

HPPH6017

Freedom, agency, and responsibility.

Vuthy Hastings

Essay Question:

Is a person morally responsible for what they have done only
if they could have acted otherwise?

Introduction:

Throughout this essay I will be answering the question 'Is a person morally responsible for what they have done only if they could have acted otherwise?' for this, it will be broken up into three problems concerning the language in use, (a) morality, (b) free will, and (d) responsibility. Morality won't be defined, I will simply point out several issues and give to it a definition that is suitable for the time being, as an objective opinion on it cannot be reached as of now. With free will,

other viewpoints such as compatibilist, incompatibilist and determinist are to be scrubbed clean of their definitions and understanding of having a free will, thereafter I will input a definition that I believe to hold weight, this is done so the question in question, is precisely comprehended. Lastly, responsibility needs a checking out, this will be compared with the alternative possibility and how these possibilities come to be through the will, then responsibility can have a clearer space in which we can place it.

(Morality):

The question *Is a person morally responsible for what they have done only if they could have acted otherwise?* poses several issues:

- (a) Morality and its definition.
- (b) What is meant by having a free will?
- (c) Where does responsibility need to lie, for one to be held accountable for their actions?

For me to deliberate on all these issues in such depth would be tomfoolery on my part. Therefore, it is only (b) the will to be contemplated with such care and attention as without it, the question at hand becomes obsolete, the question itself suggests an element of free will and so requires scrutinizing.

Morality (a), in less than a second, if you look it up thousands upon thousands of definitions emerge. For simplicity, I am to use the Latin version *moralis*, 'pertaining to morals', according to vocabulary.com. The problem here is obvious: one can't truly say what is moral or Immoral, as the knowledge that humanity possesses is finite. This finite aspect is limited to finite knowledge¹, in no way can it go beyond this, as the other end is infinite, finiteness can be a constituent to the infinite, but not it. The objective conception of morality, therefore lies within infinite knowledge, I'm reluctant to say the infinite has one form (a form not limited by a body) the subjective is given many bodies and forms as it's finite.

For specificity, the linkage between finite and subjective refers to the many perceived forms of morals that are subject to change. The opposite is the infinite, having but one form that is not subject to change.

This is why 'simplicity' is asked from the definition, a longer explanation brings forth the art of perception² & measurement³ to enact upon multiple words, their arrangements, individual meanings, connected meanings to each other, and so on.

Now, some may argue that we need to use these perceptions of morality and go from there...I'd argue with, look around;

Society,

things large and small,

visible, invisible,

here or there.

HARMONIOUS WE MUST BE!

Constitutions written,

Seats of parliament profess their morality,

Laws disguised as justice,

¹ Knowledge is perception (Complete Works of Plato, Chapter Theaetetus, 151d-e)

² Complete Works of Plato, Chapter Protagoras (PLATO, 1997, pp. 785, 356d-e)

³ Complete Works of Plato, Chapter Protagoras (PLATO, 1997, pp. 785, 356d-e)

It's nothing more than the irascible⁴ & concupiscible⁵ powers of the soul⁶ in a starved state.

The definition of moralis is to be kept throughout this essay; it isn't incorrect, it simply instigates complication on what these morals are. It won't occur in this paper; morality requires precise understanding before we can adjudicate one's responsibility in an objective moral sense.

(The will):

A dialogue between Free Will (FW), Galen Strawson (GS), Pedestrians(P1-3), and Vuthy Hastings (VH). The discussion calls free will to the forefront of our thoughts for contemplation, the main focus is to narrow down on the essence of a free will and its expression within a body. Galen Strawson's comprehension and impressions on compatibilist and determinist are the leading outlooks that the Pedestrians will take, Pedestrians will come in the form of

4

5

⁶ Chapter; 'Of the forming of man, of the external senses, and also the inward, and the Mind: of the threefold appetite of the soul and passions of the will.' (Cornelius, 2015, p. 95)

philosophical positions in the free will argument presented in Galen Strawson's Freewill book.

