

Galen Strawson (born 1952)

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FREE WILL

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You set off for a shop on the evening of a national holiday, intending to buy a cake with your last ten-dollar bill to supplement the preparations you've already made. There's one cake left in the shop and it costs ten dollars; everything is closing down. On the steps of the shop someone is shaking a box, collecting money for famine relief. You stop, and it seems clear to you that it is entirely up to you what you do next. It seems clear to you that you are truly, radically free to choose, in such a way that you will be ultimately morally responsible for whatever you do choose.

There is, however, an argument, which I will call the Basic Argument, that appears to show that we can never be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our actions. According to the Basic Argument, it makes no difference whether determinism is true or false. The central idea can be quickly conveyed.

- (A) Nothing can be *causa sui* — nothing can be the cause of itself.
- (B) In order to be ultimately morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects.
- (C) Therefore no one can be ultimately morally responsible.

We can expand it as follows.

- (1) Interested in free action, we're particularly interested in actions performed for a reason (as opposed to reflex actions or mindlessly habitual actions).
- (2) When one acts for a reason, what one does is a function of how one is, mentally speaking. (It's also a function of one's height, one's strength, one's place and time, and so on; but the mental factors are crucial when moral responsibility is in question.)

- (3) So if one is to be truly or ultimately responsible for how one acts, one must be truly or ultimately responsible for how one is, mentally speaking — at least in certain respects.

- (4) But to be truly or ultimately responsible for how one is, in any mental respect, one must have brought it about that one is the way one is, in that respect. And it's not merely that one must have caused oneself to be the way one is, in that respect. One must also have consciously and explicitly chosen to be the way one is, in that respect, and one must have succeeded in bringing it about that one is that way.
- (5) But one can't really be said to choose, in a conscious, reasoned fashion, to be the way one is in any respect at all, unless one already exists, mentally speaking, already equipped with some principles of choice, "P1" — preferences, values, ideals — in the light of which one chooses how to be.
- (6) But then to be truly or ultimately responsible, on account of having chosen to be the way one is, in certain mental respects, one must be truly or ultimately responsible for one's having the principles of choice P1 in the light of which one chose how to be.
- (7) But for this to be so one must have chosen P1, in a reasoned, conscious, intentional fashion.
- (8) But for this to be so one must already have had some principles of choice P2, in the light of which one chose P1.
- (9) And so on. Here we are setting out on a regress that we cannot stop. True or ultimate self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice.
- (10) So true or ultimate moral responsibility is impossible, because it requires true or ultimate self-determination, as noted in (3).

This may seem contrived, but essentially the same argument can be given in a more natural form. (1) It's undeniable that one is the way one is, initially, as a result of heredity and early experience, and it's undeniable that these are things for which one can't be held to be in any way responsible (morally or otherwise). (2) One can't at any later stage of life hope to accede to true or ultimate moral responsibility for the way one is by trying to change the way one already is as a result of heredity and previous experience. For (3) both the particular way in which one is moved to try to change oneself, and the degree of one's success in one's attempt to change, will be determined by how one already is as a result of heredity and previous experience. And (4) any further changes that one can bring about only after one has brought about certain initial changes will in turn be determined, via the initial changes, by heredity and previous experience. (5) This may not be the whole story; there may be some changes in the way one is that can't be traced to heredity and experience but rather to the influence of indeterministic or random factors. It is, however, absurd to suppose that indeterministic or random factors, for which one is obviously not responsible, can contribute in any way to one's being truly or ultimately morally responsible for how one is.

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But what is this supposed “true” or “ultimate” moral responsibility? As I understand it, it’s responsibility of such a kind that, if we have it, it means that it *makes sense* to suppose that it could be just to punish some of us with (eternal) torment in hell and reward others with (eternal) bliss in heaven. The stress on the words “makes sense” is important, for one certainly doesn’t have to believe in any version of the story of heaven and hell in order to understand, or indeed believe in, the kind of true or ultimate moral responsibility that I’m using the story to illustrate. A less colorful way to convey the point, perhaps, is to say that true or ultimate responsibility exists if punishment and reward can be fair without having any sort of pragmatic justification.

