

## Galen Strawson: Basic Argument

Galen Strawson was born in 1952 in Oxford, England. After earning a master's degree in art from Trinity Hall, Cambridge University, he pursued further graduate work at Wolfson College, Oxford University, where he completed his bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1977 and his doctorate in philosophy in 1983. From 1979 to 1990 Strawson taught at Oxford, where he held successive posts as lecturer in philosophy at several Oxford Colleges. He has taught at Australian National University, New York University, Rutgers University, Reading University, and the City University of New York Graduate Center. He is currently professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin.

Strawson's publications include *Freedom and Belief* (1986/2010); *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (1989); *Mental Reality* (1994/2010); *Real Materialism* (2008); *Selves* (2009), and *The Subject of Experience* (2017).

In this 1994 article Strawson defends what he calls the "Basic Argument." According to it, we have no ultimate moral responsibility for any of our actions, so praise or blame, reward and punishment for our actions, cannot be ultimately just. (Strawson points out that it makes no difference to the Basic Argument whether determinism—the doctrine that all our actions are determined by preceding causes and we can never act otherwise than we do—is true or false. For even if something changes in the ways we are influenced by events that are random or undetermined by causes, we are clearly not morally responsible for random or undetermined events.) The reason we are not ultimately morally responsible is that our actions derive from how we are; and how we are derives ultimately from our heredity and early experience; and we are not morally responsible for our heredity or early experience. Later on in life we can try to change the way we are, but our decision and efforts to do so are *themselves* determined by our heredity and previous experience.

In the latter part of his article, Strawson gives his response to three prominent theoretical positions on free will that defend the notion of moral responsibility: *compatibilism*, which holds that we can be morally responsible for actions even if we cannot act

other than we do; *libertarianism*, which holds that we can sometimes act otherwise than we do; and the *self theory*, which holds that even though we are not ultimately responsible for our character, personality, or motivational structure, we are morally responsible for our choices because we have a "self" that can make choices independently of these three elements. Strawson argues that none of these theories successfully refutes the Basic Argument.

## "The Impossibility of Ultimate Moral Responsibility"

There is an argument, which I will call the Basic Argument, that appears to prove that we cannot be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our actions. According to the Basic Argument, it makes no difference whether determinism is true or false. We cannot be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our actions in either case.

The Basic Argument has various expressions in the literature of free will, and its central idea can be quickly conveyed:

- (1) Nothing can be *causa sui*—nothing can be the "cause of itself."
- (2) In order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects.
- (3) Therefore nothing can be truly morally responsible.

In this paper I want to reconsider the Basic Argument, in the hope that anyone who thinks that we can be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our actions will be prepared to say exactly what is wrong with it. I think that the point that it has to make is obvious, and that it has been underrated in recent discussion of free will—perhaps because it admits of no answer. I suspect that it is obvious in such a way that insisting on it too much is likely to make it seem less obvious than it is, given the innate contrasuggestibility of human beings in general and philoso-

phers in particular. But I am not worried about making it seem less obvious than it is, so long as it gets adequate attention. As far as its validity is concerned, it can look after itself...

The same argument can be given in [the following] form:

- (1) It is undeniable that we are the way we are, initially, as a result of heredity and early experience, and it is undeniable that these are things for which one cannot be held responsible (morally or otherwise).
- (2) One cannot at any later stage of life hope to accede to true moral responsibility for the way one is by trying to change the way one already is as a result of heredity and previous experience. For:
- (3) Both the particular way in which one is moved to try to change oneself, and the degree of one's success in one's attempt at change, will be determined by how one already is as a result of heredity and previous experience. And:
- (4) Any further changes that one can bring about only after one has brought about certain initial changes will in turn be determined, via the initial changes, by heredity and previous experience.
- (5) This may not be the whole story, for it may be that some changes in the way one is are traceable not to heredity and experience but to the influence of indeterministic<sup>1</sup> or random factors. But it is absurd to suppose that indeterministic or random factors, for which one is (by hypothesis) in no way responsible, can in themselves contribute in any way to one's being truly morally responsible for how one is.

The claim, then, is not that people cannot change the way they are. They can, in certain respects (which tend to be exaggerated by North Americans and underestimated, perhaps, by Europeans). The claim is only that people cannot be supposed to change themselves in such a way as to be or become truly or

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<sup>1</sup> Indeterminism: the doctrine the some or all events are not determined by preceding causes.

ultimately morally responsible for the way they are, and hence for their actions....

It is important to try to be precise about what sort of responsibility is under discussion. What sort of "true" moral responsibility is being said to be both impossible and widely believed in?

