

# “Free will” as a requirement for being morally responsible

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There are some powerful reasons for questioning the whole idea of individual moral responsibility. We all seem to be so much a product of our culture, of the way we were raised, of the way we have been educated, of our past experiences, of our own genetic makeups, how can we be thought to be individually responsible for the choices we make? How can we deserve moral praise or blame, how can we be personally guilty, if we are not self-made, self-determined? It doesn’t seem fair to blame me for something over which I have no control, and yet it may seem as though I have little control over what kind of person I am, and so have little control over the general direction of my choices. Aren’t we pretty much like all other animals—just responding in natural ways to new situations, based on our individual backgrounds? Where is there room for individual moral responsibility in that?

Given the importance of individual moral responsibility, noted earlier, we will want to be very careful about raising these questions. Most contemporary philosophers are not willing to give up on moral responsibility<sup>1</sup>. But you will have to make up your own mind, based on the evidence and arguments. You have seen in the previous reading that giving up on moral responsibility may not be the end of all morality, or of human life, but it does come at a significant cost—a cost that many find disturbing or unacceptable.

In order to see more clearly why there is a general problem about whether moral responsibility really makes sense, it is necessary to think hard about what requirements must be met by a person in order to be morally responsible for something. Those who worry about whether moral responsibility is at all possible base their worries on the idea that no one can ever fulfill the true requirements of being morally responsible. If no one can fulfill those requirements, then of course

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Strawson, one of Britain’s prominent 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophers, famously argued that morally-loaded evaluations of others are central to the attitudes we have about people and thus to our whole way of living. He claims that this way of reacting to people is so deeply embedded in our most basic attitudes that no legitimate rational challenge to it is even possible: any attempt to give reasons why we should give up these attitudes will necessarily be unconvincing, because those reasons will have to be less central to our ways of thinking. See P. F. Strawson, “Freedom and resentment.” *Proc Brit Acad* 48(1962). 187-211. Some years later, his journalist son, Galen Strawson, responded in Galen Strawson, *Freedom and belief*, (Oxford Oxfordshire: Clarendon Press, 1986). He argues in Ch. 3 that his father’s position is mistaken. According to Galen Strawson, there are equally central things we all believe that can be used to challenge the notion of moral responsibility. (Galen Strawson is now a professional philosopher.) Peter Strawson’s point is often missed by commentators, who treat him as simply arguing that we are psychologically incapable of giving up our normal ways of evaluating and reacting to other people; Galen Strawson’s reply to his father then makes no sense. I am certain that the elder Strawson was not making just a psychological point, and that Galen Strawson understood that quite well.

no one can be morally responsible. So, what exactly are the conditions that a person must meet in order to be morally responsible?

One requirement is fairly obvious: people can't be morally responsible for things that are completely outside the reach of their influence. You are not morally responsible for rescuing a trapped miner in Pennsylvania during the winter of 1910 if you were not born until years later.

But other requirements for being morally responsible are trickier to explain, and there is considerable disagreement about them. It is easy to be fooled by reasonable-sounding ideas about this topic. Consider, for example, the following claim:

(C) People can't be morally responsible for things they did not cause.

Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? In fact, it sounds very similar to the requirement for moral responsibility stated in the previous paragraph. But a little thought should convince you that (C) is not correct. It is too strict a requirement, as can be seen in the following example: Imagine that you are a high school student, and you overhear some other students plotting to go on a shooting rampage in the school next week. They talk about how they have access to guns, how they will be able to sneak the guns into the school, where they will start shooting. You realize they are very likely not joking around; they seem serious about doing this. You are the only one outside the group of plotters to hear their planning session, and you know that you are alone. You hope that someone will find out about the plot and stop them, but on the day before the plot is to be consummated, you see that the plotters are still in school, and there is no evidence that anyone has discovered them. Because you don't want to get involved, you tell no one of what you have heard, but you do stay home from school the next day, when the plot does actually unfold. Several students and teachers are killed; several more are maimed for life, including a couple of your own friends. Are you not morally responsible, according to common morality, for the carnage? Of course, the others are much more responsible, we would think, but surely you bear some responsibility, if anyone does. And yet you did not cause the carnage. Your responsibility arises, we think, not because you caused the shooting, but because you could have stopped it, you knew you could have stopped it, you had good reason to think you were the only one who could stop it, you sincerely believed the situation was dire, and yet you did nothing, and your doing nothing had no strong justification.

