

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 7

September 28th, 2015



Free Will: Nagel & Strawson

- Today we will start investigating the relationship between **free will** and **moral responsibility**.

“Do we have free will?” is a **metaphysical** question (concerning the nature of the world and the objects in it), in two ways:

1. It seems to depend on *the nature of the world we live in,*

- specifically, *whether our world is deterministic* (one in which determinism is true) *or not*.
- **determinism** = “the theory that absolutely everything that happens is causally determined to happen exactly as it does by what has already gone before – right back to the beginning of the universe.” (Strawson 1)



» If our world is deterministic, then everything happens as the outcome of a *chain reaction*, or *domino effect*.

- **Physical determinism** = everything happens as an inevitable consequence of the initial conditions of the universe and the physical laws governing that universe.
- **Theological determinism** = everything happens according to the preordained plan of some deity (or deities).

2. It tells us something important about *the nature of human beings*.

- Many people believe free will is in fact the defining characteristic of human beings, which distinguishes us from, say, animals and machines.

And since it concerns human actions, whether or not we have free will raises questions for **moral philosophy**, *the study of right and wrong behavior*.

- Many people hold a view expressed in this conditional:
 - 1) If **an person is morally responsible for an action**, then **that person performed that action of their own free will**.
 - This premise asserts that having free will is a **necessary condition** for having moral responsibility for one's actions:
 - that you *can't* be morally responsible *unless* you have free will.

A **necessary condition** for **S** is a fact or state of affairs *that must be satisfied in order for S to be true*.

- E.g., **being male** is a *necessary condition* for **being a father**.

A **sufficient condition** for **S** is a fact or state of affairs *whose satisfaction is enough to guarantee that S is true*.

- E.g., **having a child** is a *sufficient condition* for being a parent.
 - ...however, **being male** is *not a sufficient condition* for **being a father**.

Thomas Nagel (1937-present, professor at NYU)

- “Free Will” endorses a view about the relationship between determinism and moral responsibility called **incompatibilism**:
 - *if determinism is true, then we **cannot** hold ourselves and others morally responsible for their actions.*



Galen Strawson (1952-present)

- “Your Move: The Maze of Free Will” argues that people cannot be morally responsible for their actions, whether determinism is true or not.
 - However, we still have good reason to think of ourselves as morally responsible for our actions, even if it isn’t strictly true that we are responsible.
- This makes Strawson a proponent of **compatibilism**:
 - *If determinism is true, then we **can** still hold ourselves and others morally responsible for their actions.*



Nagel examines how **our ordinary way of talking about our actions typically presupposes that a) our universe is indeterministic, and b) we have free will.**

If you chose cake, but say, *“I could have had a peach instead”*,

– ...you mean not only that:

» *“you had the opportunity to take a peach instead,”*

– ...but moreover that:

» *“You could have done something different from what you actually did.*

- *Before you made up your mind, it was open whether you would take fruit or cake,*
- *and it was only your choice that decided which it would be.” (ibid.)*



➤ If you believe that the world is such that it was possible for you to have chosen differently, **you deny that determinism is true.**

➤ If you believe your choices are the only causes of your action, **you assert that you act freely:**

➤ that no forces or factors beyond your choice brought about your action. 5

Nagel points out that **free will is something we only attribute to human beings (& maybe some animals).**

- We don't think inanimate objects (and most animals) could have done otherwise than they did,
 - except if a human action made them operate differently.
 - We typically treat non-human beings as if everything they do is determined by causes beyond themselves.
- But “when it comes to *people*,
 - we seem to think that they can do various things they don't actually do, just like that, without anything else happening differently first.”
 - We think that “*Nothing up to the point at which you choose determines irrevocably what your choice will be.*”
 - It remains an open possibility that you will choose a peach until the moment when you actually choose chocolate cake.
 - *It isn't determined in advance.*” (1)

➤ ***Why are we so sure that our actions aren't determined by forces outside of ourselves, but everything else is?***



Why might we think determinism is *true*?