An old story is very helpful in clarifying this question. This is the story of heaven and hell. As I understand it, true moral responsibility is responsibility of such a kind that, if we have it, then it *makes sense*, at least, to suppose that it could be just to punish some of us with (eternal) torment in hell and reward others with (eternal) bliss in heaven. The stress on the words "makes sense" is important, for one certainly does not have to believe in any version of the story of heaven and hell in order to understand the notion of true moral responsibility that it is being used to illustrate. Nor does one have to believe in any version of the story of heaven and hell in order to believe in the existence of true moral responsibility. On the contrary: Many atheists have believed in the existence of true moral responsibility. The story of heaven and hell is useful simply because it illustrates, in a peculiarly vivid way, the *kind* of absolute or ultimate accountability or responsibility that many have supposed themselves to have, and that many do still suppose themselves to have. It very clearly expresses its scope and force.

But one does not have to refer to religious faith in order to describe the sorts of everyday situation that are perhaps primarily influential in giving rise to our belief in true responsibility. Suppose you set off for a shop on the evening of a national holiday, intending to buy a cake with your last ten-dollar bill. On the steps of the shop someone is shaking an Oxfam<sup>2</sup> collection bucket. You stop, and it seems completely clear to you that it is entirely up to you what you do next. That is, it seems to you that you are truly, radically free to choose, in such a way that you will be ultimately morally responsible for whatever you do choose. Even if you believe that determinism is true, and that

<sup>2</sup> Oxfam: a confederation of organizations dedicated to ending poverty and injustice.

you will in five minutes time be able to look back and say that what you did was determined, this does not seem to undermine your sense of the absoluteness and inescapability of your freedom, and of your moral responsibility for your choice. The same seems to be true even if you accept the validity of the Basic Argument stated above, which concludes that one cannot be in any way ultimately responsible for the way one is and decides. In both cases, it remains true that as one stands there, one's freedom and true moral responsibility seem obvious and absolute to one.

Large and small, morally significant or morally neutral, such situations of choice occur regularly in human life. I think they lie at the heart of the experience of freedom and moral responsibility. They are the fundamental source of our inability to give up belief in true or ultimate moral responsibility....

Let me now restate the Basic Argument in very loose—as it were, conversational—terms. New forms of words allow for new forms of objection, but they may be helpful nonetheless.

- (1) You do what you do, in any situation in which you find yourself, because of the way you are. So:
- (2) To be truly morally responsible for what you do, you must be truly responsible for the way you are—at least in certain crucial mental respects.

Or:

- (1) What you intentionally do, given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself, flows necessarily from how you are. Hence:
- (2) You have to have some responsibility for how you are in order to have some responsibility for what you intentionally do, given the circumstances in which you (believe you) find yourself.

*Comment.* Once again the qualification about “certain mental respects” is one I will take for granted. Obviously, one is not responsible for one's sex, one's basic body pattern, one's height, and so on. But if one were not responsible for anything about oneself, how could one be responsible for what one did, given the truth of (1)? This is the fundamental

question, and it seems clear that if one is going to be responsible for any aspect of oneself, it had better be some aspect of one's mental nature.

I take it that (1) is incontrovertible, and that it is (2) that must be resisted. For if (1) and (2) are conceded, the case seems lost, because the full argument runs as follows:

- (1) You do what you do because of the way you are. So:
- (2) To be truly morally responsible for what you do you must be truly responsible for the way you are—at least in certain crucial mental respects. But:
- (3) You cannot be truly responsible for the way you are, so you cannot be truly responsible for what you do. Why can't you be truly responsible for the way you are? Because:
- (4) To be truly responsible for the way you are, you must have intentionally brought it about that you are the way you are, and this is impossible. Why is it impossible? Well, suppose it is not. Suppose that:
- (5) You have somehow intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are, and that you have brought this about in such a way that you can now be said to be truly responsible for being the way you are now. For this to be true:
- (6) You must already have had a certain nature  $n$  in light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are as you now are. But then:
- (7) For it to be true that you and you alone are truly responsible for how you now are, you must be truly responsible for having had the nature  $n$  in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are. So:
- (8) You must have intentionally brought it about that you had that nature  $n$ , in which case you must have existed already with a prior nature in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you had the nature  $n$  in the light of which you

intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are....

Here one is setting off on the regress. Nothing can be *cause of itself* in the required way. Even if such existence from and of itself is allowed to belong unintelligibly to God, it cannot plausibly be supposed to be possessed by ordinary finite human beings. “The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far,” as Nietzsche remarked in 1886:

It is a sort of rape and perversion of logic. But the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for “freedom of the will” in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely *causa sui* and, with more than Baron Münchhausen’s<sup>3</sup> audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.<sup>4</sup>

The rephrased argument is essentially the same as before, although the first two steps are now more simply stated. It may seem pointless to repeat it, but the questions remain. Can the Basic Argument simply be dismissed? (No.) Is it really of no importance in the discussion of free will and moral responsibility? (No.) Shouldn’t a serious defense of free will and moral responsibility thoroughly acknowledge the respect in which the Basic Argument is valid before going on to try to give its own positive account of the nature of free will and moral responsibility? (Yes.) Doesn’t the argument go to the heart of things if the heart of the free will debate is a concern about whether we can be truly morally responsible in the absolute way that we ordinarily suppose? (Yes.)

