

(Summary of) Paper given at the Burn: Moral Responsibility and Responding to Reasons

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One prima facie plausible version of compatibilism regarding moral responsibility and determinism holds that an agent is morally responsible in performing some action just in case this action is performed for a reason. (See e.g. Fischer & Ravizza 1999). Intuitive enough: the account rightly says we aren't responsible for what we do if we are hypnotized, or if we are robots, or if we don't intend to act. Free will is important because it is important that we can conceive of ourselves as moral agents. So this is an account that, since acting for a reason is a way of being caused, rescues the important part of agency – moral responsibility – from the threat of determinism. But we shall see that any such account is problematic.

Intuitively, even if someone takes a reason to justify an action when it doesn't, there is still a sense in which he acts for a reason. Distinguish between justifying reasons and motivating reasons: motivating reasons are psychological states that explain behaviour. (It seems we can have a motivating reason to do one thing, but since we have a stronger reason to something else, not act on it. So motivating reasons are potentially explanatory.) (See Michael Smith, 'The Moral Problem' for more on motivating reasons)

What counts as an acceptable explanation of a fact depends on what the fact is contrasted with. Consider the question, "why did you go to the opening ball?" What will explain effectively will depend on the contrast: "why did you – rather than someone else – go to the ball?", or "why did you go to the opening ball – rather than some other ball?", or "why did you go to the opening ball - rather than just staying at home?" (For accounts of 'contrastive' explanation, see David Lewis, 'Causal Explanation' 1986 or Peter Lipton, 'Inference to the Best Explanation'

1991: both give accounts of how explanations of a contrast must give a causal difference between them of a certain form.) The context determines which of these contrastive questions is referred to by the bald question, “why did you go to the opening ball?”

If an action is to be morally responsible it must be performed for a reason, in the sense that there is a reason that can figure as the explanation of that action. But as we saw, what counts as an explanation of a fact depends on what the fact is contrasted with. So take some act, say the helping of an old lady. Was it responsible? Depends on the context and the contrast specified. Why did she help the old lady instead of passing on with indifference? Because of her concern for old ladies – this gives a causal difference between the fact and its contrast. Now imagine someone who has a concern for old ladies but whose habit it is to pass by old ladies who need help because she is also concerned about punctuality. On one occasion she dismisses the need to be punctual and helps the old lady: why did she stop to help the old lady instead of passing on? To give an explanation of this contrast we need a causal difference between the fact and its contrast, and her concern for old ladies will not satisfy this condition.

Consider in general what is true of an agent deliberating between two choices that are both believed by the agent to be supported by reasons, such that the agent may resolve to do either one. What explanation is there for the fact that the agent resolves to act on one set of reasons rather than the other? None of the reasons that the agent believes to support one of the choices can act as a causal difference between the fact – choosing to act on the first set of reasons and ignore the second set – and the contrast – choosing to act on the second set rather than the first, since whichever way she resolves all those reasons are present. Since we stipulated that the agent deliberates between the reasons available, no reason will serve as an explanation that is a causal difference between the resolving on one set of reasons rather than another. If this is true of our agent choosing between helping old ladies and punctuality, although it nonetheless remains true, as we saw above, the fact that she stopped instead of passing on indifferent is explained by her concern, there is no explanation in terms of motivating reasons for the fact she resolved on one concern rather than the other.

So we are left with the problematic result that our agent's resolution to act on her concern for old ladies was not a morally responsible act, and thus was not morally laudable. It looks like any account that requires such a strong connection between moral responsibility and the existence of motivating reasons that explain behaviour will have to rule much apparent moral agency as no agency at all.