One certainly doesn’t have to refer to religious faith in order to describe the sorts of everyday situation that give rise to our belief in such responsibility. Choices like the one with which I began (the cake or the collection box) arise all the time, and constantly refresh our conviction about our responsibility. Even if one believes that determinism is true, in such a situation, and that one will in five minutes time be able to look back and say that what one did was determined, this doesn’t seem to undermine one’s sense of the absoluteness and inescapability of one’s freedom, and of one’s moral responsibility for one’s choice. Even if one accepts the validity of the Basic Argument, which concludes that one cannot be in any way ultimately responsible for the way one is and decides, one’s freedom and true moral responsibility seem, as one stands there, obvious and absolute.

Large and small, morally significant or morally neutral, such situations of choice occur regularly in human life. I think they lie at the heart of the experience of freedom and moral responsibility. They’re the fundamental source of our inability to give up belief in true or ultimate moral responsibility. We may wonder why human beings experience these situations of choice as they do. It’s an interesting question whether any cognitively sophisticated, rational, self-conscious agent must inevitably experience situations of choice in this way (Mackay 1960; Strawson 1986, 281–86). But they are the experiential rock on which the belief in ultimate moral responsibility is founded.

Most people who believe in ultimate moral responsibility take its existence for granted, and don’t ever entertain the thought that one needs to be ultimately responsible for the way one is in order to be ultimately responsible for the way one acts. Some, however, reveal that they see its force. E. H. Carr states that “normal adult human beings are morally responsible for their own personality” (1961, 89). Sartre holds that “man is responsible for what he is” (1989, 29) and seeks to give an account of how we “choose ourselves” (1969, 440, 468, 503). In a later interview he judges his earlier assertions about freedom to be incautious, but still holds that “in the end one is always responsible for what is made of one” (1969). Kant puts it clearly when he claims that “man *himself* must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is to become. Either condition must be an effect of his free choice; for otherwise he could not be held responsible for it and could therefore be *morally* neither good nor evil” (1960, 40). Since he is committed to belief in radical moral responsibility, Kant holds that such self-creation does indeed take place, and

writes accordingly of “man’s character, which he himself creates,” and of “knowledge of oneself as a person who . . . is his own originator” (1956, 101). John Patten claims that “it is . . . self-evident that as we grow up each individual chooses whether to be good or bad” (1992). Robert Kane, an eloquent recent defender of this view, writes as follows: “If . . . a choice issues from, and can be sufficiently explained by, an agent’s character and motives (together with background conditions) then to be ultimately responsible for the choice, the agent must be at least in part responsible by virtue of choices or actions voluntarily performed in the past for having the character and motives he or she now has” (2009, 317–18). Christine Korsgaard agrees: “judgements of responsibility don’t really make sense unless people create themselves” (2009, 20).

Most of us, as remarked, never follow this line of thought. It seems, though, that we do tend, in some vague and unexamined fashion, to think of ourselves as responsible for — answerable for — how we are. The point is somewhat delicate, for we don’t ordinarily suppose that we have gone through some sort of active process of self-determination at some past time. It seems nevertheless that we do unreflectively experience ourselves, in many respects, rather as we might experience ourselves if we did believe that we had engaged in some such activity of self-determination; and we may well also think of others in this way.

Sometimes a part of one’s character — a desire or tendency — may strike one as foreign or alien. But it can do this only against a background of character traits that aren’t experienced as foreign, but are rather “identified” with. (It’s only relative to such a background that a character trait can stand out as alien.) Some feel tormented by impulses that they experience as alien, but in many a sense of general identification with their character predominates, and this identification seems to carry within itself an implicit sense that one is, generally speaking, in control of, or at least answerable for, how one is (even, perhaps, for aspects of one’s character that one doesn’t like). So it is arguable that we find, semi-dormant in common thought, an implicit recognition of the idea that true or ultimate moral responsibility for what one does somehow involves responsibility for how one is. It seems that ordinary thought is ready to move this way under pressure.