- Science tells us that things happen the way they do in accordance with the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, etc., which deliver reliable outcomes given certain starting conditions.
- Some religions tell us that everything happens according to the plan or will of a higher power (or higher powers).

$$v = v_0 + at$$
$$x = x_0 + v_0 t + \frac{1}{2} at^2$$
$$v^2 = v_0^2 + 2a(x - x_0)$$

If determinism is *true*, then it seems we *don't* have free will.

- That's because determinism says that factors and forces beyond our own choices (like the laws of physics, the operations of our brains, or divine commands) make us act the way we do,
 - i.e., *our choices are not the sole causes of our actions.*



Consider the following *argument against free will*:

- 1) If we have free will, then our choices must be the sole causes of our own actions.
- 2) Our choices are *not* the sole causes of our actions.
- 3) Therefore, we do *not* have free will.

Why might we think determinism is *false*?

- Science suggests that some events cannot be predicted on the basis of prior conditions, either because they occur purely by chance.
 - e.g. genetic mutations and radioactive decay occur randomly,
 - and quantum physics suggests that the exact behavior of microparticles cannot be predicted because of a phenomenon called superposition.



If determinism is *false*, then we have free will – *right*?

- ***Not really***: In an indeterministic world, *nothing* is causally determined by what happens prior – everything is just left up to chance.
- If our world is indeterministic, your actions are *not caused* by *any* factors and forces at all: *not even your choices*.

- So whether or not determinism is true, our choices aren't the sole causes of our actions,
- and the ***argument against free will*** seems sound.



- 1) If we have free will, then our choices must be the sole causes of our own actions.
- 2) Our choices are ***not*** the sole causes of our actions.

- 3) Therefore, we do ***not*** have free will.

It seems that **we are very attached to the idea that we have free will.**



Let's revisit the *argument against free will*:

- 1) If we have free will, then our choices must be the sole causes of our own actions.
- 2) Our choices are *not* the sole causes of our actions.

- 3) Therefore, we do *not* have free will.

➤ Most people will assume that the conclusion of this argument is unsupported, because premise 2) must be false.

Nagel thinks **we are reluctant to accept that free will might be an *illusion*,**

- because “If you believed that about yourself and other people,
- it would probably change the way you felt about things.” (3)
 - *If you didn't choose cake over a peach of your own free will, “could you blame yourself for giving in to temptation...?”*
 - ...you probably wouldn't be able sensibly to blame anyone at all for doing something bad, or praise them for doing something good.” (3)

➤ **If we don't really have free will, how could we hold anyone responsible for their actions?**

Nagel's reasoning assumes the truth of:

- 1) If a person is morally responsible for an action,
then that person performed that action of their own free will.
 - » i.e., that having free will is a *necessary condition* for moral responsibility.

...And it also seems that whether or not determinism is true, we don't really have free will, so this premise is true of any person:

- 2) Person A did **not** perform action X of their own free will.

➤ Then premises 1) & 2) give us conclusion 3), by *Modus Tollens*:

- 1) If a person is morally responsible for an action,
then that person performed that action of their own free will.
- 2) Agent A did **not** perform action X of their own free will.

- 3) Therefore, agent A is **not** morally responsible for action X.

» We can call this the *argument against moral responsibility*.

If both premises are *true*, the argument is sound, and conclusion 3) is supported.

