

The Opinion Pages

Your Move: The Maze of Free Will

By Galen Strawson

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You arrive at a bakery. It's the evening of a national holiday. You want to buy a cake with your last 10 dollars to round off the preparations you've already made. There's only one thing left in the store — a 10-dollar cake.

On the steps of the store, someone is shaking an Oxfam tin. You stop, and it seems quite clear to you — it surely is quite clear to you — that it is entirely up to you what you do next. You are — it seems — truly, radically, ultimately free to choose what to do, in such a way that you will be ultimately morally responsible for whatever you do choose. Fact: you can put the money in the tin, or you can go in and buy the cake. You're not only completely, radically free to choose in this situation. You're not free not to choose (that's how it feels). You're "condemned to freedom," in Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase. You're fully and explicitly conscious of what the options are and you can't escape that consciousness. You can't somehow slip out of it.

You may have heard of 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. You may also believe that determinism is true. (You may also know, contrary to popular opinion, that current science gives us no more reason to think that determinism is false than that determinism is true.) In that case, standing on the steps of the store, it may cross your mind that in five minutes' time you'll be able to look back on the situation you're in now and say truly, of what you will by then have done, "Well, it was determined that I should do that." But

even if you do fervently believe this, it doesn't seem to be able to touch your sense that you're absolutely morally responsible for what you next.

The case of the Oxfam box, which I have used before to illustrate this problem, is relatively dramatic, but choices of this type are common. They occur frequently in our everyday lives, and they seem to prove beyond a doubt that we are free and ultimately morally responsible for what we do. There is, however, an argument, which I call the Basic Argument, which appears to show that we can never be ultimately morally responsible for our actions. According to the Basic Argument, it makes no difference whether determinism is true or false. We can't be ultimately morally responsible either way.

The argument goes like this.

(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.

The key move is (3). Why can't you be ultimately responsible for the way you are in any respect at all? In answer, consider an expanded version of the argument.

(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) And any further changes that you may become able to bring about after you have brought about certain initial changes will in turn be determined, via the initial changes, by your genetic inheritance and previous experience.

There may be all sorts of other factors affecting and changing you. Determinism may be false: some changes in the way you are may come about as a result of the influence of indeterministic or random factors. But you obviously can't be responsible for the effects of any random factors, so they can't help you to become ultimately morally responsible for how you are.

Some people think that quantum mechanics shows that determinism is false, and so holds out a hope that we can be ultimately responsible for what we do. But even if quantum mechanics had shown that determinism is false (it hasn't), the question would remain: how can indeterminism, objective randomness, help in any way whatever to make you responsible for your actions? The answer to this question is easy. It can't.

And yet we still feel that we are free to act in such a way that we are absolutely responsible for what we do. So I'll finish with a third, richer version of the Basic Argument that this is impossible.

(i) Interested in free action, we're particularly interested in actions performed for reasons (as opposed to reflex actions or mindlessly habitual actions).

(ii) 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 it's the mental factors that are crucial when moral responsibility is in question.)

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

(iv) But to be 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 also have succeeded in bringing it about that one is that way.

(v) 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.

(vi) But then to be ultimately responsible, on account of having chosen to be the way one is, in certain mental respects, one must be ultimately responsible for one's having the principles of choice P1 in the light of which one chose how to be.

(vii) But for this to be so one must have chosen P1, in a reasoned, conscious, intentional fashion.

(viii) But for this to be so one must already have had some principles of choice P2, in the light of which one chose P1.

(ix) And so on. Here we are setting out on a regress that we cannot stop. Ultimate responsibility for how one is is impossible, because it requires the

actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice.

(x) So ultimate, buck-stopping moral responsibility is impossible, because it requires ultimate responsibility for how one is; as noted in (iii).

Does this argument stop me feeling entirely morally responsible for what I do? It does not. Does it stop you feeling entirely morally responsible? I very much doubt it. Should it stop us? Well, it might not be a good thing if it did. But the logic seems irresistible And yet we continue to feel we are absolutely morally responsible for what we do, responsible in a way that we could be only if we had somehow created ourselves, only if we were “*causa sui*,” the cause of ourselves. It may be that we stand condemned by Nietzsche:

The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far. 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 ... (“Beyond Good and Evil,” 1886).

Is there any reply? I can’t do better than the novelist Ian McEwan, who wrote to me: “I see no necessary disjunction between having no free will (those arguments seem watertight) and assuming moral responsibility for myself. 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, even if I do not have control of its course. It is this sense of being the possessor of a consciousness that makes us feel responsible for it.”

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