Bruce N. Waller
Against Moral Responsibility.
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Skepticism about moral responsibility seems to be increasing in popularity today. This kind of skepticism typically focuses on the alleged incompatibility of free will with causal determinism or with the chanciness (again, allegedly) entailed by indeterminism: because free will is incompatible with whatever causal story turns out to be true, we lack moral responsibility. This skeptical theory depends on the common understanding of free will as the power that (exercised in appropriate circumstances) makes agents morally responsible. Waller rejects this understanding of free will. For him, moral responsibility is much more demanding than free will. Free will is a naturalistically respectable power; indeed, it is a power possessed (in some degree at least) by non-human animals. But moral responsibility is incompatible, not with determinism or even determinism plus indeterminism, but with naturalism.

Waller's case against moral responsibility turns on the *unfairness* of holding someone responsible for an act that can be explained entirely by reference to facts and processes that the agent did not control. On the other hand, his case for free will is based on the fact that animals like us intelligently vary their behavior to explore their environment and pursue goals adaptively. The emphasis on the latter—on the ways in which animals, and especially animals like us, gain an increasing degree of control over their environment and their own behavior—is surely to be welcomed.

However, many philosophers will balk at the suggestion that we can equate this kind of agency with free will. One reason to regard the suggestion as a (perhaps welcome) change of subject is that it seems to render the traditional debate nonsensical. If we understand 'free will' as referring to this kind of agency, the answer to the question 'is free will compatible with determinism' is so obviously 'yes' that it is hard to see how it could ever have been the subject of debate. The suspicion that Waller is changing the subject is increased by his attempt to explain how his notion of free will is concerned with alternative possibilities. By alternative possibilities he means *options*: an agent has alternative possibilities, in this sense, if there is a rich range of options available to her. But the traditional conception of alternative possibilities is metaphysical: it concerns whether the agent can choose between her options, however impoverished. In this sense of alternative possibilities, a slave might have alternative possibilities; in Waller's sense a slave cannot. Again, the change of subject might be welcome, but it ought to be recognized for what it is.

A more serious problem confronts Waller, supposing we agree either to identify free will with the power we actually have (according to him) *or* to change the subject in the way he recommends. It is this: why shouldn't this power be sufficient to ground moral responsibility? Waller argues that all of our actions can be given a naturalistically

respectable explanation that cites factors over which we have no control. This claim will be granted by almost all compatibilists (and many libertarians too); nevertheless, they will point to the fact that some of these actions are uncoerced intelligent responses to the environment—that is, meet the conditions for Waller freedom—and ask why isn't this fact sufficient to render the agent morally responsible? We might put the challenge to Waller in a form of a dilemma: either free will is not very impressive after all (in which case, why should we care about it at all), or it is sufficient for moral responsibility.

Waller's case for distinguishing moral responsibility and free will depends crucially on claims about *fairness*. Unfortunately there is no single sustained discussion of just why the attribution of moral responsibility is unfair. Instead, Waller's approach is largely negative. In dozens of short sections, distributed across 16 chapters, he sets out and criticizes well-known defenses of moral responsibility, ranging from those of compatibilists like Dennett to agent-causal theorists like O'Connor. The result is highly readable and entertaining, but also somewhat frustrating for the specialist. The amount of space Waller devotes to each theorist is small, and therefore he cannot get into much depth with regard to any of them. Each criticism he levels at a thinker might be met with a response; in many cases, the criticism has actually been discussed by the thinker targeted. But Waller doesn't give himself the space to enter into the dialectic. The cumulative effect is a plausible mounting case for skepticism, but individual thinkers will sometimes feel hard done by. (In some cases, moreover, Waller makes mistakes in setting out the views of thinkers: Fischer will have a hard time recognizing his account of guidance control in Waller's remarks, for instance, and some of the empirical data that Waller enlists in support of his views are mischaracterized.)

The effect of reading these bite-sized discussions is of crisscrossing the same landscape from many different directions. The approach is novel and quite effective: though each charge is vulnerable to rebuttal, the mounting case against blaming wrongdoers is powerful. Nevertheless, I could not help wondering whether Waller succeeded *too well*. The same considerations that he cites against moral responsibility— that its attribution ignores the causal story about how agents came to have the cognitive capacities they do, that it ignores individual differences, and so on—could equally be cited against his defense of free will.

The claim that naturalism is incompatible with moral responsibility is also not cashed out in sufficient depth. In making this claim, Waller seems to have something like this in mind: if naturalism is true, then there is a total explanation for all actions; that is, every action can be predicted on the basis of sufficient causal factors that predate that action. But if that is the case, it would be unfair to blame agents. However, this argument cannot be correct as it stands. Naturalism is not required for the truth of the claim that every action has a total explanation. Indeed, the truth of naturalism does not even entail that every action has a total explanation: indeterministic causation is perfectly natural. For this reason, I think that the claim that naturalism is incompatible with moral responsibility is a red herring. Waller would have done better to argue that all actions either have sufficient causes over which the agent lacks control, or have no sufficient

causes at all and thereby escape the agent's control. It is control, and not naturalism, that matters.

Though these criticisms are serious, the substance of Waller's book is unaffected by them. Understood as an argument for the unfairness of blame (in particular) given our current knowledge of the sources of behavior, the book presents a powerful case. Particularly refreshing and useful is Waller's connection of these philosophical debates with questions in sociology and politics. He argues persuasively that the rejection of moral responsibility shifts the focus, away from the individual and toward the social or systemic problems that cause immoral behavior. The emphasis on moral responsibility is therefore costly: it distracts attention away from measures that would reduce crime. The victims of the myth of moral responsibility are not restricted to those who are blamed, but include those who are the victims of crime. If this claim is plausible—and Waller's case for it is persuasive—this book has an importance that extends beyond narrow philosophical debates.

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