

The Possibility of Moral Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

In “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility,” Galen Strawson presents his view that moral responsibility is impossible if determinism is true. On the other hand, Roderick Chisholm strongly defend a libertarian view in his paper, “Human Freedom and the Self.” Chisholm believes that an agent has the ultimate freedom to decide, and deterministic causes are not enough to cause an action.

In this paper, I will briefly present the structure of Strawson’s argument that moral responsibility is impossible because of his so-called “Basic Argument.” For Strawson, agents cannot be responsible because their actions are determined by prior causal chains, and agents definitely are not responsible for those causal chains. Then, I argue that moral responsibility is possible because deterministic causes are not enough to cause an action. Third, I will challenge Strawson’s position by arguing that his core argument can be rejected. Finally, I deal with one plausible challenge.

Keywords: Moral responsibility, Agent, Galen Strawson

1.G. STRAWSON'S ARGUMENT

The original version of the Basic Argument is as follows: (1) Nothing can be a *causa sui*—nothing can be the cause of itself. (2) In order to be truly morally responsible for one’s actions one would have to be *causa sui* at least in certain crucial mental respects. (3) Therefore, nothing can be truly morally responsible.



Figure 1 Galen Strawson

Strawson modifies his Basic Argument slightly in section five of his paper. Strawson says that (1) what you

intentionally do [1], given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself, flows necessarily from how you are. (2) You have to get to have some responsibility for how you are in order to get to have some responsibility for what you intentionally do, given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself (14).

For Strawson [1], (1) “what you intentionally do, given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself, flows necessarily from how you are” cannot be rejected; while (2) “you have to get to have some responsibility for how you are in order to get to have some responsibility for what you intentionally do, given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself” must be resisted by those who defend the concept of moral responsibility [4].

However, for Strawson [1], an agent cannot be truly responsible for who she is because she has intentionally brought it about that she is the way she is. For Strawson [1], it is natural to assert that one’s desire to perform some action must have a cause that exists independently. For example, one’s personality is influenced by one’s genes, past experience, and other factors. For sure, an agent cannot be responsible for her genes and past experience. Similarly, in order to be truly responsible for who she is, an agent must decide intentionally to be who she is now. In order to make an intentional decision to become who she is now, she must already have had a nature N, which contained her motivation to become who she is now. However, in order for her to have been responsible for possessing nature N, the agent must have decided intentionally to come to have that nature N. Then, she must already have another nature N2, which motivated her to come to possess nature N, and N2 would require that she had formerly possessed N3, etc... Clearly, a regress is inevitable. Hence Strawson proposes that humans’ natures [1], and hence their actions, must be determined by prior causal chains.

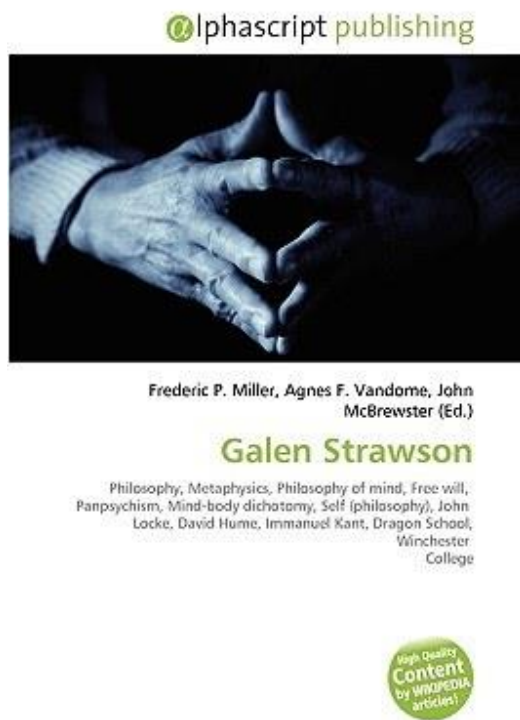


Figure 2 The Philosophy book by Galen Strawson

Therefore, I will modify Strawson's Basic Argument in order to make it clearer. "(1) what you intentionally do, given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself, flows necessarily from how you are. (2) You have to get to have some responsibility for how you are in order to get to have some responsibility for what you intentionally do, given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself." (3) However, responsibility for how you are doesn't exist because your nature N must be determined by prior causal chains. (4) Therefore, moral responsibility is impossible since a regress is generated [5].