There are also many aspects of our ordinary sense of ourselves as morally responsible free agents that we don’t feel to be threatened in any way by the fact that we can’t be ultimately responsible for how we are. We readily accept that we are products of our heredity and environment without feeling that this poses any threat to our freedom and moral responsibility at the time of action. It’s very natural to feel that so long as one is fully consciously aware of oneself as able to choose in a situation of choice, then this is already entirely sufficient for one’s radical freedom of choice—*whatever* else is or is not the case. It seems, then, that our ordinary conception of moral responsibility may contain mutually inconsistent elements. If this is so, it is a profoundly important fact; it would explain a great deal about the character of the philosophical debate about free will (Strawson 1986, §6.4). But these other elements in our ordinary notion of moral responsibility, important as they are, are not my present subject.

1. Quoted in *The Spectator*, April 17, 1992, p. 9. [Strawson’s note.]

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I want now to restate the Basic Argument in very loose—as if we were conversational—terms. New forms of words allow for new forms of objection, but they may be helpful nonetheless.

(1) You do what you do, in any situation in which you find yourself, because of the way you are.

So

(2) To be truly morally responsible for what you do, you must be truly responsible for the way you are—at least in certain crucial mental respects.

Or:

(1) When you act, what you do is a function of how you are.

(What you do won't count as an action at all unless it flows appropriately from your beliefs, preferences, and so on.) Hence

(2) You have to get to have some responsibility for how you are in order to get to have some responsibility for what you intentionally do.

Once again I take the qualification about "certain mental respects" for granted. Obviously one isn't responsible for one's sex, basic body pattern, height, and so on. But if one weren't responsible for anything about oneself, how could one be responsible for what one did, given the truth of (1)? *This is the fundamental question*, and it seems clear that if one is going to be responsible for any aspect of oneself, it had better be some aspect of one's mental nature.

I take it that (1) is incontrovertible, and that it is (2) that must be resisted. For if (1) and (2) are conceded the case seems lost, because the full argument runs as follows.

(1) You do what you do because of the way you are.

So

(2) To be truly morally responsible for what you do, you must be truly responsible for the way you are—at least in certain crucial mental respects.

But

(3) You can't be truly responsible for the way you are, so you can't be truly responsible for what you do.

Why can't you be truly responsible for the way you are? Because

(4) To be truly responsible for the way you are, you must have intentionally brought it about that you are the way you are, and this is impossible.

Why is it impossible? Well, suppose it isn't. Suppose

(5) You have somehow intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are, and that you have brought this about in such a way that you can now be said to be truly responsible for being the way you are now.

For this to be true

(6) You must already have had a certain nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are as you now are.

But then

(7) For it to be true that you are truly responsible for how you now are, you must be truly responsible for having had the nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are.

So

(8) You must have intentionally brought it about that you had that nature N, in which case you must have existed already with a prior nature in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you had the nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are....

Here one is setting off on the regress. Nothing can be *causa sui* in the required way. Even if this attribute is allowed to belong (unintelligibly) to God, it can't plausibly be supposed to be possessed by ordinary finite human beings. "The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far," as Nietzsche remarked in 1886:

it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic. But the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for "freedom of the will" in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and, with more than Baron Münchhausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness. (1966, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 21)

The rephrased argument is essentially exactly the same as before, although the first two steps are now more simply stated. Can the Basic Argument simply be dismissed? Is it really of no importance in the discussion of free will and moral responsibility, as some have claimed? (No and No.) Shouldn't any serious defence of free will and moral responsibility thoroughly acknowledge the respect in which the Basic Argument is valid before going on to try to give its own positive account of the

nature of free will and moral responsibility? Doesn't the argument go to the heart of things if the heart of the free will debate is a concern about whether we can be truly morally responsible in the absolute way that we ordinarily suppose? (Yes and Yes.)