I mention this because we are about to be flooded with reasonable-sounding ideas about what is required in order for a person to be morally responsible. I simply want to urge caution. On a number of occasions, I have proposed to my own students various principles about moral responsibility that sounded reasonable to me, but I have found students to be excellent critics, coming up with realistic examples that shot down my reasonable-sounding principles.

In this chapter, we are going to consider the reasonable-sounding idea that moral responsibility requires something called "free will." This is the supposed requirement that is most often the center of concern when people worry about whether moral responsibility is possible for human beings. The opening paragraph of this chapter might have been at least loosely concerned with our lack of "free will." Some folks argue that we are too much influenced by our environments to have "free will." Others who believe that moral responsibility requires free will also believe that people sometimes really do have enough free will, and so people *can* meet the requirement.

### ***“Free will” as personal control***

Unfortunately, the notion of “free will” is rather unclear, and not everyone means the same thing when they talk about it. However, the basic idea is simple enough: free will has to do with the question of who or what has *control* over a person and what the person thinks and does. If you do something “of your own free will,” surely that means at least that no one forced you to do it—that you were largely *in control* of your behavior. Another way to put this might be that if you do something of your own free will, that means you are the *author* of any behavior or thinking that directly results. You are in charge. You have control over what is going on with that part of your life.

Thus, from a common sense point of view, free will is thought of as being an ability of a person to control some aspect of life. When a person’s behavior or thinking is under that kind of personal control, it is said that the behavior or thinking is “freely chosen” by that person. And something like this sort of personal control appears to be needed for moral responsibility.

For example, if you figure out a way to get two of your friends to stop fighting and arguing all the time, and your method actually works for the benefit of everyone involved, we would typically think you deserve some moral credit. Your efforts reflect on you in a positive way, morally speaking. Accordingly, you are, we think, *morally responsible* for improving the situation. Your being responsible here depends on your exercising some important control over your behavior and the process of your own thinking. You were the author of your idea—that is, you came up with it. No one else did it for you, or to you. No one else told you what to do or think. We might say you came up with your own idea freely. And if your friends agreed with your idea, not because you somehow forced them to agree, but because you persuaded them by giving them good reasons, they went along with your idea of their own free will. They chose to adopt your plan, and so they were in control of their own decision. They, too, exercised free will. At least those who believe in free will might describe the situation in such terms.

None of this tells us exactly how free will works, or exactly what it is. But it at least gives some idea of what free will is about—enough of an idea so that you will readily see why free will is so often thought to be a requirement for moral responsibility. After all, it seems obvious that a person cannot be morally responsible for something over which they have no control. How could a bit of your behavior over which you have no real control (e.g., a nervous twitch) reflect on whether you are morally good or bad? So, we seem to be on the right track by identifying free will as some kind of individual personal control. Even in the high school example given earlier, you had a measure of control, we suppose, over what happened at your school. You kept quiet of your own free will, it might be said, and that means your silence was under your control. This in turn means that you had some control over whether the plotters would be stopped, or whether they would be allowed to go on with executing their plot, and you therefore had some control over whether the teachers and students would fall victim to the plot.

If moral responsibility requires free will, and free will is some sort of individual personal control, then a person can’t be morally responsible for something unless they have the right sort of individual personal control over that thing. Once said, this point may appear to be obviously correct.

However, as we have seen above, caution is called for. In philosophical analysis, there are almost always complications, and this case is no exception. Here is one complication: the drunk driver whose drunken driving causes an accident with injuries. The drunken driver at the time of the accident did not have control of the vehicle, or of their own driving, and yet the driver is thought to be morally responsible for the accident nevertheless. Why? Does this show that responsibility

does *not* require control? (BEFORE READING ANY FURTHER, YOU SHOULD TRY TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION FOR YOURSELF. THEN SEE WHETHER YOUR QUICK ANSWER AGREES WITH MINE, BELOW.)

The drunk driver, it is commonly thought, is responsible for the accident even though she did not have control at the time of the accident, because she had control over crucial events at some *earlier* time, and could have avoided causing the accident, simply by properly exercising control earlier. No one forced her to drive the car. She had control over that decision. Recognizing she was drunk, she should have never gotten behind the wheel. Or, if she was so drunk that she had no control of her own thinking at the time she got behind the wheel, then she should never have gotten that drunk in the first place if she was likely to drive. She had control over how much alcohol she consumed. She should have known how dangerous it would be to get that drunk when she was planning to drive.

