

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will
Prof. Funkhouser
11/9/06
Fischer and Ravizza, Chapter 2

I.

- People can be morally responsible for many things, and F&R will attend to 3 such things — actions, omissions, and the consequences thereof. This chapter covers action, which is the most fundamental of the 3. Other candidates for the “content” of moral responsibility include character traits and emotional responses.

- Key question for this chapter: Determinism seems to rule out alternative possibilities. But, are alternative possibilities required for moral responsibility?

II.

- The story of Sam and Jack is presented as a Frankfurt-type case. Such cases purport to establish that moral responsibility does not require the ability to do otherwise. This then allows one to sidestep the Indirect Challenge.

- The story about Sally is then presented to distinguish guidance control from regulative control. The latter concerns the ability to do otherwise. F&R claim that only the former is required for moral responsibility.

III.

- In this section they begin arguing that guidance control is compatible with causal determinism.

- Examples that clearly involve a loss of guidance control: a hypnotic suggestion (that one did not consent to), subliminal advertising, brainwashing, potent drugs, and direct manipulation of the brain. These are all *responsibility-undermining factors*. Some of these passages should remind you of Frankfurt on coercion.

Many people believe that there can be genuinely “irresistible” psychological impulses. If so, then these may issue in behavior the agent does not control. Drug addicts may (in certain circumstances) act on literally irresistible urges, and we might not hold

them morally responsible for acting on these desires (especially if we believe that they are not morally responsible for acquiring the addiction in the first place). (35)

○ Unlike Frankfurt, however, F&R emphasize that causal history does matter to moral responsibility. (36)

● Hypothesis: Responsibility-undermining factors take away our responsiveness to reasons.

● Actual-sequence accounts of moral responsibility:

We believe, then, that the Frankfurt-type cases invite us to look more carefully at the characteristics of the *actual sequence that leads to the action*. That is, these cases invite us to develop what we shall call an “actual-sequence” account of moral responsibility. By an “actual-sequence” approach, we mean an approach to moral responsibility that does *not* require alternative possibilities. In contrast to traditional views, an actual-sequence model of moral responsibility holds that ascriptions of responsibility do *not* depend on whether agents are free to pursue alternative courses of action (and thus have alternative scenarios genuinely accessible to them); rather, what is important is (roughly speaking) what the agents do, and how their actions come to be performed. (37)

Part of this procedure is to focus on the mechanisms that actually generate actions. And mechanisms can be said to be reasons-responsive (or not).

○ 2 important conditions for moral responsibility/guidance control are then suggested: the relevant mechanism must be reasons-responsive and the mechanism must be the agent’s own.

IV.

● Strong reasons-responsiveness for a mechanism K :

...if K were to operate and there were sufficient reason to do otherwise, the agent would *recognize* the sufficient reason to do otherwise and thus *choose* to do otherwise and *do* otherwise. (41)

This allows for the possibility of 3 kinds of failure: in recognition (of reasons), choice, and action. (Check out the interesting discussions of each, on pp. 41–42.)

- F&R do not believe that strong reasons-responsiveness is required for moral responsibility. Examples to support this position are given on pp. 42–43.

- F&R offer weak reasons-responsiveness as an alternative requirement:

In contrast, under weak reasons-responsiveness, we (again) hold fixed the actual kind of mechanism, and we then simply require that there exist *some* possible scenario (or possible world) in which there is a sufficient reason to do otherwise, the agent recognizes this reason, and the agent does otherwise. (44)

F&R then discuss the same examples, as evaluated by this new standard. (45) They tentatively conclude that weak reasons-responsiveness is both necessary and sufficient for moral responsibility.

V.

[This section can be ignored. They basically admit that they do not have an account of mechanisms.]

VI.

- Example: Jim and his irresistible urge for a drug.

When an agent acts from a literally irresistible urge, he is undergoing a kind of physical process that is not reasons-responsive, and it is this lack of reasons-responsiveness of the actual physical process that rules out guidance control and moral responsibility. (48)

VII.

- The very drunk driver example: He is morally responsible for what he does while in a state lacking weak reasons-responsiveness, because he decided or allowed himself to get into that state while being weakly reasons-responsive.

The general approach we are developing is a “tracing” approach: when an agent is morally responsible for an action that issues from a mechanism that is not appropriately reasons-responsive, we must be able to trace back along the history of the action to

a point (*suitably related to the action*) where there was indeed an appropriately reasons-responsive mechanism. (50–51)

VIII.

- F&R remind us that their account of guidance control shows that moral responsibility is compatible with causal determinism.

- semicompatibilism: “. . . moral responsibility is compatible with causal determinism, even if causal determinism is incompatible with freedom to do otherwise.” (53)

IX-X.

[You can skip this material.]