

# RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTROL

A Theory of  
Moral Responsibility

JOHN MARTIN FISCHER  
MARK RAVIZZA, S.J.

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN  
PHILOSOPHY AND LAW

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# Responsibility and Control

## A Theory of Moral Responsibility

JOHN MARTIN FISCHER

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This book provides a comprehensive, systematic theory of moral responsibility. The authors explore the conditions under which individuals are morally responsible for actions, omissions, consequences, and emotions. The leading idea in the book is that moral responsibility is based on "guidance control." This control has two components: the mechanism that issues in the relevant behavior must be the agent's own mechanism, and it must be appropriately responsive to reasons. The book develops an account of both components. The authors go on to offer a sustained defense of the thesis that moral responsibility is compatible with causal determinism.

This major study will interest moral philosophers, legal theorists, and those in religious studies concerned with the issue of moral responsibility.



## **Responsibility and Control**



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# Contents

Acknowledgments	<i>page</i> vii
1 Moral Responsibility: The Concept and the Challenges	1
2 Moral Responsibility for Actions: Weak Reasons-Responsiveness	28
3 Moral Responsibility for Actions: Moderate Reasons-Responsiveness	62
4 Responsibility for Consequences	92
5 Responsibility for Omissions	123
6 The Direct Argument for Incompatibilism	151
7 Responsibility and History	170
8 Taking Responsibility	207
9 Conclusion	240
Bibliography	261
Index	271



## Chapter 1

# Moral Responsibility: The Concept and the Challenges

### I. MORAL RESPONSIBILITY: WHAT'S AT ISSUE?

An important difference between persons and other creatures is that only persons can be morally responsible for what they do. When we accept that someone is a morally responsible agent, this typically involves more than holding a particular belief about him; it entails a willingness to adopt certain attitudes toward that person and to behave toward him in certain kinds of ways. Imagine, for example, that you return home one evening and find your treasured Waterford vase shattered on the dining room floor. Discovering that the vase has been purposely shattered by a malicious houseguest will give rise to a set of reactions much different than those which would seem appropriate were you to discover that the vase had been accidentally toppled from the shelf by your clumsy cat. In the latter case, you might feel regret and perhaps even anger at your cat, but you would hardly feel the same sort of resentment and moral indignation that would seem warranted had your guest intentionally broken the vase in order to hurt you. Moreover, it would be appropriate to blame your guest and to hold him responsible for the misdeed in a way much different from the way in which you might discipline your cat and try to train him not to climb on the furniture in the future.

Of course, to make these claims is not to deny that there is one sense in which both the guest and the cat are responsible for breaking the vase in the respective scenarios. Each is *causally responsible* – each

Some of the material in this chapter is based on material previously presented in John Martin Fischer, "Introduction: Responsibility and Freedom," in *Moral Responsibility* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 9–61; John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control*, Aristotelian Society Monograph Series, vol. 14 (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1994); and John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, eds., Introduction, in *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 1–41.

plays a causal role in bringing about the destruction of the vase. But whereas both persons and nonpersons can be causally responsible for an event, only persons can be morally responsible.<sup>1</sup>

For many people, questions of moral responsibility are associated primarily with wrongdoing like that described in the preceding example. According to this view, questions concerning who may legitimately be held responsible are seen to stem from more practical questions concerning who should be blamed and punished for their misdeeds; similarly, a concern to understand the propriety of our responsibility ascriptions is driven mostly by a concern to understand what justifies the punitive measures we take toward those who injure us and violate the norms of society. Such a view helps to give expressions such as "I am going to hold you responsible" or "I promise to find out who is responsible for this" a mostly negative connotation, calling to mind the retributive attitudes and harsh treatment that await wrongdoers.

In contrast to this approach, however, others take a broader view of moral responsibility. They associate responsibility not only with negative responses like resentment and blame, but also with more positive responses such as gratitude, respect, and praise. To see the intuition behind this view, imagine that you once again return home after work. This time, instead of finding a shattered vase, you discover that your neighbor's exceedingly ugly tree (which had long blocked the otherwise spectacular view from your living room) has been knocked down. As in the previous examples, your reactions will vary depending upon what you subsequently learn about the causes that led to the tree's demise. For instance, your reaction would presumably depend on whether the tree's uprooting was the result of a fortuitous gust of wind or the efforts of your considerate neighbor who removed the eyesore as a birthday surprise for you. In the former case, you might feel fortunate or happy, but you would hardly feel the gratitude and desire to praise that would seem appropriate had your thoughtful neighbor torn down the offensive tree just to please you. The point stressed by the proponent of the broader

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the term "responsibility" admits of a variety of uses in addition to causal and moral responsibility. For example, the general term "responsibility" also is used to refer to legal responsibility, corporate responsibility, role responsibility (i.e., the type of responsibility the captain of a ship assumes for the safety of his vessel), and so forth. In this book, we shall be focusing primarily on the issues surrounding moral responsibility.

conception of responsibility is that there is a *spectrum* of reactions (including positive reactions) that are appropriately applied only to persons.