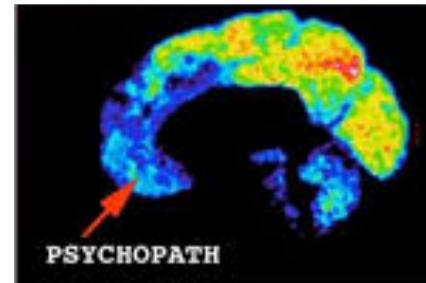
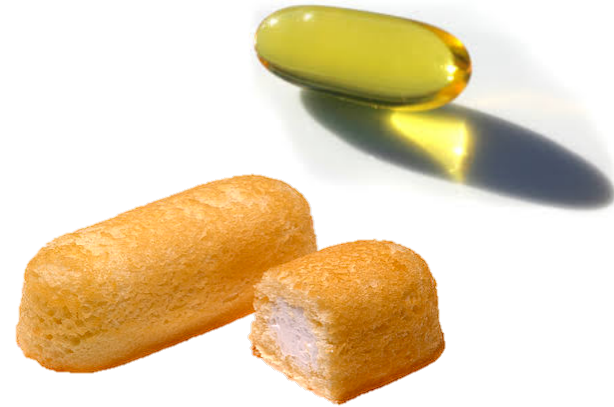
- *But what if action X is something really bad?*
- Are we supposed to just let them get away with it, without holding them accountable?

Let's **investigate our intuitions** about different cases.



– In each of the following scenarios,
is George morally responsible for his action?

1. It was predetermined (by God or by the laws of physics) that George would rob a bank, and he does.
2. George accidentally ingests a drug that manipulates his brain in a way that causes him to rob a bank.
3. George eats a sugary dessert which manipulates his brain in a way that causes him to rob a bank.
4. George is born with a brain condition that causes him to rob a bank.
5. George undergoes a terrible accident that manipulates his brain in a way that causes him to rob a bank.



Nagel explains:

- “Some think that if determinism is true, no one can reasonably be praised or blamed for anything, any more than the rain can be praised or blamed for falling.” (3)
 - These people are **incompatibilists**, who believe that:
 - *if determinism is true, then we **cannot** hold ourselves and others morally responsible for their actions.*
 - » In other words, they believe that the truth of determinism is *incompatible* with our practices of holding people morally accountable for their actions.
- “Others think that it still makes sense to praise good actions and condemn bad ones, even if they were inevitable.
 - After all, the fact that someone was determined in advance to behave badly doesn't mean that he *didn't* behave badly.
 - Furthermore, if we don't blame him, or perhaps even punish him, he'll probably do it again.” (ibid.)
 - These people are **compatibilists**, who believe that:
 - *If determinism is true, then we **can** still hold ourselves and others morally responsible for their actions.*
 - » They believe that the truth of determinism is *compatible* with our practices of holding people morally accountable for their actions.



- Remember that **we can't just assure ourselves that we are morally responsible for our actions by denying that determinism is true.**
 - That's because *even if our world is indeterministic, we wouldn't obviously have free will, because our choices wouldn't be the sole causes of our actions.*

Nagel explains that:

- "...if [your action] wasn't determined in advance, by your desires, beliefs, and personality, among other things,
 - it seems to be something that *just happened*, without any explanation.
 - And in that case, how was it *your doing*?
 - Either of two choices may be possible in advance,
 - but unless *I* determine which of them occurs,
 - it is no more my responsibility than if it was determined by causes beyond my control.
 - And *how can I determine it if nothing determines it?*" (4)
- **Even if determinism is false, the *argument against moral responsibility* succeeds:**

- 1) If a person is morally responsible for an action, then that person performed that action of their own free will.
- 2) Agent A did **not** perform action X of their own free will.
- 3) Therefore, agent A is **not** morally responsible for action X.

Nagel explains **one way that philosophers have tried to argue for compatibilism** – that people *can* be moral responsible, even if determinism is true:

- Accept that our actions are determined,
- but you can be held responsible for your actions *if the cause of the action is one of your psychological states* (e.g., your intentions, desires, etc.).
 - E.g., you are responsible for choosing the cake
“because you *wanted* chocolate cake more than you wanted a peach”:
 - » the cause of your action was your *desire* for cake. (5)

➤ In other words, **the strategy is to revise this premise:**

- 1) If a person is morally responsible for an action,
then **that person performed that action of their own free will.**

➤ **...by giving a different *necessary condition* for moral responsibility:**

- 1*) If a person is morally responsible for an action,
then **the cause of that action was one of that person’s psychological states.**

