RESPONSIBILITY AND THE EXPLANATORY VIEW OF CONSEQUENCES

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I. RESPONSIBILITY

This is an essay about moral responsibility. It does not concentrate, however, on the problem of free will. The vast literature on that aspect of the problem of responsibility has concealed the deepest and most important aspect of the problem, which concerns the concept of a consequence.

In one sense of the word 'responsible' we are responsible for certain actions. When is a certain agent responsible for a certain action? According to some, if he intentionally performed it. Others say he is responsible only if he intentionally performed the action and could have avoided doing so. Such claims raise questions which concern important problems of philosophy of law. From the point of view of moral philosophy, however, the crucial question is what makes a certain agent responsible for a certain event.

A standard meaning of the phrase, 'A certain person, P, is responsible for an event, e', would be that something about e matters to a normative assessment of some action of P. We are responsible for all the events knowledge of which must be gained in order to assess definitely whether our actions are right or wrong.

Under what conditions are we 'responsible', then, for some event? (Even if we know the meaning of the word 'responsible' the possibility remains that we do not know the criteria for its application.) Obviously this is an ethical question. I think, however, that most moral philosophers, in accordance with our common sense morality, would agree with the view that I am not responsible for a certain event unless this event is among the consequences of something I have done. Let us call this the 'open' view of responsibility. Some moral philosophers, whom we may call the 'teleologists', would hold, moreover, that an event's being among the consequences of something I have done is also a sufficient condition for my being responsible for it. Let us call this the 'closed' view of responsibility.
But what does it mean to assert that an event's being among the 'consequences' of some action of mine is a necessary condition (the open view) or a necessary and a sufficient condition (the closed view) for my being responsible for it?

This is the question I try to answer in this essay. I define what it is for an event to be among the consequences of a particular action. This definition not only yields a precise and morally attractive meaning to the open and the closed views of responsibility, but also accounts in a natural way for various 'intuitions' we seem to have about the concept of a consequence. Or so I will argue, at any rate.1

2. THE ONTOLOGY OF CONSEQUENCES

Consequences, in the present context, are consequences of actions. So the ontological status of consequences depends on that of actions. The word 'action' is ambiguous, however, in an ontologically important way.

The word 'action' is sometimes taken to refer to abstract, generic entities, like taking a bath, going for a walk, and so forth. But obviously only particular actions have consequences. And particular actions are concrete entities, located in time and space2. I think, then, of actions as being like my writing this very sentence right now.

I take it that particular actions are, or are composed of, concrete events. Not all events constitute actions, however. The most promising attempts to single out those events that do constitute actions have been put forward by various 'causal' theorists. Actions are events caused, one way or the other, by certain intentions, or motives, or decisions, or something of that kind, on the part of an agent. In the sequel I will take it for granted that this conception of an action can be made sufficiently precise for the purposes of moral philosophy.

My problem, then, is how to decide what are the consequences of such concrete and particular actions. It goes without saying that the consequences are themselves concrete events, just like the actions that produce them.

There is one very good reason — I would say a conclusive one — for conceiving of the consequences in this concretist fashion. Some concrete events most certainly have negative or positive intrinsic value (like my feeling intense pain or pleasure at a certain moment) while it is doubtful, to say the least,