ABSTRACT. John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza offer a theory of moral responsibility which makes responsibility dependent upon the way in which moral agents view themselves. According to the theory, agents are responsible for their actions only if they think of themselves as apt candidates for praise and blame; if they come to believe they are not apt candidates for praise and blame, they are \textit{ipso facto} not morally responsible. In what follows, I show that Fischer and Ravizza’s account of responsibility for consequences is inconsistent with this subjective element of their theory, and that the subjective element may be retained only if they are willing to implausibly restrict their account of responsibility for consequences. I end by discussing the broad significance of the failure of the subjective element for their overall approach to moral responsibility.

KEY WORDS: causal determinism, John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, moral responsibility, reasons-responsive compatibilism, responsibility for consequences

I

In a series of articles and an important recent book,\textsuperscript{1} John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza have constructed a “mechanism-based” rather than an “agent-based” approach to moral responsibility. Their account does not require that agents be “free to do otherwise” in the sense that there are alternate possibilities genuinely accessible to them

given the actual causal antecedents, but requires instead that the mechanism\(^2\) (or the actual sequence of neurological/mental events) issuing in a given action be moderately reasons-responsive, or such as to allow the agent to recognize and react to reasons in an appropriate way. Since moderate reasons-responsiveness is, according to Fischer and Ravizza, compatible with causal determinism, moral responsibility is (so far forth) compatible with causal determinism.

A salient feature of their account is the further requirement that agents view themselves in a certain way: agents must (1) think of themselves as agents— as sources of certain causal upshots in the world—and (2) consider themselves appropriate targets of praise and blame in their social context. Should an agent fail to fulfill either (1) or (2), that agent is not morally responsible, even if she acts from moderately reasons-responsive mechanisms. This “subjective” condition, together with the “objective” constraint above, suffices for moral responsibility.

A few philosophers have taken issue with the subjective component of the Fischer–Ravizza account, either by offering examples in which an agent appears to be responsible for a particular action despite the fact that he does not view himself as such, or by arguing that allowing agents to opt out of responsibility on the basis of philosophical considerations is too generous in any case.\(^3\) But none of these philosophers seems to have noticed that Fischer and Ravizza’s theory itself provides us with the resources we need to hold an agent morally responsible, even if he renounces his responsibility by denying the justifiability of responsibility ascriptions. Specifically, their account of responsibility for consequences is not consistent with their contention that an agent may reflectively decide that moral judgments are unjustified, and thereby fail to be morally responsible for his behavior.

\(^2\) The theoretical utility of the notion of a mechanism (or mechanism kind) has been questioned by several philosophers [e.g., Alison McIntyre “Review of Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility,” The Philosophical Review 109 (2000), pp. 267–270], and Fischer and Ravizza admit that the notion is “fuzzy around the edges” (Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility and Control, p. 113). But the intuitive idea is clear enough: a mechanism is just an “internal process” (consisting of mental or neurological events) that causally suffices for an agent’s action. Practical deliberation and unreflective habit, for example, are mechanisms in this sense. Nothing in my argument depends upon a precise characterization of mechanisms, so I will simply follow Fischer and Ravizza in using “mechanism” synonymously with “process,” both understood in a rough and ready way.

\(^3\) See Section III below.