ABSTRACT. The author argued elsewhere that a necessary condition that John Fischer and Mark Ravizza offer for moral responsibility is too strong and that the sufficient conditions they offer are too weak. This article is a critical examination of their reply. Topics discussed include blameworthiness, irresistible desires, moral responsibility, reactive attitudes, and reasons responsiveness.

KEY WORDS: blameworthiness, irresistible desires, moral responsibility, reactive attitudes, reasons responsiveness

Over the years, I have learned a lot from John Fischer’s work on moral responsibility and freedom – both his solo work and his work with Mark Ravizza – and even when I think he is mistaken, I find that he focuses issues in ways that promote philosophical progress. So I was pleased by this journal’s invitation to contribute to this special issue. In a symposium on Fischer and Ravizza’s book, I raised some problems for their position on moral responsibility. Two of the critical claims I advanced are that a necessary condition they offer for moral responsibility is too strong and the sufficient conditions they offer are too weak. Fischer and Ravizza have replied to my concerns. In this article, I examine their reply.

1. A Subjective Requirement for Moral Responsibility?

Fischer and Ravizza hold that “someone who is genuinely morally responsible must satisfy certain ‘subjective conditions’: he must see himself as morally responsible in order to be morally responsible.”


They claim that “Whichever candidate analysis one selects [for moral responsibility], there will be a suitable subjective condition.”\(^5\) For example, “on the ledger view” – “according to which an individual is morally responsible insofar as ... he is an apt target for judgments of right and wrong, permissibility and impermissibility, and so forth” – “the subjective approach would require that an individual view herself as an apt target of certain moral judgments.” And on Fischer and Ravizza’s “reactive attitudes” view, the subjective approach requires that “an individual view herself as an apt target of ... the reactive attitudes.”\(^6\) My topic in this section is an aspect of the subjective element of the latter view.

Fischer and Ravizza contend that “taking responsibility” is a necessary condition of moral responsibility and requires that the agent “accept that he is a fair target of the reactive attitudes as a result of how he exercises [a certain kind of] agency in certain contexts.”\(^7\) One version of this requirement – the one that is my concern – is for people who “engage in significant metaphysical reflection about the relationship between causal determinism and the fairness of our social practices of applying the reactive attitudes.”\(^8\) Here it is: (R) Such an “individual must view himself as, prima facie at least, an apt candidate for the application of the reactive attitudes, and be willing to put aside his residual doubts, for all practical purposes.”\(^9\) Fischer and Ravizza assert that whereas their “reactive attitudes” condition for nonreflective agents involves a judgment about what our social practices are, the counterpart condition for reflective agents involves these agents’ making a “metaphysical judgment.”\(^10\) For reflective agents “the question is not simply about the given social practices; the question is whether these practices can be justified, all things considered.”\(^11\)

Elsewhere, I offered what I argued to be a counterexample to R.\(^12\) It features a philosopher, Phil, who is converted from a compatibilist believer that he and most people are morally responsible agents to a hard determinist during a visit to London in which, over the course of several months, Ted Honderich persuades him that determinism is true.

\(^7\) Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility and Control, p. 211.
\(^8\) Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility and Control, p. 211.
\(^10\) Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility and Control, p. 226.
\(^11\) Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility and Control, p. 226 (emphasis altered).
\(^12\) Mele, “Reactive Attitudes,” pp. 447–449.