So, even though the drunk driver does not have personal control over her own driving performance at the time of the accident, and does not cause the accident of her own free will, she does have personal control over getting into the risky situation in the first place, and did choose of her own free will to put herself into that situation. In fact, if someone else really did *force* her to get that drunk, against her will, and *forced* her to drive drunk, against her will, then she really is *not* responsible for the accident. Whoever did the forcing is the one in control, and the one who is therefore responsible.

I cannot know whether you fully agree with the line of thinking above, but something like this ought to sound like a very common way of linking personal control with moral responsibility, even in cases in which a particular misdeed is one over which the person did not have control *at the time*. We use the term “negligence” to cover a great many of these cases. A person is negligent when they fail to do something they should have done, that they were in a position to know they should have done, and over which they did have enough control. The drunk driver is seriously negligent.

The discussion of the drunk driver, then, turns out to confirm the common sense idea that lying behind a person’s moral responsibility there must be the right sort of personal control exercised by that person at some point prior to the occurrence for which the person is responsible. As the drunk driver case illustrates, the relationship between personal control and subsequent events that the person is responsible for can be a bit complicated, but personal control at some point is still needed for moral responsibility<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, assuming that having free will is equivalent to having the relevant sort of control, then it certainly seems as though free will is a requirement for moral responsibility, and I will assume this to be the case from now on.

***This only means that moral responsibility requires the right sort of personal control.*** To call this sort of personal control by the name “free will” makes a connection between personal control and common talk about “free will” or “free choice,” and doing things “of your own free will,” but it does not tell us anything about what the right sort of personal control really is like.

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<sup>2</sup>The issue of control becomes even more complex in application to individual responsibility for group actions. Nevertheless, I think at least some measure of personal control at some point in the processes of joining and continuing to be a member of the group is necessary for individual responsibility, even in the case of group action. However, the degree of control one individual might have over the behavior of a large group, especially when the individual is not in the group’s leadership, raises some serious issues about how well talk of individual control can be made to fit the group action picture. Probably control over the group action is not required for responsibility of the individual for the group’s action, but rather control over one’s own participation in the carrying out of the group’s action.

### ***Some problems about influences and personal control***

Exactly what does it take in order to have the right sort of personal control, the sort of control that supports moral responsibility? This turns out to be a really tough question.

For example, if I get so angry that I “lose control” does that mean my moral responsibility goes away during that time, no matter what I might do? Or, if my roommate successfully pressures me into going along with some stupid cheating scheme by threatening not to be cooperative with me in the room any more if I don’t do it, it might be said I’ve lost control of the situation. Does that mean I have no free will with regard to participating? Was I “forced” into participating? Am I not responsible for my behavior? Or, if I am on prescribed anti-depressant drugs, and they do not work as expected, so that I become even more depressed, have I lost control of my behavior so that I no longer am responsible? These questions and many more like them indicate the complexity of the idea of personal control.

Since there is considerable disagreement regarding exactly what it takes to have the right sort of control, there is disagreement about what “free will” is, but I think everyone agrees that moral responsibility requires the right sort of control, whatever that may be.

Probably the main difficulty in getting clear about personal control lies in the obvious fact that people in making their choices are heavily influenced by all sorts of things that are beyond their control at the time they have to make their choice. This seems to threaten their personal control. To put it crudely—how much influence can there be on someone before that person loses control so much that they are no longer responsible for what they choose to do?

When I “lose control” and become angry, that probably happens because of outside influences that “push my buttons” to such an extent that my normal psychological self-control mechanisms are overwhelmed. When I am threatened, or pressured, into doing something that I otherwise would not have done, surely the threats and pressure tactics are strong outside influences on my behavior. But even in less obnoxious ways I am heavily influenced all the time by the ways I was reared, by what my friends think, by what I have experienced in the past. Religious or anti-religious views do not just appear out of nowhere—they seem to be instilled in people by many factors that come into play during life. Thinking and behavior may also be influenced by many things of which people are not even aware, such as dietary deficiencies and hormone changes. The most famous of these is PMS, which despite all the jokes, is for some women a real issue<sup>3</sup>. But there is also considerable evidence that dietary deficiencies are important—low blood sugar at the end of the workday apparently contributes to car accidents in commuters, and poor diet can affect childhood intellectual development.

