

Philosophy 101

Consciousness,
Will, &
Responsibility

Review

The Libet
Experiments

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Strawson's Revised Argument

- ① You do what you do because of the way you are.
 - ② To be morally responsible for what you do you must be truly morally responsible for the way you are – at least in certain crucial mental respects.
 - ③ To be truly responsible for the way you are, you must have intentionally brought it about that you are the way you are
 - ④ It is impossible to have intentionally brought about how one is
 - ⑤ \therefore You cannot be truly morally responsible for what you do, because you cannot be truly responsible for the way you are
- Is the argument valid? Sound?

Strawson's Argument (Validity)

- ① $D \rightarrow A$
- ② $MD \rightarrow MA$
- ③ $MA \rightarrow IA$
- ④ $\neg IA$
- ⑤ $\therefore \neg MA$ (3, 4, Modus Tollens)
- ⑥ $\therefore \neg MD$ (2, 5, Modus Tollens)

Questions about Strawson's Argument (Soundness)

- Premise 2: Why think that if one cannot be morally responsible for the way one is, one cannot be morally responsible for what one does?
- Premise 4: Why is it impossible to have intentionally brought about how one is?

Defending Premise 2

Why think that if one cannot be morally responsible for the way one is, one cannot be morally responsible for what one does?

- We aren't responsible for those aspects of ourselves over which we have no control
 - hair color
 - skin color
 - social-economic class

Agency & Control

The Source Requirement: If an agent is morally responsible for her deciding to perform an action, then the production of this decision must be something over which the agent has *control*, and an agent is not morally responsible for the decision if it is produced by a source over which she has no control

Defending Premise 2

- ① We are only truly responsible for that over which we could have appropriate control (source requirement)
- ② The decisions we make depend in part on our character/evaluative dispositions (premise)
- ③ \therefore We are only truly responsible for what we do if we have appropriate control over our character/evaluative dispositions

Counterexamples?

- Sometimes attributions of responsibility depend on 'moral luck'
 - In particular cases we treat people as morally responsible (actions as worthy of praise/blame) even though there were significant aspects of the situation that were beyond their control
 - murder vs. attempted murder
 - circumstances (e.g. unlucky driver, Nazi collaborator)

Counterexamples?

- We are responsible for things that don't have to do with character/evaluative dispositions
 - promises
 - relationships (e.g. to parents, children, friends)

Defending Premise 4

Why is it impossible to have intentionally brought about how one is?

- Intentionally bringing about how one is entails an absurdity

Defending Premise 4

- ① Suppose that 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 now are
- ② Your intentional act, for which you are responsible, is due to some nature N
- ③ If you are truly responsible for this act you must be truly responsible for having the nature N in virtue of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are
- ④ \therefore You must have intentionally brought about N, which requires that you have some further nature N1, in virtue of which you brought about your nature N... (absurd infinite regress ensues)
- ⑤ \therefore It is impossible for you to have intentionally brought it about that you are as you are now

Defending Premise 4

- ① IA (assumption for reductio)
- ② $Ix \leftrightarrow Rx$ (premise)
- ③ $\therefore RA$ (1, 2, substitution, MP)
- ④ $Ix \rightarrow N_i$ (premise)
- ⑤ $IA \rightarrow N_1$ (1, 4, substitution)
- ⑥ $RA \rightarrow RN_1$ (premise)
- ⑦ $\therefore RN_1$ (3, 6, MP)
- ⑧ $\therefore IN_1$ (2, 7, substitution, MP)
- ⑨ $IN_1 \rightarrow N_2$ (4, 7, substitution)
- ⑩ Infinite regress ensues (repeat steps 6-8) ...
- ⑪ $\therefore \neg IA$

- Is the argument valid? sound?

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The Libet Experiments

The Efficacy of Conscious Willing

Libet asked his subjects to flex their wrists at any time they wanted and then report the location of a dot moving quickly around a clock face when they first felt the urge or intention to flex their wrists. Throughout this process, he recorded their neural activity (with EEG) as well as their wrist movements (with EMG)...That activity [called a 'Readiness Potential' or RP] ramped up slowly, reaching its pinnacle at the time when bodily movement began, and then fell quickly after movement...(Sinnott-Armstrong, 238)

The Efficacy of Conscious Willing

What was surprising was the order: The readiness potential with unplanned actions (type II RP) began around 550 ms before the hand movement (M) began, and the reported time of conscious will (W) was around 150–200 ms before the hand movement (M) began, so the readiness potential...began around 350–400 ms before the reported time of conscious will (W). This order suggests that conscious will does not initiate the readiness potential...This implication is surprising, because most people think that their conscious choice is what begins the process that makes their body move in such cases. (Sinnott-Armstrong, 238-9)

The Efficacy of Conscious Willing

- On one interpretation of the experiment, conscious willing is not casually efficacious in the generation of behavior
- Are there other potential functions for conscious willing with respect to action?

The Efficacy of Conscious Willing

Potentially available to the conscious function is the possibility of stopping or vetoing the final progress of the volitional process, so that no actual muscle action ensues. Conscious-will could thus affect the outcome of the volitional process even though the latter was initiated by unconscious cerebral processes. Conscious-will might block or veto the process, so that no act occurs. (Libet, 5)

The Efficacy of Conscious Willing

- According to Libet, the role of conscious willing is to *control* not *initiate* action

The role of conscious free will would be, then, not to initiate a voluntary act, but rather to control whether the act takes place. (Libet, 7)

The Efficacy of Conscious Willing

- Conscious willing may not play a causal role in the initiation of action
- Conscious willing may play a role in the 'veto' of an intention to act
 - No free will, but free "won't"