Free Will enters the discussion

VH: Tell me Free Will, what is being asked of you when one states you are free?

GS: A rebuttal; 'what is it to act (or choose) freely?' (Galen Strawson, Article summary)

FW: Steady your horses gents, a consensus on the following first; are we free agents?

P1: Yes

P2: Yes

P3: No

VH: Yes

FW: You, P1, why do you hold this opinion?

P1: I happen to be a compatibilist; the underlying essence of compatibilism is that 'freedom is compatible with determinism because freedom is essentially just a matter of not being constrained

or hindered in certain ways when one acts or chooses.’ (Galen Strawson, Article Summary)

FW: And how about you P2?

P2: I am an incompatibilist, but I take the Libertarian outlook; ‘Libertarians hold that we are indeed free and fully morally responsible agents, and that determinism must therefore be false.’ (Galen Strawson, Article summary)

GS: That’s ludicrous, Libertarians ‘great difficulty is to explain why the falsity of determinism is any better than determinism, when it comes to establishing our free agency and moral responsibility’ (Galen Strawson, Article Summary)

FW: Moving on for now, what is the other outlook of incompatibilists?

GS: There is, it holds that whether determinism is true or false we are not genuinely free agents, one of their arguments;

“When one acts, one acts in the way that one does because of the way one is. So, to be truly morally responsible for one’s actions, one would have to be truly responsible for the way one is: one would have to be *causa sui*, or the cause of oneself, at least in certain crucial mental respects.” (Galen Strawson, Article Summary)

A view point that I too hold.

P3: Well I am a determinist and believe everything is determined therefore I have no free will and can't be held morally responsible for anything.

VH: Let us take this one step at a time, compatibilism's idea of free will rests on choice, and the ability to choose without being hindered, constrained, and so on. Freedom to a compatibilist 'is a matter of not being physically or psychologically forced or compelled to do what one does.' (Galen Strawson, Compatibilist)

This runs into the problem of things not being free to choose in relation to time, take this; a boy around the age of 7 wants to drink alcohol, the laws surrounding this disallow for that, according to the idea of free to a compatibilist, it's in the appearance of choice over possibilities that suggests he is a free agent. Even though he is being restricted as he can always at one point or another rebel and drink anyways.

As compatibilism holds true that determinism is a thing that pervades both material states and no corporeal such as sensations, desires.

Well, let's say this boy of age 7 in an objective sense has to get from point (a to b) within this year and that is determined, he has to become this character by enveloping +50 on the positivity scale and -30 on the negativity scale in terms of sensations and feelings. If all is

determined, then why is it that as the agent with desires usurped by determinism, on a subjective scale isn't able to see one liner line of events but all possibilities and impossibilities? Further on, the existence of impossibilities should not occur if there is one set path, same goes for possibilities outside of this fate.

P1 and p3 are you to say that there are many routes to the top of the mountain in so far as they follow the determined objective a to b path? If so then where do these possibilities and impossibilities come from?

P1: Not entirely sure, could you do me the favour in answering this.

VH: Very well, but after I make a point on all views. Libertarians, the idea of free will and moral responsibility is taken out, the argument is that;

“to be truly morally responsible for one's actions, one would have to be truly responsible for the way one is: one would have to be *causa sui*, or the cause of oneself, at least in certain crucial mental respects. But nothing can be *causa sui* - nothing can be the ultimate cause of itself in any respect. So, nothing can be truly morally responsible.” (Galen Strawson, Article Summary)

As for you no freedom theorist believes there is a free will if using the compatibilist sense of free, but that this sense is fallible and in need of further review.

GS: It's true!