Does the existence of all these influences undermine a person’s control of their own thinking and behavior to such an extent that they are not morally responsible? After all, they cannot now do anything about their own past, and so they cannot now eliminate the present influences coming from the past. How much influence from the past can there be before control in the present is lost? Often people cannot do anything about important aspects of their present circumstances either. How much influence from present circumstances can there be before control is lost?

In response to these troubling questions, one might suppose that the easy solution is to simply say that a person has the right kind of control only when NO influences are present. In other words,

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<sup>3</sup> Note that I am not saying PMS is a *disease*, that it is *abnormal*, or that it is a serious *problem*. I am simply saying that hormonal changes may influence the way people think.

if a person is influenced by anything at all when they make their choices, then they are not morally responsible for those choices, because the presence of even a small influence on the person means they don't have complete and total control over what is going on. Then we don't have to face any hard questions about how much influence is too much, since any tiny amount of influence is already too much.

The suggestion in the previous paragraph may be simple, and clear, but I believe it is not hard to show that it simply will not work. In fact, meaningful personal control over one's own behavior generally **REQUIRES** responsiveness to outside influences. Think about driving a car. If you are properly controlling the car, it is absolutely essential that you respond to outside influences constantly. When you see someone pull out in front of you, and you are in good control of the car, you react and take appropriate action. You don't put up a psychological wall and say "I must not let any outside influences change my driving"! Intelligent personal control over behavior must constantly operate under an enormous number of influences from background experience (when you learned to drive, for example), from what other people say (such as when your passenger points out that you just missed your turn), from physical limitations (such as when you put on sun glasses to avoid the glare), and so on, and on. To claim that you have personal control only when there are no influences operating on you is outrageous. Moral responsibility cannot reasonably require such a thing.

Our society seems terribly confused about these issues regarding influences and moral responsibility. On the one hand, we say parents can "ruin" the rest of a child's life by abusing the child, as though the influences from the abuse take away the ability of the child to ever have enough control later to be in charge of his or her own life. But then we turn around and morally blame that child once grown into an adult, if that person is nasty or antisocial. Isn't this contradictory? Doesn't this show confusion about how influences do or do not undermine the sort of personal control needed for responsibility?

#### **Summary of the thread so far**

- The basic idea of moral responsibility: when a person is morally responsible for something, that thing reflects on the person's moral standing.
- The concept of moral responsibility is at the heart of the ways we think about our own worth and aspirations and about the lives of others. We ought not discard the concept lightly.
- Moral responsibility requires the right sort of personal control—a person's moral standing cannot be affected by something over which the person lacks the right sort of control.
- Having the right sort of control is often referred to as "free will," but that doesn't tell us what is needed in order to have the right sort of control.
- There are deep puzzles about what sort of control is the right sort, because control can be undermined by outside influences on the person, and yet

### ***Free will and causation***

We are now confronted with a perplexing set of issues about the personal control needed for moral responsibility. We want to know exactly what kind of personal control is the right kind, and how it relates to being influenced. We know that without some measure of personal control, moral responsibility is impossible. But we also know that we are constantly living with an enormous collection of influences that must make a difference to our choice-making. We need a theory about how a person can have enough control to be responsible while still being influenced by all sorts of things.

The next step is to try to make the notion of responsibility-generating control more precise. A good account of control will clarify the proper place of influences. One popular approach for making responsibility-generating control more precise so as to handle these issues goes like this:

When something is brought about by the exercise of someone's "free will," that means the person's decision or choosing was *not caused* by anything other than the *person* at the time. The person might have been *influenced* by past experiences or genetic makeup and by outside forces, but the ultimate *cause* of the choice nevertheless was the person who made it.

This way of describing "free will" in terms of causes and effects flows directly out of our earlier discussion of free will as a form of personal control: free will on this view is personal control defined in terms of *the person's being the ultimate cause* of that thing. On this view of free will, when you exercise your free will, no one else, no other force, no other influence, nothing besides *you* caused those thoughts or behaviors.

