

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility

By JOHN MARTIN FISCHER
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SUMMARY

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This book is a collection of essays. In most cases, the essays were written after I wrote the two monographs, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* and (with Mark Ravizza), *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*.¹ I seek to fill in and further develop the overall framework for moral responsibility I presented in the monographs, and to defend various elements against criticisms.

The overall framework for moral responsibility includes (at least) the following elements: a distinction between the concept of moral responsibility and its conditions of application; a distinction between ‘regulative’ and ‘guidance’ control; an argument that guidance control, and not regulative control, is the ‘freedom-relevant’ condition linked to moral responsibility; an account of guidance control in terms of mechanism ownership and moderate reasons-responsiveness; an argument that guidance control, so construed, is compatible with causal determinism; and an account of the value of moral responsibility (in terms of self-expression).

I suggest that there are various plausible ways of specifying the concept of moral responsibility, including the ‘moral ledger view’, the ‘fittingness-of-providing an explanation’ view, and the ‘Strawsonian view’, which involves aptness for the ‘reactive attitudes’ (resentment, indignation, gratitude, love, and so forth). I do not take an official stand as to the proper analysis of our concept of moral responsibility; perhaps there is no one single correct answer here, and our concept involves elements of the various suggestions. Even so, I find it helpful and instructive to take as a working hypothesis some version of the Strawsonian account of the concept of moral responsibility.

1. *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Blackwell, 1994); and *Responsibility and Control* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

But under what conditions does the concept apply? I here follow Aristotle: an agent must meet both some sort of ‘epistemic’ condition and a ‘freedom-relevant condition’. This tracks Aristotle’s claim that an agent fails to act voluntarily to the extent that he acts from ignorance or force. I say little about the epistemic condition, focusing instead on the freedom-relevant condition.

I offer plausibility arguments for the contention that ‘acting freely’ (an ‘actual-sequence’ sort of freedom) plays the role of the freedom-relevant condition; put in other words, guidance control, and not regulative control, is the freedom-relevant condition associated with moral responsibility. On my view, then, an agent may be morally responsible but never have had genuine metaphysical access to alternative possibilities—he may never have had ‘freedom to do otherwise’. These plausibility arguments employ the thought-experiments that originated with John Locke and have been dubbed, ‘Frankfurt-Style Examples’, after Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt has argued that such cases— involving a signature sort of pre-emptive overdetermination—imply the falsity of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (the principle that states that freedom to do otherwise is a necessary condition of moral responsibility). In my view, the moral of the Frankfurt Stories is that acting freely (and being morally responsible) is a matter of how the actual sequence unfolds, *not* whether the agent has genuine metaphysical access to alternative sequences. Although I find the thought-experiments instructive and illuminating, I believe that there are other dialectical routes to the same conclusion, and that the thought-experiments should form part of an overall strategy of argumentation.² Even if one doesn’t find the Frankfurt-Examples convincing, this should not in itself issue in a rejection of the basic conclusion about the relationship between moral responsibility and freedom to do otherwise.

Especially with my co-author, Mark Ravizza, I have sought to sketch an account of guidance control. On our approach, guidance control involves two chief elements; mechanism ownership and reasons-responsiveness. An agent exhibits guidance control of an action insofar as the action issues from the agent’s own, ‘moderately reasons-responsive’ mechanism. Our more detailed accounts of both elements have elicited worries and objections; particularly contentious have been the claim that mechanism ownership involves a certain sort of ‘subjective’ condition, and that reactivity to reasons is ‘all-of-a piece’. In these essays I seek to defend the fundamental ideas where possible. Also, in subsequent work I have pointed out that the basic elements of the framework for moral responsibility can be preserved while adjusting the specific details; I have argued that I can still accomplish everything I had hoped to accomplish by offering a framework for moral responsibility even without a commitment to a strong subjectivity or to the contention that ‘reactivity-is-all-of-a piece’.³ That is, I can accept slightly adjusted accounts of the fundamental

2. For other strategies, see R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Harvard University Press, 1994), and Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (Viking, 2003).

3. John Martin Fischer, ‘Reply: The Free Will Revolution’, part of a book symposium on John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control, Philosophical Explorations* 8 (2005), pp. 145–56; and ‘The Free Will Revolution (Continued)’, part of a special issue on the work of John Martin Fischer in *The Journal of Ethics* (Springer), forthcoming, July 2006.

elements of the framework while still maintaining that moral responsibility does not require regulative control, that it is fundamentally a historical notion, and that it is compatible with causal determinism. This is important because some philosophers have apparently dismissed the view because they have found the specific subjective view or the view that reactivity is all-of-a piece troubling.

Finally, I have suggested that the value placed on acting freely and being such as to be held morally accountable is the value of a certain distinctive kind of self-expression. When we act freely, we express ourselves in a way that is perhaps a form of artistic creativity (or akin to such self-expression). What matters is not that we make a difference to the world, but that we make a certain kind of statement. I seek to take at least the first steps toward explaining the relevant sort of self-expression.