

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will
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Fischer and Ravizza, Chapter 5

I.

- This chapter deals with moral responsibility for omissions.

II.

- Omissions can be understood in a wider or narrower sense. In the wider sense, *anything* that we fail to do counts as an omission. They adopt this wider usage.

◦ Example: Sloth, Sue, and the small-time thug. These are cases in which (it seems that) the agent is not morally responsible for their omission, *because* the agent could not have performed the omitted action.

Thus, these cases, in conjunction with “Hero” (and a whole array of cases of positive agency), suggest that actions and omissions are *asymmetrical* with respect to the requirement of alternative possibilities. That is, moral responsibility for an action does not require the freedom to refrain from performing the action, whereas moral responsibility for failure to perform an action requires the freedom to perform the action. (127)

◦ But there are other cases in which it seems that agents are morally responsible for omissions, even though they could not have performed the omitted action — e.g., “Forest Ranger 2”. So, we have a puzzle.

III.

- The lack of moral responsibility is never to be explained by the lack of alternative possibilities. Rather, it is always due to a lack of guidance control.

- Distinguish *bodily* and *complex* omissions. (132–133) Moral responsibility for these 2 kinds of omissions corresponds to moral responsibility for actions and consequences, as detailed previously.

◦ F&R discuss Locke’s example of a man who voluntarily stays in a locked room. His failure to leave the room is a complex omission. F&R hold that he is not morally responsible for this complex omission, since the man’s ability

to leave the room is not sensitive to his bodily movements (i.e., there is a lack of guidance control). They make similar claims about “Sharks”, “Rain Dance”, etc. However, in cases like “Forest Ranger 2” the appropriate kind of sensitivity (guidance control) does hold, so they are morally responsible.

○ The (ir)relevance of the counterfactual intervener to moral responsibility should be the same whether or not the intervention would occur at the first or second stage of a complex consequence or omission. (139)

IV. & V.

[You can skip these sections.]