

Moral responsibility

This handout follows the handouts on ‘Determinism’ and ‘Compatibilism’. You should read those handouts first.

DETERMINISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

People are moral agents and so their actions can be held against the standards of morality. We react with attitudes of praise and blame. To rescue someone drowning receives praise; to steal someone’s handbag receives blame. In holding people’s actions against the standards of morality, we hold them to be morally responsible for what they do.

But how far does our idea of moral responsibility depend on the idea that someone could have acted differently? If you are blamed for what you did, then you ought to have done a different action. What if you couldn’t? For example, if you are strapped to a chair and cannot free yourself, then you are not to blame if you do not help someone drowning. There is nothing you can do, so you are not morally responsible for failing to help. Whether we blame someone depends on whether we think they were able to act differently from how they in fact acted.

If it makes no sense to blame or praise someone when there was no other action they could have performed, then moral responsibility depends on free will. So if free will is undermined by determinism, so is moral responsibility. No one is responsible for natural events, such as earthquakes. But determinism claims that actions are just like natural events in that they are all causally determined. If we don’t blame or praise people when there was nothing else they could do, we should never blame or praise people. In other words, no one is every truly morally responsible for what they do. (The same argument can be run about our choices.)

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE VIEW THAT ‘OUGHT’ IMPLIES ‘CAN’

This argument turns on the principle that ‘ought implies can’. If there is something that you ought to do, then you are able to do it. So if you ought to have acted differently (as we think when we blame someone), then you could have acted differently. If you could not have acted differently, as determinism argues, it makes no sense to say that you ought to have acted differently. And if it’s not true that you ought to have acted differently, how are you to blame for what you did?

Someone who thinks that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility will either claim that there is moral responsibility and determinism is false; or that determinism is true, so there is no moral responsibility – at least in the usual meaning of the phrase. Compatibilism about moral responsibility has three options:

1. it can accept that ought implies can and argue that there is a relevant sense in which a person could have acted differently, even though determinism is true, and so they are morally responsible;

2. it can argue that issues of determinism and 'ought implies can' are irrelevant to moral responsibility;
3. it can explicitly reject the 'ought implies can' principle, so the fact that a person cannot do anything else does not mean that they are not morally responsible for it.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH PRAISE, BLAME AND PUNISHMENT CAN BE MEANINGFULLY EMPLOYED IF DETERMINISM IS TRUE

Ought implies can

A first variety of compatibilism argues that free will means that if they had chosen differently, they would have acted differently. This entails that they could have acted differently had they chosen differently. So even though determinism is true, they are morally responsible.

We can say that this is not enough for moral responsibility. We need to say not only that they could have acted differently if they had chosen differently, but also that they *could* have chosen differently. But determinism means that they could not have chosen differently.

Ought does not imply can

We can try to justify moral responsibility in terms of the benefits that come from our practice of holding people responsible for their choices and actions. We want more good actions and less bad ones. Our practices of praise (and reward) and blame (and punishment) have causal effects on people's behaviour. They enjoy praise and dislike blame, so they will tend towards doing more praiseworthy actions and fewer blameworthy ones. So even if determinism is true, and someone could not have done otherwise, we are justified in praising or blaming them, because people will perform more good actions if we do.

But is this really moral responsibility any more? On this defence, morality and moral responsibility have become no more than a system for classifying and controlling behaviour, like the rewards and punishments we use for training animals. But animals are not moral agents; if morality is no different from training animals, this is to give up the idea that people are morally responsible for what they do.

Strawson: 'reactive attitudes'

Our practices of praise and blame are part of a system of attitudes that penetrates throughout our lives. These attitudes, which Peter Strawson calls 'reactive attitudes', include gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, hurt and many others: 'essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us' ('Freedom and Resentment'). They are responses to other people as moral agents; and they distinguish our interactions with people from our interactions with animals, computers, and natural events.

Determinism wrongly associates not blaming someone when they couldn't do otherwise to not blaming a natural event. But the reason we don't blame someone because they couldn't avoid doing what they did, is quite different from the reason we don't blame computers or volcanoes, even though in both cases, the event was caused and unavoidable. Computers and volcanoes are not responsible because they are not responsible agents – never responsible. Not blaming someone on a particular occasion leaves intact our attitude to them as people – they are still responsible agents, even

though they are not responsible for what happened. If we thought they were not responsible agents, e.g. if they had a brain tumour or severe psychological illness, so that they cannot make choices at all, then our reactive attitudes towards them are replaced by an 'objective' attitude, the kind of attitude we take towards volcanoes and computers.

