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Determinism, Morality, Free Will

An essay inspired by Galen Strawson's Free Will (University of Texas Austin):
in Norton introduction to philosophy, chapter on free will

by

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Summary: The present short essay argues that a traditionally accepted order between the determinism, the free will, and the moral responsibility must be reversed. The determinism provides a basis for the moral responsibility. Existence of the moral responsibility, in turn, ensures the free will.

The question of relations between the human moral responsibility and free will is often constructed in such a manner that the free will is a basis for our moral responsibility. Here, I propose that this question is better formulated in the other way round: we first define a basis of the moral responsibility, and once our capacity for moral responsibility is established, the notion of the free will naturally follows.

To establish the notion of the moral responsibility, I first point out that it comes from a construction of Western society: We have to take a moral responsibility because our society asks for it. To live in such a society, the parents bring up their children to bear moral responsibilities. That is why we have it.

This is a major detour of this essay, and the claim is rather subjective, and I am even ready to accept a criticism as a racist. However, I believe, this detour is important to make the point stated in the next single-sentence paragraph clear: Looking at far-oriental societies, people are not asked to bear such a responsibility. For example, in my own personal observations, in China, people are just asked to follow certain rules, or follow an order of someone superior, such as a parent, a work supervisor. Or simply give their favors to those who they like or who are considered to be important for them. Either the case, what follows as their action does not involve any sense of "moral" in Western sense. [Look at the behavior of the people at any major cross sections in Beijing : it just reveals that people do not know how to behave with total strangers : in short, lack of sense of moral.]

Thus, we must first recognize that the moral responsibility is a culturally based notion.

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Ironically, the determinism is consistent with the notion of moral responsibility¹⁾. To be responsible, one must make every decision in a logically consistent manner, so to say, in such a manner that nothing is arbitrary²⁾. In other words, a moral decision must follow a well-defined set of logic: an analogy with a computer program may be useful here. Every time we face a need for a moral decision, we run this system of logic for a moral decision, like running a computer program. If a logic system is well defined, a process of reaching a decision must be totally deterministic. Otherwise, we are inserting something irrational and random into a process of moral decision. Of course, an arbitrary decision would not be responsible, because we cannot be accountable with an arbitrary decision in a literal sense that we cannot explain.

One may say that, however, if our decision process is totally deterministic, it is just mechanical (though it is more to do with a software rather than a hardware). To this, I would point out that our decision logic is hardly a fixed one, but evolves with us as getting older, and thus as achieving more maturity. We can imagine that there is a hyper-logic (or upper logic) within ourselves to revise our set of moral logic principles. In short, we learn from our moral errors (our moral decisions are evaluated by ourselves afterwards, that would be a part of the moral responsibility), and grow throughout our life, so that we can make (in general) better moral decisions as we are getting older. We may interpret that this process is handled by a type of upper-level software system that supervises those basic moral programs. Of course, such an upper-level software (*i.e.*, , upper-level of moral logic) must also be deterministic. In principle, we can also imagine our hyper-hyper moral logic to check our hyper moral logic, and this hierarchy may extend to infinity. A number of levels that one has for moral decisions may be considered a sign of a degree of maturity of a given person.

Though I do not discuss any further here, we may note here that a further expansion of the software analogy can justify to argue that we have mind, self, soul, etc as types of macros in this complex software system.

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The issue of the free will is vast, and it is beyond the scope of this short essay to even define it carefully³⁾. However, once a self autonomy of our moral system is established as

¹⁾ A similar argument is also developed by Susan Wolf in Asymmetrical freedom, *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXVII, 3 (March 1980): 151-166.

²⁾ Looking at differently, here I am defining the moral responsibility as a capacity of making a moral decision in a logically defensible manner.

³⁾ For example, Thomas Aquinas defines the free will as “a free judgment arising from

a type of logical and deterministic software system as already argued above, we can say that the existence of a self autonomy in ourselves can also be considered a mark of a free will within ourselves⁴).

It is often argued that the existence of free will within us is a basis of our moral responsibility. However, realize: when we face a serious moral decision, we are not quite free to choose, in a literal sense, as we wish. Rather, under a given circumstance, by following our own moral principles, we are no longer free to choose: our moral principle simply urges us to take a particular choice in a rather inevitable manner.