2. AN APPROACH TOWARDS MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

To begin with, investigating an agent's psychological system for making decisions is helpful for making progress in the discussion of moral responsibility [6]. It is reasonable to accept the claim that a rational agent's decision derives from her motivations, because an agent cannot decide upon nothing. For example, one may decide to drink because she is thirsty, but it is impossible for the agent to decide to decide to consume a drink because of nothing. Therefore, a motivation to do something is the foundation for an agent to act, and agent is unable to perform actions without having motivations.

It seems intuitive to us that an agent only needs a motivation in order to cause an action. One has a motivation to drink, and then she drinks; one has a

motivation to eat, and then she eats. However, there are two reasons why motivations are not enough for an agent to intentionally cause an action, and what I will call a "decider" is needed for an agent to cause an action.

First, it is reasonable to argue that an agent's psychology is so complex that she might possess various distinct motivations simultaneously. For instance, one may desire to drink a cup of tea because she is tired, and one may desire to take a nap at the same time because she is tired. However, an agent is unable to perform two actions at the same time. Therefore, the agent faces a tradeoff: whether to drink a cup of tea or to sleep.

Second, and even more importantly, distinct motivations may contradict, or provide a basis for disapproving of, other motivations. This is possible in many situations in which an agent faces a hard decision. Consider the following circumstance. A warrior goes to battle, and he has two motivations: preserving his life, which requires that he retreat, or fighting bravely. For sure, if the agent chooses the second option, there is a possibility that he may sacrifice his life in the battle. Hence, the second motivation of the agent (fight bravely) directly contradicts the first motivation (preserving the life). In this situation, motivations fail to cause an action on their own, since the two motivations are for incompatible actions.

Mere motivations are therefore not enough to cause an action. An agent must decide to perform an action, which implies that the agent has the power to cause an action. The possible solution to this problem is that an agent has a "decider", as I call it, to make a final decision founded upon his motivations. The decider is not one motivation among others, since motivations are not enough to cause an action when motivational conflicts appear; the decider is a supreme power that can resolve a conflict by making a decision. The psychological system of an agent relevant to decision-making is therefore as follows: motivations—decider (decision)—action.

But how could the system of making decisions be free, in order to challenge determinism? In order to answer this question, it is essential to further analyze the nature of the decision system. I will argue that an agent's decision system is responsible, to some extent.

I need to clarify that this argument is a modified version of one of Chisholm's. Chisholm believes that a human is a prime mover unmoved, and shares this attribute with God [3]. An agent has more than one option when she causes an action, and every option is reasonable and every option contributes to a causal chain. When an agent chooses to act, her will becomes the cause of the action, and her action follows from her will. Her will is the cause in a causal chain, and the action she performs is the outcome of this causal chain. However, if the agent decides to act otherwise, her will to act otherwise becomes the cause of a different causal chain, and a different action is the outcome that follows from this cause.

Consider the following instance: X is very angry, which causes her to shoot and kill an innocent victim; her anger is the cause, firing the gun is the action, and killing an innocent victim is what follows necessarily from the causal chain. In this situation, it is no doubt that a

deterministic causal chain is completed, since cause and outcome are connected by necessity. However, this event could occur differently: if X decided to act otherwise, then she would act otherwise. This would be compatible with determinism too. According to the interpretation of Chisholm, determinism governs causal chains. Two different results, both governed by determinism, can be caused by the same agent at a specific moment [3]. Hence, the agent possesses the ability to do otherwise, but this doesn't violate determinism, and the explanation must be that the agent is free to cause a particular action or not to do so.

Similarly, when different motivations contradict each other, the agent has the capacity to actualize one of her motivations. It is natural to think that an agent makes a decision when faced with a dilemma. For example, an agent needs to decide what to eat in the morning, and she struggles because she wants to eat both eggs and pasta, but time only allows her to eat one of them. Both motivations can initiate a causal chain, and determinism doesn't explain why the agent ultimately chooses to eat pasta, since the two potential outcomes are both desirable for her. Therefore, she must be free to make the decision she makes, and this freedom is possessed by the "decider".

