Haji, *Critical Notice* - Canadian Journal of Philosophy Vol.43 No.2, 276.
- 11 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, 429.
- 12 Thomas Nagel, Moral Luck, 2.
- 13 Dana K Nelkin, Moral Luck, 2.

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