My favorite cases to consider are decisions of intellectuals under the Nazis regime. Many chose to leave Germany (or Hungary), including Albert Einstein (physicist) as well as Erich Kleiber (conductor), Vera Bartók (composer), and Karl Barth (theologian). On the other hand, some intellectuals chose to collaborate with the Nazis, those include Werner Heisenberg (physicist), Wilhelm Furtwängler (conductor), Richard Strauss (composer). One of the most unique cases would be the decision of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (theologian) to remain in Germany as a resistance : did he have a choice to leave Germany or to collaborate with the Nazis? For him, clearly, this was an inevitable choice.

If one has a strong sense of moral responsibility, like those people I just mentioned, under a critical situation, one is no longer free to choose, but a decision becomes an inevitable one. This fact is supported by an analogy of our moral responsibility with a deterministic software system, as suggested above. Under such a stark situation, the moral choice is deterministic.

However, we should not say that those decisions were not from their own free wills. They were not forced to make these decision by anyone else, though there were certainly pressures on them. It would be best interpreted that they made those inevitable decisions out of their free wills. In this manner, a determinism associated with a moral decision does not contradict with the free will, but rather establishes it.

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Looking at other way round, we have to realize that cases easily demonstrating our ability of choosing “alternative possibilities” by free will, without any inevitableness, are reason” in Summa Theologica, First Part of the Second Part, Q17, Article 1 by following earlier philosophers.

⁴) In this respect, I do not interpret the free will in terms of the “principle of alternative possibilities” (*cf.*, Harry Frankfurt, Alternative possibilities and moral responsibility, Journal of Philosophy, LXVI, 23 (December 4, 1969): 829-839), as elaborated further below.

rather benign and inconsequential, like choosing a type of cheese for your burger or a dressing for your salad at a restaurant⁵⁾. Unless you have a strong preference, the choice is inconsequential, hurting no one by whatever you choose. Under such a circumstance, we literally demonstrate our freedom to choose, by choosing a choice out of whim. It appears to us that we are using a kind of random-number generator in our moral-decision software. However, if we believe in determinism of any physical processes, even such a virtually random choice must be deterministic, in the same sense as the so called random-number generators in computers are based on deterministic algorithms.

Probably, an important point is that we usually do not choose in a totally random manner, but based on a certain logic: like since you took cheddar last time, you take something else this time. However, such a logic is hardly a serious one: it just demonstrates that our human brain is not quite well adapted to generate a pure random number so we need a certain justification to choose. Again, it can all be well understood in analogy with a computer software.

If wished, we can still continue to discuss about the free will as a matter of choice from “alternative possibilities”. However, as I already pointed out, the question of whether we have such a capacity does not suggest any serious moral implications. Lack of such a choice will would rather be considered an indication of a strong sense of moral responsibility.

The following example would appear rather ridiculous, but make this point clear in a very simple setting. Imagine a person who finds a strong moral responsibility to take cheddar cheese every time when she orders a burger. So every time she orders a burger, she asks for cheddar as well. This is her completely fixed behavior, almost mechanical. It would look like that she has absolutely no free will in choosing cheese for burgers. But does it actually prove a lack of her free will?

We should interpret it in the other way round: the fact that she always order cheddar with a burger is a sign of her sense of strong moral responsibility, and she does it out of her free will. We may even argue that those common people who choose a type of cheese out of whim every time ordering a burger rather lack a real free will.

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The question of our free will to choose should be taken more seriously when a situation is more serious. For example, when we face lot of political pressures, like under the Nazis regime. For me, the question of the free will is whether one has a capacity of making one's

⁵⁾ We must also realize that availability of such choices is, again, a cultural matter: we encounter this situation more frequently in US. Under other cultures, once we choose a menu to order, it is left as chef's responsibility to prepare the food in the best manner.

own decision regardless how much external pressures one faces. To be able to make such a chose, one must hold a very strong sense of moral responsibility. Such a strong sense of responsibility is established only by a robust logical system of decision making, that makes the decision deterministic under a given full circmustance. A strong free will is rather supported by a very robust deterministic decision system that one holds within oneself.