

Moral Responsibility

1. Versions of the Argument

(a) *The Basic Argument (Strawson, p.5)*

1. Nothing can be the cause of itself (causa sui)
2. In order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be the cause of oneself – at least in certain crucial mental respects
3. Nothing can be truly morally responsible

(b) *Elaborated (adapted a bit, from p.6):*

1. When one acts for a reason what does is a function of how one is, mentally speaking.
2. So if one is to be truly responsible for how one acts, one must be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking – at least in certain respects.
3. To be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, one must have brought it about that one is the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects.
4. But one cannot really be said to choose the way one is mentally speaking, in any respect at all, unless one is already equipped with some principles of choice, P1 – preferences, values, pro-attitudes, ideals – in the light of which one chooses how to be.
5. But then to be truly responsible on account of having chosen to be the way one is, one must be truly responsible for having P1 in the light of which one chose how to be.
6. But for this to be so one must have chosen P1.
7. But for this to be so one must have had some principles of choice P2 in the light of which one chose P1.
8. True self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice.
9. True moral responsibility requires true self-determination.

(c) *A More Natural Version (adapted a bit from p.7)*

1. One is the way one is, initially, as a result of heredity and early experience, and these are things for which one cannot be held to be responsible.
2. One cannot at any later stage of life hope accede to true moral responsibility for the way one is by trying to change the way one already is as a result of heredity and previous experience.

Why? Because the particular way in which one is moved to try to change oneself and the degree of one's success in one's attempt at change will be determined by how one already is as a result of heredity and previous experience, and any further changes that one can bring about only after one has brought about certain initial changes will be determined, via the initial changes, by heredity and previous experience. Maybe some changes are traceable to indeterministic or random factors, but one definitely is not responsible for this!

3. At no stage can there be true moral responsibility for the way one is.

4. At no stage can one be truly morally responsible for their actions.

(d) *Yet another version!* (adapted a bit from p.13)

1. You do what you do because of the way you are.
2. To be truly morally responsible for what you do you must be truly responsible for the way you are – at least in certain crucial mental respects.
3. You cannot be truly responsible for the way you are.
4. You cannot be truly responsible for what you do.

Defense of (3):

To be truly responsible for the way you are, you must have intentionally brought it about that you are the way you are in a way that makes you responsible for how you are. But this is impossible.

Why?

- (a) For you to have intentionally brought about the way you are, you must already have had a certain nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are as you are now.
- (b) For it to be true that you are truly responsible for how you are, you must be truly responsible having had the nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you.
- (c) To have intentionally brought it about that you had that nature N in a way which makes you responsible for it, you must have existed already with a prior nature N', in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you had the Nature N in the light of you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are...

Regress!

2. Why Does It Matter?

Belief in absolute moral responsibility has been central to Western religious moral and cultural tradition.

It implies that there is a fundamental sense in which no punishment or reward is ever ultimately just. It's no more just to punish somebody for their actions than for their hair color.

It's relevant to our self-understanding – we have a *feeling* we have that we are fully morally responsible for what we do (cake versus Oxfam tin) and how we are that Strawson thinks come about just because we have self-conscious awareness of ourselves as agents who deliberate about what to do.

3. Objections and Responses

Objection 1 – Compatibilism

Compatibilists think you can be a morally responsible agent just in virtue of your actions being caused in a certain way – for example by your desires, when they coincide with your higher order desires. They reject (2) in the last argument.

Response: The kind of responsibility compatibilists give us is not *true* moral responsibility. Compatibilists have given various accounts of when punishment is “fitting” but they can’t, says Strawson, reasonably think it’s truly and ultimately just to punish, if the causes of action are not things we are responsible for.

Objection 2 – Libertarianism

Libertarians are incompatibilists who believe determinism is false, and so we do have free will and are morally responsible.

Response: Denying determinism doesn’t help. You’re no more responsible for truly random events going on in your brain than for determined events going on in your brain.
p.19: “In the end, whatever we do, we do it either as a result of random influences for which we are not responsible, or as a result of non-random influences for which we are not responsible, or as a result of influences for which we are proximally responsible, but not ultimately responsible.”

Objection 3 – There is a “self” beyond the motivation system

The idea is that you “self” is independent of your personality or motivational structure – your “CPM”. Your self, S, considers the deliverances of CPM and makes a decision in light of them, but independent of them.

Response: S decides on the basis of the CPM, but whatever S decides it decides because of the way S is.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

24.00 Problems of Philosophy
Fall 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.