According to this account of free will, when I freely chose many years ago to become a philosopher, I and I alone was the cause of that decision. I was not caused by outside forces or by my previous experiences and genetic makeup to make the decision I made. Of course, I was influenced by some of those forces—for example, my earlier course work in philosophy made a big difference. My genetic makeup and childhood development gave me a brain that was structured and functioning properly, and so I couldn't have been in the position to make my decision without that background. But, according to this account, those influences or background factors were not the *cause* of my choice. I, and I alone, authored my decision. Similarly, your present choice of major, or choice to change major, or choice not to have a major right now, is a free choice—supposedly an exercise of your free will. Again, this means none of the influences on you—your parents, your friends, your advisor, your past experiences, what you ate for breakfast, or the rules of the institution—are causing your choice. You are the ultimate author of your choice. Nothing causes you to make it.

Unfortunately, there is a complication that must now enter the picture. Some philosophers find this talk of causation by persons to be unacceptable, because they believe all causation originates in events or states, not in individual things. But they nevertheless believe that people have "free will" to make choices that are not caused by anything about the person's past, or anything about the person's thinking, or by anything outside of the person. In other words, they object to the idea that persons cause their free choices, just as they object to the idea that *anything at all* causes a free choice.

So, we have two kinds of ways in which standard causation of free choices can be rejected:

- a) Free choices (that is, choices made by the exercise of the kind of free will needed for moral responsibility) are not caused by any events or states, not even the person's own mental states or experiences, but are caused simply by *the person* who makes the choice. This view about the causes of free choice is called the "agent causal" view.
- b) Free choices (that is, choices made by the exercise of the kind of free will needed for moral responsibility) are choices a person makes without being caused by anything at all to make them – not even by their own prior thinking and experiences. Such choices have no cause – they are not caused even by the person who makes them.

These notions of free will are supposed to allow a very simple, direct assertion of a very strong form of personal control over choice-making, since on either account, the agent is not caused by anything to make the free choice.

It would be good to have a label for these accounts of the sort of "free will" needed for moral responsibility. Sometimes the phrase "**contra-causal free will**" has been used ("Contra" means "against." So, the name, "contra-causal" indicates that on this conception of free will there are no ordinary causes of a person's choice-makings.) But those who hold the "agent causal" view might not like that label. One prominent author, Robert Kane, suggests another label that might be more appropriate: "**libertarian free will.**" There is a discussion of libertarianism below, to explain why that label would be a good one.

### ***Libertarianism***

Libertarianism<sup>4</sup> is a popular philosophical point of view about free will and moral responsibility that arises out of the previous considerations.

What is the libertarian point of view? Like most philosophical stances, it is hard to come to complete agreement on a definition that satisfies everyone, but the following list of typical libertarian commitments should come close:

Rough version:

- People are commonly morally responsible for lots of things.
- Moral responsibility requires **libertarian** free will.
- So, people often make morally significant choices by exercising libertarian free will.

More carefully stated:

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<sup>4</sup>The word "libertarian" has a much different use in political theory, where it refers to the view that the best political arrangement requires keeping the role of government as small as possible so that people are left at liberty to direct their own resources, if any, in whatever way they wish. This political idea is probably connected in various obscure ways with the issue of whether people have contra-causal free will, but the definition of political libertarianism is clearly distinct from the account of libertarianism with respect to moral responsibility.

1. Normal people often are morally responsible in virtue of their acts, omissions, thoughts, desires, or other morally significant aspects of their lives.
2. In order for a person to be morally responsible, that person must have the ability to make relevant choices through the exercise of **libertarian** free will. In other words, if a person did not have the ability to make relevant choices through the exercise of libertarian free will, then the person could not be morally responsible.
3. Normal people have the ability to make choices through the exercise of libertarian free will, and they often utilize this ability when making morally significant choices.

It has often been claimed (even by some who oppose it) that the vast majority of non-philosophers are libertarians, but the sociological evidence for that claim is lacking, as far as I can tell. My own view is that most people really are just confused about what to think regarding these issues, and that they have no firm commitments.

At this point it then becomes appropriate to investigate what can be said for or against the libertarian point of view. The obvious big questions:

- Does moral responsibility truly require that people be able to make choices by exercising **libertarian** free will (or might some other, less demanding sort of free will be enough)?
- Do people truly possess the ability to make choices through the exercise of **libertarian** free will?

Note that the issue is always about **libertarian** free will. There seems to be general agreement that some kind of personal control is needed for moral responsibility, and one might call that sort of control “free will”. But there is no agreement that moral responsibility requires **libertarian** free will, or that people possess the ability to make choices through the exercise of that type of free will.