So, Strawson objects, if determinism implies that we should take the objective attitude towards all human actions, then it is saying the abnormal case is normal – which is self-contradictory. If we don't blame someone who is tied to a chair for not helping, this assumes that if they were able to help, but didn't, we could legitimately blame them. The usual reasons for not blaming someone depend on the normal cases in which blame is appropriate. Furthermore, the objective attitude would undermine all reactive attitudes, making all normal, personal human relationships impossible.

The hard determinist might respond that it is rational to take the objective attitude and irrational to have reactive attitudes. But what standard of rationality can we use here to make this judgment? The objective attitude is an intellectual, theoretical response to human behaviour, which determinism claims is supported by its theory of causation. However, to argue that this is the only attitude to take fails to take account of our experience of ourselves and others. It fails to see people as persons, part of a community of moral agents. Given this experience of ourselves and others, which we cannot abandon, the question of 'rationality' fails to arise: 'it is useless to ask whether it would not be rational for us to do what it is not in our nature to (be able to) do'. The complete absence of reactive attitudes is not humanly possible. And so the issue of moral responsibility is settled from within the perspective of reactive attitudes; we do not seek and we do not need an external justification. Determinism is irrelevant.

Objections

We can object that our reactive attitudes are only legitimate if people really are moral agents. In taking reactive attitudes for granted, Strawson has avoided the question of whether people are moral agents; he has assumed that we can legitimately treat them as such. But the hard determinist challenges this.

Second, Strawson claims that we cannot abandon reactive attitudes in favour of the objective attitude. But is this true? And even if it is, it does not show that we have moral responsibility, only that we give up the idea (illusion?) that we have.

Third, Strawson argues that it is not rational to suggest we do something – abandon reactive attitudes – that we are not capable of. But this assumes that there is such a thing as choosing and acting, in this case whether or not to abandon reactive attitudes. But determinism challenges the assumption that we have any choices. Again, the response doesn't address the truth of the claim that determinism undermines moral responsibility.

Moral responsibility and persons

In 'Responsibility for Self', Charles Taylor suggests a different way of defending moral responsibility. He argues that a person is a being who can raise the question 'Do I really want to be what I now am?' and evaluate the alternatives. When we evaluate how to be, we make our choices for reasons, but reasons are not themselves part of what we can choose. But this limitation doesn't undermine responsibility for ourselves, as we still resolve to be a certain way. Because it is in the very nature of a self to be able to raise the question of how to be and to resolve to be a particular way, we are responsible for ourselves. Because people are responsible in this way, it makes sense to praise and blame

them. Determinism doesn't imply that we are not persons, so it is irrelevant to the question of moral responsibility.

Has Taylor has assumed free will in our resolution to be a certain way? If determinism is not compatible with free will, then the resolving to be a certain way rather than another is an illusion. We can raise the question of how to be, but that does not mean that we are able to respond to the question as Taylor thinks we can. So we are not responsible for how we are.

Taylor may respond that determinism does not show that we cannot respond to our thoughts about how to be. People do change how they are. As long as this remains true, then there is moral responsibility.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO DO OTHERWISE

The challenge of determinism to moral responsibility is from the idea that we are not able to do otherwise. In 'Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility', Harry Frankfurt argues that this is irrelevant. Suppose Smith wants Jones to perform a particular action, e.g. make a donation to charity. If Jones decides to make the donation, there is nothing Smith needs to do and he does nothing; however, Smith has implanted a microchip in Jones' brain – if it looks like Jones will decide not to make the donation, Smith activates the chip, which causes Jones to decide to make the donation.

In this situation, there is no alternative for Jones – either he decides to make the donation 'on his own' or he is caused by the microchip to decide to make the donation. So he could not have chosen otherwise. Nevertheless, if he makes that decision without Smith activating the microchip, then he is morally responsible. (He is not morally responsible if Smith activates the microchip.) So what is important to moral responsibility is that the action is brought about by the person's own choices and desires.

But doesn't this assume that in the case in which Smith doesn't interfere, Jones chooses to make the donation? But was this choice an illusion, since only this action was possible? The hard determinist can reply that Jones never makes a choice – choice is dependent on free will, and there is no free will. So there is still no moral responsibility.

But we don't have to accept this. The example brings out the different relation someone can have to what they decide; it is this difference that moral responsibility picks up. Determinism doesn't do away with the difference between the case in which Jones comes to his decision without Smith's interference from the case in which Smith causes the decision. That difference is all that is needed for moral responsibility. The difference gives us the sense in which a decision is mine or not, quite independent of whether there is free will in the sense of being able to choose otherwise.

The determinist can insist that the distinction is some kind of illusion. Jones' decision is not 'his' in any sense that is strong enough for real moral responsibility; it is equally caused in every case, whether by Smith or some other process of natural causation.