To highlight the importance of the reactions typically directed toward responsible agents, suppose that one day you learn something very startling about your best friend: you learn that he is being electronically manipulated by a team of scientists at a neuroscience institute in La Jolla, California. A group of University of California, San Diego, researchers (devout adherents to the doctrines of “neurophilosophy”) secretly implanted a sophisticated device in your friend’s brain some years ago. (Let us say that your friend went in for minor surgery two years ago; unbeknownst to him, the device was implanted then.) This extraordinary device allows the scientists to monitor all the activities of your friend’s brain; in particular, the researchers are able to tell exactly when your friend is deliberating about courses of action, both significant and mundane. Further, the device is used to stimulate the brain electronically to induce certain decisions in your friend. This direct manipulation is not something that can be “felt” or detected by your friend. Whenever your friend deliberates, the scientists briefly consult one another and agree as to which decision to induce electronically. Over time, they attempt to achieve a certain coherence in the pattern of induced decisions – the decisions and actions of your friend are not in any sense “random” or unpredictable.

At first it would be hard to know how one would react to such an unusual situation. But, we think, once you had been convinced that direct manipulation exists, a striking thing would occur: many of your most basic *attitudes* toward your friend would change. Your friend would no longer seem to be an appropriate object of such attitudes as respect, gratitude, love, indignation, and resentment. It would also seem somehow out of place to praise or blame your friend on the basis of his behavior. Imagine, for instance, that your friend fails to pick you up at the airport (although he had previously agreed to do so); surely, it would be inappropriate to resent the failure, for, after all, his decision not to pick you up was a product of direct electronic stimulation by the neuroscientists from UCSD. If it is fitting to be indignant or resentful on anyone’s account, it would seem that the *neuroscientists* would be the appropriate targets of the attitude. Furthermore, suppose that, instead of coming to pick you up at the airport, your friend devoted his afternoon to collecting



money for the United Way. It would not be in any way fitting to commend him for his efforts. If anyone is to be praised for the charitable activity, it would seem to be the group of neuroscientists, and *not* your friend.

It would appear to be impossible to maintain any sort of friendship with an individual whom you knew to be under this sort of direct manipulation. The whole range of attitudes characteristic of friendship would have to be abandoned. But we needn't imagine such wholesale and systematic manipulation in order to see how our attitudes toward others might change. Imagine that the scientists very *infrequently* manipulated your friend, but on the occasion of his failure to pick you up at the airport, the manipulation occurred. Now, although you might still have many of the relevant attitudes toward your friend (on the basis of other behavior or aspects of his personality), it would nevertheless be inappropriate to be indignant at him for his failure to pick you up. Similarly, if the charitable work was the result of manipulation, it would not be fitting to praise your friend for this activity. Our attitudes and responses to particular bits of behavior, as well as whole ranges of activity, are sensitive to the kinds of discoveries described here.

Other kinds of discoveries about individuals – similarly unusual and alarming – would result in parallel changes in attitude. Imagine that you discover that, on the morning of your birthday, a hypnotist secretly hypnotized an acquaintance of yours, inducing her to call you. Unhappily, your feelings of gratitude and affection after the telephone conversation now seem wholly inappropriate. Or suppose that you discover that someone secretly slipped a pill into the drink of a friend of yours who, you believe, smokes too much. The pill induces an aversion to the thought of smoking. When your friend abstains from smoking, you might feel happy and relieved, but it would seem out of place to give any credit to your friend for refraining from smoking – he does not deserve your *respect* for his decision.

When we make these sorts of discoveries, certain normal interpersonal responses seem inappropriate. These responses, it is quite clear, are of *central* importance to our lives. Imagine, if you can, a life without gratitude, respect, love, indignation, resentment, and so on. Such a life would be very different from the lives we now lead. Upon reflection, almost everyone will surely find this sort of life cold and alienating – and highly unattractive. We care very deeply about these attitudes and the activities of praising and blaming, rewarding and punishing, that are bound up with them.