We are what we are, and we can't be thought to have made ourselves *in such a way* that we can be held to be free in our actions *in such a way* that we can be held to be morally responsible for our actions *in such a way* that any punishment or reward for our actions is ultimately just or fair. Punishments and rewards may seem deeply appropriate or intrinsically "fitting" to us; many of the various institutions of punishment and reward in human society appear to be practically indispensable in both their legal and non-legal forms. But if one takes the notion of justice that is central to our intellectual and cultural tradition seriously, then the consequence of the Basic Argument is that there is a fundamental sense in which no punishment or reward is ever just. It is exactly as just to punish or reward people for their actions as it is to punish or reward them for the (natural) color of their hair or the (natural) shape of their faces.

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I have suggested that it is step (2) of the restated Basic Argument that must be rejected, and of course it can be rejected, because the phrases "truly responsible" and "truly morally responsible" can be defined in many ways. I'll sketch three sorts of response.

(I) The first response is *compatibilist*. Compatibilists say that one can be a free and morally responsible agent even if determinism is true. They claim that one can correctly be said to be truly responsible for what one does, when one acts, just so long as one isn't caused to act by any of a certain set of constraints (kleptomaniac impulses, obsessional neuroses, desires that are experienced as alien, post-hypnotic commands, threats, instances of *force majeure*, and so on). They don't impose any requirement that one should be truly responsible for how one is, so step (2) of the Basic Argument comes out as false. They think one can be fully morally responsible even if the way one is is totally determined by factors entirely outside one's control. They simply reject the Basic Argument. They know that the kind of responsibility ruled out by the Basic Argument is impossible, and conclude that it can't be the kind of responsibility that is really in question in human life, because we are indeed genuinely morally responsible agents. No theory that concludes otherwise can possibly be right, on their view.

(II) The second response is *libertarian*. *Incompatibilists* believe that freedom and moral responsibility are incompatible with determinism, and some incompatibilists are libertarians, who believe that we are free and morally responsible agents, and that determinism is therefore false. Robert Kane, for example, allows that we may act responsibly from a will already formed, but argues that the will must in

this case be "our own" free will by virtue of other past 'self-forming' choices or other actions that were undetermined and by which we made ourselves into the kinds of persons we are. . . . [T]hese undetermined self-forming actions (SFA's) occur at those difficult times of life when we are torn between competing visions of what we should do or become" (2009, 279). They paradigmatically involve a conflict between moral duty and non-moral desire, and it is essential that they involve indeterminism, on Kane's view, for this "screens off complete determination by influences of the past" (ibid., 279). He proposes that we are in such cases of 'moral, prudential and practical struggle . . . truly 'making ourselves' in such a way that we are ultimately responsible for the outcome," and that this "making of ourselves" means that "we can be ultimately responsible for our present motives and character by virtue of past choices which helped to form them and for which we were ultimately responsible" (1989, 252).

Kane, then, accepts step (2) of the Basic Argument, and challenges step (3) instead. He accepts that we have to "make ourselves," and so be ultimately responsible for ourselves, in order to be morally responsible for what we do. But the old objection to libertarianism recurs. How can indeterminism help with moral responsibility? How can the occurrence of partly random or indeterministic events contribute to my being truly or ultimately morally responsible either for my actions or for my character? If my efforts of will shape my character in an admirable way, and are in so doing partly indeterministic in nature, while also being shaped (as Kane grants) by my already existing character, why am I not merely *lucky*?

(III) The third response begins by accepting that one can't be held to be ultimately responsible for one's character or personality or motivational structure. It accepts that this is so whether determinism is true or false. It then directly challenges step (2) of the Basic Argument. It appeals to a certain picture of the *self* in order to argue that one can be truly free and morally responsible in spite of the fact that one can't be held to be ultimately responsible for one's character or personality or motivational structure.

