Against Moral Responsibility

1. The Basic Argument: It is generally thought that, in order to be held responsible for your actions, your actions must have been free. Imagine these two cases:

**Hit1:** You lean over to your little sister and hit her in the harm repeatedly.

**Hit2:** Your bigger sister grabs your arm, and repeatedly hits your little sister with it. “Stop hitting your little sister,” your big sister says mockingly, as you try to pull away, but can’t.

In Hit1, we think that you are responsible for the harm done to your little sister. In Hit1, it would be appropriate to punish you. It would not be unjust for your parents to spank you, or ground you, etc. In Hit2, however, we do not think that you are responsible for the harm done to your sister. It was your arm that hit her, but you did not do this freely. Something else caused you to do it—or someONE, namely your bigger sister—and so it was outside of your control. As such, we would think it unjust or misguided if you were blamed or punished for your action.

So, it seems that, in order to be blameworthy, you need to be in control of your actions. But, Galen Strawson argues that we are never in control. He argues that ALL of your actions are like your action in Hit2. Therefore, no one is ever blameworthy for their actions. Let’s look at his argument:

1. A person is only responsible for actions that are under their control; i.e., actions that are performed freely.
2. All free actions are performed for reasons (we’re not calling reflexes, or mindless actions “free”; actions performed without reasons are random or arbitrary).
3. Whatever reasons one has at any given time are a product of how one is, mentally, at that time.
4. Therefore, in order for a person to be responsible for their action at time t, then how they are, mentally, at time t must be under their control.
5. But, a person is in control of how one is, mentally, at time t, only if at some earlier time t-1 they consciously and explicitly chose to be that way.
6. Therefore, in order for a person to be responsible for their action at time t, then how they are, mentally, at time t-1 must be under their control.
7. But, a person is in control of how one is, mentally, at time t-1, only if at some earlier time t-2 ... And so on...
8. But, it is impossible for a person to initiate control in this beginningless series.
9. Therefore, no one is ever responsible for their actions.
The basic idea of this argument is that, no matter how far back we go, there is never a point at which we have control of how we are. You do things because of how you are. You are how you are because of some previous way that you were. You were how you were because of some even further previous way that you were. And so on, with no point at which you were ever in control. As such, there is no way for us to be ultimately in control of ourselves. That would require us to be something impossible: Self-causing beings.

Let’s look at an even shorter paraphrase of Strawson’s argument.

1. A person is only responsible for actions that are under their control.
2. In order to be in control of one’s self, one must either: (a) have had control of herself initially, or (b) have gained control of herself at some point.
3. No one has control of herself initially. How one is initially is a product of one’s heredity (DNA) and initial upbringing. So, (a) is impossible.
4. No one can gain control of herself at any point. Any decision or attempt to gain control of how we are will merely be a product of how we are at that time (i.e., such attempts will merely be a product of our heredity and upbringing).* So, (b) is impossible.
   Note: In other words, even if it SEEMS to us as if we are gaining control of how we are, whatever influences that we exert over ourselves—and whatever reasons compel us to do so—are all just products of factors that we are not in control of. Note that this is not a denial that people can change. It is a denial that people can gain control of themselves via changing.
5. Therefore, no one is ever responsible for their actions.

* Strawson notes that his argument does not require determinism to be true. Perhaps the world is indeterministic. But, he rejects the idea that such indeterminism would allow one to gain CONTROL of one’s self:

It may be that some changes in the way one is are traceable not to heredity and experience but to the influence of indeterministic or random factors. But it is absurd to suppose that indeterministic or random factors, for which one is ex hypothesi in no way responsible, can in themselves contribute in any way to one’s being truly morally responsible for how one is. (7)
2. **The Problem:** The problem is that we FEEL the following things very strongly:

- **Freedom.** It sure seems that we are in control of ourselves, doesn’t it?
- **Guilt.** When we do something bad, we get this feeling that we should not have done that; i.e., we take responsibility for our actions.
- **Praise.** When people do something good, we praise them, as if they deserve praise; i.e., as if they are responsible for the good thing they just did.
- **Blame.** When people do something bad, we blame them, as if they deserve blame; i.e., as if they are responsible for the bad thing they just did.

If Strawson is right, we are mistaken about all of these things. We do not have free will; we are not in control of our actions; it is irrational to ever feel guilty for one’s actions; or to praise or reward others for good deeds; or to blame or punish others for bad deeds—in fact, doing so seems unjust! Punishing someone for a bad action is as unjust as imprisoning someone for having blue eyes—since no one has any more control of one than they do the other, according to Strawson.

The problem is that, we DO feel responsible for being the way that we are. Even the fact that some parts of ourselves seem *foreign* to us—for instance, when we say things like “that was really uncharacteristic of me!” or “I don’t know what I was thinking!”—this too testifies to the fact that we (often) feel responsible for how we are, since such statements would only make sense if there were some part of ourselves that we viewed as NOT foreign; that is, only if there is some set of traits that we DO identify with. If Strawson is right, then why is there this discrepancy between what seems true and what IS true?

3. **Solutions:** In the coming weeks, we will look at two types of solutions:

**Compatibilism:** Some philosophers accept that we are NOT in control in any “ultimate” sense. Nevertheless, we are responsible for (most of) our actions in some perhaps weaker sense. In short, Strawson’s argument is “compatible” with moral responsibility.

**Libertarianism:** Other philosophers reject Strawson’s claims altogether. They say that, somehow, we DO control who we are, and what we do. Perhaps there is NOT an infinite regress of causes or reasons. Rather, the chain of influence DOES end in us, the free agent.