» ...which allows us to make an ***argument for moral responsibility:***

- 1*) If a person is morally responsible for an action,
then **the cause of that action was one of that person’s psychological states.**

- 2*) **The cause of your action X is your intention (desire, plan, etc.) to do X.**

- 3*) Therefore, **you are morally responsible for action X.**

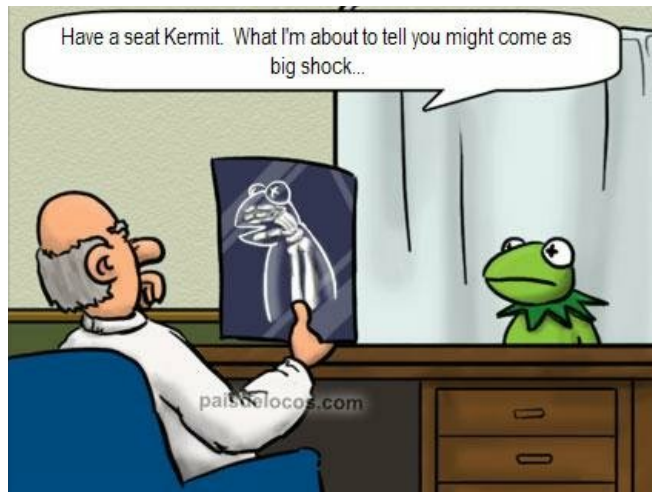
“According to this position, causal determination by itself does not threaten freedom -- only a certain *kind* of cause does that.

- If you grabbed the cake because someone else pushed you into it, then it wouldn't be a free choice.
- But **free action *doesn't* require that there be *no determining cause* at all:**
 - **it means that the *cause has to be of a familiar psychological type.***” (5)

➤ But Nagel thinks that this premise:

1*) If a person is morally responsible for an action,
then the cause of that action was one of that person's psychological states.

...is a dissatisfying account of *why* we can hold people morally responsible.



- “If I thought that everything I did was determined by my circumstances and my psychological condition, *I would feel trapped,*”
 - *because we aren't fully in control of our minds.*
- “And if I thought the same about everybody else, *I would feel that they were like a lot of puppets.*”
 - **It wouldn't make sense to hold [people] responsible for their actions** any more than you hold a dog or a cat or even an elevator responsible.” (5)

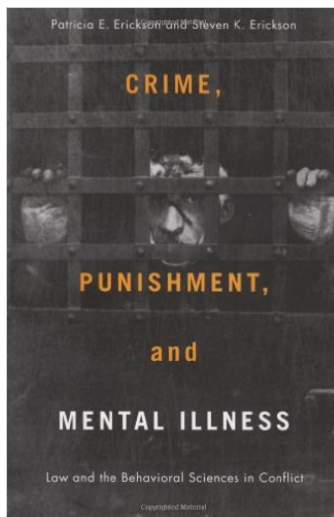
Nagel is an incompatibilist about the relationship between determinism and moral responsibility,

➤ ...because he thinks that the **argument for moral responsibility fails**,



- 1*) If a person is morally responsible for an action, then the cause of that action was one of that person's psychological states.
- 2*) The cause of your action X is your intention (desire, plan, etc.) to do X.
-
- 3*) Therefore, you are morally responsible for action X.

...since premise 1*) would make it the case that we hold people morally responsible even though the cause of their actions *isn't* under their control.



» Nagel thinks we cannot justify practices like punishing people for crimes or misdemeanors, just on the basis of their having certain thoughts, desires, etc. that cause their actions.

- E.g., people with severe depression or schizophrenia *don't* choose to feel or think the way they do.
- *How can we blame them for acting on the basis of psychological states that are beyond their control?*

➤ Strawson has a different objection to this premise:

1*) If a person is morally responsible for an action,
then the cause of that action was one of that person's psychological states.

He will argue that **moral responsibility requires** *not only* that a person's action was caused by their psychological states,

- but also **that one is responsible for the psychological states they have,**
 - which turns out to be *impossible*.