“They agree that free will is not compatible with determinism, but deny that indeterminism can help to make us (or anyone else) free. They believe that free will, of the sort that is necessary for genuine moral responsibility, is provably impossible.” (Galen Strawson, Incompatibilism)

Their argument is as follows, ‘When you act, you do what you do, in the situation in which you find yourself, because of the way you are.’ (Galen Strawson, Pessimism)

VH: This argument is one for moral responsibility and free will, if one wasn't in control but determined to be by the previously determined facts, then are they truly free to choose who to be? Same goes for moral responsibility, ‘to be truly or ultimately morally responsible for what you do, you must be truly or ultimately responsible for the way you are, at least in certain crucial mental respects.’ (Galen Strawson, Pessimism)

This 7-year-old boy, manipulated to think stealing is good. Faced with a scenario to steal still contemplates on various variations that is best

suiting to steal, and in those choices the boy is able to pick and choose how he would like to steal. He may be trapped mentally speaking in thinking stealing is good, but even in being a thief he has the opportunities to choose how it is done, what type of thief he is to be, and so on. Again, if all is determined down to the tee, then why is it that possibilities and impossibilities arise from this fated path? These possibilities popping up and giving choice a selection has in itself a freedom that determinism aspects in an agent can't restrict. Freedom hasn't fully been taken away from the no freedom theorist and their argument needs further research.

Circling round back to the compatibilist and determinist, the answer to the question asked about the mountain and appearance of these possibilities and impossibilities is as such; all things are determined, down to the physical states of being in material, to parts of agents, they follow an a to b, it is by due to the will the appearance of these possibilities and impossibilities occur. Therefore, 'the will, although it be of itself, of all things that are possible, yet because it is free by its essence, it may be also of things that are impossible.' (Cornelius, 2015, p. 95)

The boy, has to attain +50 positivity and -30 negativity to get to b, but because the will is free it unveils to the agents exterior and interior senses the determined possibilities and impossibilities that can be taken to fulfil this a to b path. It is simply the tool that pry's open all

these various pathways that can be taken at all times, even through overwhelming emotions. With this definition Henry Cornelius provides we can detail that having a free will doesn't rest on freedom of to make a choice, but to perceive all possible and impossible choices.

FW: Strawson, when asking what it meant to choose freely, by using this account of free will would it not follow that then freedom of choice is manifest from perception of choices? For if no possibilities or impossibilities were given but a course that is deprived of possibilities outside of fate, then what would one be able to choose from? It's only from multiplicity that choices are given. This would mean alternative possibilities are subject to a will being free, and as its been distinguished it is, therefore moral responsibility lies with the agent as there is always a way in which they could've acted otherwise.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, yes, a person is morally responsible only if they could have acted otherwise.

This paper was divided into three problems as mentioned; morality and its definition, what is meant by having a free will, and where responsibility lies for one to be held morally responsible. The section

on morality identified the problems with the definitions presented, as well as the understanding of morals. This misunderstanding was demonstrated through the use of finite and infinite, bodies and forms, arguments for what one should do with this subjective morality were attacked by a poem, the poem outlines how society is catered towards the idea of morality and that it isn't getting anywhere. Crime is still committed, hate is passed on from stranger to stranger, loved ones to loved ones, and so on. I hope it is seen that morality needs a clearer understanding before moving on with moral responsibility. The section on the will did exactly what I said I would I do, compare and contrast views on the will stemming from compatibilist and incompatibilist as well as determinist. Perhaps a straightforward approach to describing what these viewpoints are, is called for, nonetheless, a definition for the will was presented and a dissection of each view point too. Lastly, responsibility fitted in nicely with the freewill section as it would massively impact where responsibility makes it bed to lay in, for longer attention was needed but not offered due to word count and lack of organisation. But it seems to still be logical since free will is but a tool to open the determined possible and impossibilities that responsibility would lie with the agent, and their actions. I wouldn't rule out taking outside influences to aid in the decision on moral responsibility, but it's in the approach taken that too alongside morality, needs investigating.

Bibliography:

1. "Moralist." *Vocabulary.com Dictionary*, Vocabulary.com,
<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/moralist>. Accessed 12 Oct. 2024.
2. Strawson, Galen. Compatibilism. Free will, 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-V014-1. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Taylor and Francis,
<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/free-will/v-1/sections/compatibilism>.
- 3.