This view challenges claim (3): however, responsibility for how you are doesn't exist because nature N is determined by prior causal chains. This can be challenged since determinism fails to explain the fact that an agent has the ability to act in this way or to act in otherwise. In other words, even though an agent's motivation derives from prior causes, we cannot conclude that an agent necessarily acts in the way that she does, since she can choose to act on other motivations, which also derive from prior causes. Therefore, although it is plausible to admit that prior events influence her desires or even some of her values, the standpoint for the agent to make a decision is still not strictly determined by prior causes. Hence, an agent is free since she has the capacity to act and choose otherwise than she does. In other words, an agent has the capacity to be a prime mover unmoved when she exercises the power of her decider.

However, it is reasonable to admit that this freedom is not an absolute freedom, a freedom to decide upon nothing, to act from total indeterminacy. Indeed, the alternative paths that the agent can choose are limited. However, the agent is free to actualize her final action, since pure desires cannot cause this action, and she must have a supreme power to decide between her motivations. This freedom is not absolute, but it suffices for free agency [2].

3. POSSIBLE REBUTTAL AND DEFENSE

Strawson presents a challenge to the view that the decider is free to some extent by arguing as follows [1]. In order for an agent to be responsible for her action, she must decide intentionally, which means that her decider must have the ability to decide intentionally. However, in order to decide intentionally, an agent's decision must not be the outcome of random selection, which would make it

impossible for an agent to be responsible for her action. For Strawson [1], then, an agent's decider necessarily has a personality or character, since the agent is responsible for her decision only if the decision is determined by her personality or character, and not by random selection.

However, if a decider has an identity, then the concern arises again: the identity cannot be self-creating, but rather must be determined by prior causes. This argument goes as follows: (1) a decider must have an identity; (2) identity cannot be self-creating, because the identity of a decider must decide upon something (values, calculation of utility, etc.); (3) hence, a decider's decision is determined by causal chains; (4) therefore, a decider cannot be free.

This can be objected to by arguing that the causes within a causal chain don't provide sufficient reason for an agent to participate in an action, and I will further argue that a decider is free because a causal chain is not enough to ensure that an agent reaches any one particular decision.

First, consider a circumstance in which the causal chain of motivation doesn't proceed in the way we might expect. For instance, when an agent is hungry, it is true that she has the motivation to eat. Also, determinism dictates that an agent eats when she is hungry. However, in reality, it is not enough to assert that this agent will eat this hamburger even though she is hungry at this moment. The agent has the capacity to decide whether to eat or not to eat when she is hungry. This agent actually makes a decision by using her decider. Hunger might be a necessary condition for eating, but it cannot be a sufficient condition for an agent to eat a hamburger in a particular situation.

Furthermore, different identities may conflict, but an agent can still make a decision when faced with a dilemma. It is possible for an agent to have conflicting identities, since agents are complex beings. If determinism were true, making decisions would be impossible in such a case, because internally conflicted deciders cannot cause actions. But clearly this is false in reality. For example, an agent might be both a coward and brave. If determinism were true, her decider would be unable to make a decision, since its identities contradict with each other. However, when she faces a robbery, this agent can either decide to be brave or decide to give up. In the first decision, she exercises her decider's identity of bravery; in the second decision, she exercises her decider's identity of cowardice. Two outcomes can both derive from her identities. Therefore, the decider of an agent cannot be something that is determined solely by identity, as it would if determinism were true.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I first briefly analyzed the psychology of decision-making. Then, I argued that motivations provide the basis for an agent's action, while the decider makes an agent free.

This view allows us to make progress in understanding moral responsibility as grounded in libertarianism, since the concern of Basic Argument has been established for a long time. An agent is able to be free if she has the ability

to utilize her own decider in causing an action. Further discussions of the psychological states involved in decision-making would be necessary for a comprehensive argument for free agency.

As Chisholm asserts, an agent has the ability to become a prime mover unmoved. This ability might not make one completely free, but is enough for an agent to be free in the most crucial sense, and hence to be responsible for her action.

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