➤ **His 'Basic Argument' (against moral responsibility):**

- 1) "You do what you do – in the circumstances in which you find yourself – because of the way you then are.
- 2) So if you're going to be ultimately responsible for what you do, you're going to have to be ultimately responsible for the way you are – at least in certain mental respects.
- 3) *But you can't be ultimately responsible for the way you are in any respect at all.*
- 4) So you can't be ultimately responsible for what you do." (Strawson 2)

- » He tells us that the key premise here is 3),
- » which he supports with 2 auxiliary arguments.

3) *But you can't be ultimately responsible for the way you are in any respect at all.*

Auxiliary Argument #1

- a. "It's undeniable that the way you are initially is a result of your genetic inheritance and early experience.
- b. It's undeniable that these are things for which you can't be held to be in any way responsible (morally or otherwise).
- c. But you can't at any later stage of life hope to acquire true or ultimate moral responsibility for the way you are by trying to change the way you already are as a result of genetic inheritance and previous experience.
- d. Why not? Because both the particular ways in which you try to change yourself, and the amount of success you have when trying to change yourself, will be determined by how you already are as a result of your genetic inheritance and previous experience.
- e. Any any further changes that you may become able to bring about after you have brought about certain initial changes, by your genetic inheritance and previous experience." (Strawson 2-3)

- The take-away here is that **we can't be responsible for the way that we are** (including the psychological states that we have),
- **because that depends on countless factors beyond our control.**

3) *But you can't be ultimately responsible for the way you are in any respect at all.*

Auxiliary Argument #2 [Paraphrase of (i) – (ix)]:

- Intentional actions are a function of one's mental properties.
- If one is responsible for one's actions,
then one must be responsible for their mental properties.
- But to be responsible for mental properties,
one must have chosen to have those properties.
- But to have chosen those properties, one must have some
"principles of choice" (P_1) they appeal to in order to choose how to be.
- But then to be ultimately responsible for one's intentional actions,
one must be responsible for having these principles of choice.
- But then one would have to have chosen those principles of choice.
- ...so they would have needed some principles of choice P_2 ,
in virtue of which they selected P_1 .
 - ...and so on, and so on... [to an infinite regress]

- Strawson is showing how **having moral responsibility would require us to be responsible for every last feature of our minds leading to our choice of action,**
 - **which is impossible.**

Strawson concludes:

- ***“Ultimate moral responsibility is impossible,***
- *because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices and principles of choice.”*

» **Since we are *not* responsible for every feature of our minds, we *cannot* be entirely responsible for our actions.**

➤ *Nevertheless*, he thinks that the impossibility of ultimate moral responsibility should *not* make us incompatibilists!

» **“Does this argument stop me feeling entirely morally responsible for what I do?”**

• **It does not.**

» ...Should it stop us [from feeling morally responsible]?

• Well, it might not be a good thing if we did.

• because then we might think we are blameless, or can do anything with impunity, and so on...

» **...we continue to feel we are absolutely morally responsible for what we do.”** (Strawson 5)



Strawson explains why he is a compatibilist,

- ***If determinism is true, then we **can** still hold ourselves and others morally responsible for their actions.***

..by quoting author **Ian McEwan**:

- "...The point is ownership. I own my past, my beginnings, my perceptions.
- And just as I will make myself responsible if my dog or child bites someone, or my car rolls backwards down a hill and causes damage,
- so **I take on full accountability for the little ship of my being, do not have control of its course.**
 - **It is this sense of being the possessor of a consciousness makes us feel responsible for it.**" (Strawson 6)



Strawson agrees that there is *no conflict* "between *having no free will* (those arguments seem watertight) and *assuming moral responsibility for myself.*"

- In other words, the commonly-held assumption that:
 - » If **an person is morally responsible for an action,** then **that person performed that action of their own free will.**
- ...is *false*, because **free will *isn't* really a necessary condition for moral responsibility – but ownership of one's actions is.**