

Moral Responsibility in the Face of Causal Determinism

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Moral responsibility is most commonly defined as the attribute of an agent by which said agent must be held accountable for their actions. It is usually presumed that the agent is only morally responsible as long as they have some faculty for perceiving morals: which means, for the purposes of this paper, that such an agent must be human. Beyond this basic supposition, however, questions tend to arise with regard to the correlative requirements for moral responsibility. In this paper, I shall define incompatibilist free will and then examine whether or not it is an attribute required for moral responsibility, using the ideas of John Martin Fischer. I will do this first by examining if responsibility necessitates an agent's freedom, and then by examining if such freedom is necessarily incompatibilist to causal determinism.

Generally speaking, the theory of incompatibilist free will claims that human beings are free to choose their actions in a situation where there is no determinism dictating their choices. In other words, the belief states that free will and determinism are mutually exclusive: if determinism is the case, free will cannot exist, and if free will exists, the world must be indeterministic. This dichotomy presents a problem when trying to assign moral responsibility to humans. If free will does not exist, we seemingly have no control over our choices and thus no responsibility for them. If the world is not determined by causal relationships, then the "random events" that occur cannot be blamed on causing agents.

In his essay *Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility*, John Martin Fischer attempts to remedy the problem of moral responsibility by suggesting in part that it does not require incompatibilist free will. He does this in a way that removes free will from the problem entirely, but still accounts for moral responsibility in a deterministic world. He states that "an agent can be held morally responsible for performing an action insofar as the mechanism actually issuing in the action is reasons-responsive; the agent need not be free to do otherwise" (*Introduction to*

Philosophy Eighth Edition 485). This idea allows for determinism and moral responsibility to exist simultaneously, while still being coherent with reality. As long as a person does something intentionally – with some form of response to incentives given by the deterministic world around them, then that person is responsible for their actions. If someone sees the situation they are in and decides to murder their neighbor, for example, they are clearly responsible. On the other hand, if they set a hammer down on a windowsill and it falls and kills a person, they are not held responsible, because their action was not reasons-responsive and thus was “accidental.” Similarly, we often do not hold animals morally responsible because we believe they are not morally reasons-responsive.

Fischer’s definition makes moral responsibility a matter of the fact that the agent did something in response to something else. Because of this, it does not matter whether the agent was free to do otherwise – what only matters is that they did what they were to do. In this way, agents in a predetermined causal world can still be held responsible for their actions because “[e]ven an agent who acts against good reasons can be responsive to some reasons” (*Introduction to Philosophy Eighth Edition* 479). Fischer explains that a person does not need a strong reason in order to be considered morally responsible – the person need only commit an action in response to some reason. Thus, it is from the action that responsibility originates, not in a person’s ability to do otherwise. This line of thinking allows for a kind of responsibility that does not need free will to operate, and is therefore compatible with deterministic viewpoints.

Even if Fischer’s argument turned out to be faulty, and moral responsibility absolutely necessitates free will, it does not necessarily follow that free will and a deterministic world-view are incompatible. Determinism posits that every event has a cause, and many determinists argue that this is incompatible with free will, as understood to mean a person’s ability to make a choice

between alternate possibilities. A strict determinist might point out that each of the events leading up to a person's actions dictates that the person really has no free will in the things they do – because they could not physically do otherwise. In other words, if a person is responding to the reasons given to them by events determined by causes, then they are simply a part of that chain of events and have no choice other than that which was caused. This would mean they are not free, and thus cannot be held morally responsible because they must be able to choose otherwise in order to bear responsibility.

Under close examination, this line of reasoning seems to be faulty, because even if we are limited to a single action, it turns out that we still must *choose* to commit it or not. Following the line of reasons-responsiveness, if we are faced with an irrevocable reason to do something, we are still faced with a choice not to follow our reason. We have the freedom to think. Based on this freedom alone, determinism necessitates the responsibility to choose between thinking or not thinking. In this sense, determinism is not contradictory to responsibility, but rather necessitates it, because human beings are responsible for their choice to use their minds.

There is another way in which free will might exist in a determinist understanding of the world, and this form of free will also demands that humans be responsible for their actions. Determinists may argue that agents are not free because their actions are the effects of previous causes. But this is not entirely true, because an agent's action may be caused by something that has not happened. In other words, an agent chooses to do something because they foresee the effect of that thing – and solely for that reason. Nothing has happened in their life to warrant their action, but something may happen if they act. Since they are the cause of this effect, they have the choice to initiate it or not. Their will is free to change the future regardless of events in the past, and it is on the basis of the effect that they make their decision. This is not to say that

their actions are not limited by their present reality – but their action is about to arise because of a cause that has not yet happened. People make decisions like this all the time – sometimes planning their lives years in advance and acting according to future hopes that they assume will be true. This necessitates a moral responsibility in the sense that the outcome of their decisions holds them accountable to their choice of future.

Even if theories of incompatibilist free will turn out to be false representations of our reality, there is no less reason to believe in moral responsibility. From Fischer's argument, it is seen that free will is not needed to make a person accountable for their actions, because individuals are responsible so long as they respond to reasons. Even with a more determinist sense of the world, moral responsibility still holds, because the limited freedom of will that we do have is enough to necessitate accountability, and some amount of free will must be admitted to exist in future causes, even if determinism posits that past causes and their effects are unchangeable.

References

Fischer, John Martin. "Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility." *Introduction to Philosophy Classical and Contemporary Readings Eighth Edition*, edited by John Perry et al, Oxford University Press, 2019.