CHOICE, MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

ABSTRACT. Is choice necessary for moral responsibility? And does choice imply alternative possibilities of some significant sort? This paper will relate these questions to the argument initiated by Harry Frankfurt that alternative possibilities are not required for moral responsibility, and to John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza’s extension of that argument in terms of guidance control in a causally determined world. I argue that attending to Frankfurt’s core conceptual distinction between the circumstances that make an action unavoidable and those that bring it about that the action is performed – a distinction emphasised in his recent restatement – provides a new route into an analysis of Frankfurt’s argument by showing how it depends on a person’s ‘decision to act’ involving the exercise of choice. The implicit reliance of Frankfurt’s argument on this notion of choice, however, undermines his claim that the example of the counterfactual intervener strengthens the compatibilist case by providing a counter-example to the principle of alternative possibilities. I also argue that Frankfurt’s reliance on the exercise of choice for moral responsibility is also evident in the Fischer/Ravizza argument, and that a close analysis of both arguments shows that such exercise of choice is not available if causal determinism is true.

KEY WORDS: action, agency, alternative possibilities, choice, comparative decision, compatibilism, decision to act, determinism, freedom, moral responsibility

I

Is choice necessary for moral responsibility? And does choice imply alternative possibilities of some significant sort? Harry Frankfurt argued that alternative possibilities aren’t required for moral responsibility and in doing so he stimulated an enormous debate about the role of alternative possibilities for freedom, agency and moral responsibility (Frankfurt, 1969).¹ John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza have provided the most developed elaboration of Frankfurt’s core argument in terms of their model of ‘guidance control’, yet they argue that the agent ‘chooses freely’ in the actual

¹ For recent contributions and extensive bibliographies to what is now a literature too large to reference fully here, see essays in (Widerker and McKenna, 2003; Kane, 2002; Philosophical Perspectives 14 (2000); Journal of Ethics 3 (1999), Number 4); also (Palmer, 2005; Haji and McKenna, 2004; Fischer, 1999).
sequence (in the presence of a passive counterfactual intervener) and they emphasise the importance of ‘choice’ in their account of moral responsibility in a causally determined world (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998; Fischer, 2004). In spite of the importance of the notion of choice, however, the part that it plays in the Frankfurt – Fischer/Ravizza version of compatibilism has been little explored by philosophers. In this paper I shall argue that the notion of ‘choice’ plays a crucial role in these compatibilist accounts of moral responsibility and that it undermines their claims to have strengthened the compatibilist case by overturning the principle of alternative possibilities. I shall first return to Frankfurt’s attack on the principle of alternative possibilities and then I shall argue that Frankfurt’s implicit reliance on agential ‘choice’ is also evident in Fischer and Ravizza’s account of guidance control in a causally determined world.

II

According to the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP) as formulated by Frankfurt, ‘a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise’ (Frankfurt, 1969, p. 829). Frankfurt argued against this principle by presenting examples which are meant to show that ‘our moral intuitions’ (p. 830) tend to disconfirm the principle of alternative possibilities. Frankfurt’s much-discussed example involving a passive counterfactual intervener purports to illustrate how the mere absence of alternative possibilities is not sufficient to undermine moral responsibility, since a person who ‘decides for reasons of his own’ to perform an action that would otherwise be forced upon him by the counterfactual intervener is held to be morally responsible according to these intuitions. With the principle of alternative possibilities thus discredited, the compatibilist argument – that causal determinism, if true, does not undermine moral responsibility – was thereby thought to be strengthened. The main focus of debate has centred on the precise details of the working of the counterfactual intervener: philosophers have debated at length, for example, about how the counterfactual intervener does his neural work; whether the example delivers what is required for Frankfurt’s argument; and whether the device of the counterfactual intervener predisposes the argument in a compatibilist direction. Relatively little attention has been directed to the earlier examples in Frankfurt’s paper relating to a threat to a person to do what, as it turns out, that person had already decided to do. These earlier

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3 Subsequent unattributed page references to Frankfurt refer to this paper.