This picture can be set out as follows. One is free and truly morally responsible because one's self is, in a crucial sense, independent of one's character or personality or motivational structure — one's CPM, for short. Suppose one is in a situation which one experiences as a difficult choice between A, doing one's duty, and B, following one's non-moral desires. Given one's CPM, one responds in a certain way. One's desires and beliefs develop and interact and constitute reasons in favour both of A and of B, and one's CPM makes one tend towards either A or B. So far the problem is the same as ever: whatever one does, one will do what one does because of the way one's CPM is, and since one neither is nor can be ultimately responsible for the way one's CPM is, one can't be ultimately responsible for what one does.

Enter one's self, S. S is imagined to be in some way independent of one's CPM. S (i.e., one) considers the outputs of one's CPM and decides in the light of them, but it — S — incorporates a power of decision that is independent of one's CPM in such a way that one can after all count as truly and ultimately morally responsible

in one's decisions and actions, even though one isn't ultimately responsible for one's CPM. The idea is that step (2) of the Basic Argument is false because of the existence of S (Campbell 1957).

The trouble with the picture is obvious. S (i.e., one) decides on the basis of the deliverances of one's CPM. But whatever S decides, it decides as it does because of the way it is (or because of the occurrence in the decision process of indeterministic factors for which it—i.e., one—can't be responsible, and which can't plausibly be thought to contribute to one's true moral responsibility). And this brings us back to where we started. To be a source of true or ultimate responsibility, S must be responsible for being the way it is. But this is impossible, for the reasons given in the Basic Argument. So while the story of S and CPM adds another layer to the description of the human decision process, it can't change the fact that human beings cannot be ultimately self-determining in such a way as to be ultimately morally responsible for how they are, and thus for how they decide and act.

In spite of all these difficulties, many (perhaps most) of us continue to believe that we are truly morally responsible agents in the strongest possible sense. Many feel that our capacity for fully explicit self-conscious deliberation in a situation of choice suffices—all by itself—to constitute us as such. All that is needed for true or ultimate responsibility, on this view, is that one is in the moment of action *fully self-consciously aware of oneself as an agent facing choices*.

The Basic Argument, however, appears to show that this is a mistake: however self-consciously aware we are as we deliberate and reason, every act and operation of our mind happens as it does as a result of features for which we are ultimately in no way responsible. Nevertheless the conviction that self-conscious awareness of one's situation can be a sufficient foundation of strong free will is very powerful. It runs deeper than rational argument, and it survives untouched, in the everyday conduct of life, even after the validity of the Basic Argument has been admitted.

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TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Galen Strawson's conclusion is that we cannot be "truly and ultimately" responsible for what we do. Say what this means.
2. Explain the basis for Strawson's claim that "true or ultimate self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice."

NOTES AND QUESTIONS

1. Galen Strawson's argument depends crucially on what is sometimes called a *transfer principle*: a principle according to which we are only responsible for a choice if we are responsible for at least some of the prior facts that ground the choice. In Strawson's case, the principle maintains that we are morally responsible for an action only if we are morally responsible for the beliefs, desires, and values that led us to perform it, even if these prior mental states did not causally determine the act in question.

But is this right? Suppose Jones kills Smith because he hates Smith and wants to see him dead. At trial the prosecutor says:

The defendant has hated Smith for years, but he is not on trial for hating Smith. The defendant is clearly a bad man, but he is not on trial for being a bad man. So it does not matter whether he is morally responsible for being the man he is. The defendant is on trial for killing Smith, and for this he has no excuse. No one made him kill Smith. He was not determined by prior causes to kill Smith. After all, many people in the defendant's circumstances were just as bad as he, and hated Smith just as much, but they did not kill Smith. The defendant alone acted on his hatred, and we seek to punish him for this act. His attorney, Professor Strawson, will tell you that since the choice was not determined by his prior mental states, the defendant is a "victim of random chance," and that it would therefore be a travesty to blame him. Nonsense. Chance did not make him act. Chance is not a force in our lives. To say that his choice occurred by "chance" is just to say that nothing forced him to choose. That is not an excuse! He is responsible.

How might Strawson respond?

2. Galen Strawson's argument is developed in detail in *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford University Press, 1986; rev. ed. 2010).