We are what we are, and we cannot be thought

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Friedrich Hieronymous von Münchhausen (1720-1797) was a German soldier and teller of tall tales.

to have made ourselves *in such a way* that we can be held to be free in our actions *in such a way* that we can be held morally responsible for our actions *in such a way* that any punishment or reward for our actions is ultimately just or fair. Punishments and rewards may seem deeply appropriate or intrinsically “fitting” to us in spite of this argument, and many of the various institutions of punishment and reward in human society appear to be practically indispensable in both their legal and non-legal forms. But if one takes the notion of justice that is central to our intellectual and cultural tradition seriously, then the evident consequence of the Basic Argument is that there is a fundamental sense in which no punishment or reward is ever ultimately just. It is exactly as just to punish or reward people for their actions as it is to punish or reward them for the (natural) color of their hair or the (natural) shape of their faces. The point seems obvious, and yet it contradicts a fundamental part of our natural self-conception, and there are elements in human thought that move very deeply against it. When it comes to questions of responsibility, we tend to feel that we are somehow responsible for the way we are. Even more importantly, perhaps, we tend to feel that our explicit self-conscious awareness of ourselves as agents who are able to deliberate about what to do, in situations of choice, suffices to constitute us as morally responsible free agents in the strongest sense, whatever the conclusion of the Basic Argument.

I have suggested that it is step (2) of the restated Basic Argument that must be rejected, and of course it can be rejected, because the phrases “truly responsible” and “truly morally responsible” can be defined in many ways. I will briefly consider three sorts of response to the Basic Argument, and I will concentrate on their simpler expressions, in the belief that truth in philosophy, especially in areas of philosophy like the present one, is almost never very complicated.

(i) The first is *compatibilist*. Compatibilists believe that one can be a free and morally responsi-

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), Part One, Section 21, p. 28.

ble agent even if determinism is true. Roughly, they claim, with many variations of detail, that one may correctly be said to be truly responsible for what one does when one acts, just so long as one is not caused to act by any of a certain set of constraints (kleptomaniac impulses, obsessional neuroses, desires that are experienced as alien, post-hypnotic commands, threats, instances of *force majeure* [an irresistible force] and so on). Clearly, this sort of compatibilist responsibility does not require that one should be truly responsible for how one is, and so step (2) of the Basic Argument comes out as false. One can have compatibilist responsibility even if the way one is is totally determined by factors entirely outside one's control.

It is for this reason, however, that compatibilist responsibility famously fails to amount to any sort of true *moral* responsibility, given the natural, strong understanding of the notion of true moral responsibility (characterized above by reference to the story of heaven and hell). One does what one does entirely because of the way one is, and one is in no way ultimately responsible for the way one is. So how can one be justly punished for anything one does? Compatibilists have given increasingly refined accounts of the circumstances in which punishment may be said to be appropriate or intrinsically fitting. But they can do nothing against this basic objection.

Many compatibilists have never supposed otherwise. They are happy to admit the point. They observe that the notions of true moral responsibility and justice that are employed in the objection cannot possibly have application to anything real, and suggest that the objection is therefore not worth considering. In response, proponents of the Basic Argument agree that the notions of true moral responsibility and justice in question cannot have application to anything real; but they make no apologies for considering them. They consider them because they are central to ordinary thought about moral responsibility and justice. So far as most people

are concerned, they are the subject, if the subject is moral responsibility and justice.

(ii) The second response is *libertarian*. Incompatibilists believe that freedom and moral responsibility are incompatible with determinism, and some of them are libertarians, who believe that we are free and morally responsible agents, and that determinism is therefore false. In an ingenious statement of the incompatibilist-libertarian case, Robert Kane argues that agents in an undetermined world can have free will, for they can “have the power to make choices for which they have ultimate responsibility.” That is, they can “have the power to make choices that can only and finally be explained in terms of their own wills (that is, character, motives, and efforts of will).”<sup>5</sup> Roughly, Kane sees this power as grounded in the possible occurrence, in agents, of efforts of will that have two main features: first, they are partly indeterministic in their nature, and hence indeterminate in their outcome; second, they occur in cases in which agents are trying to make a difficult choice between the options that their characters dispose them to consider....

But the old objection to libertarianism recurs. How can this indeterminism help with moral responsibility? Granted that the truth of determinism rules out true moral responsibility, how can the falsity of determinism help? How can the occurrence of partly random or indeterministic events contribute in any way to one's being truly morally responsible either for one's actions or for one's character? If my efforts of will shape my character in an admirable way, and in so doing are partly indeterministic in nature, while also being shaped (as Kane grants) by my already existing character, why am I not merely lucky?

The general objection applies equally whether determinism is true or false, and can be restated as follows. We are born with a great many genetically determined predispositions for which we are not responsible. We are subject to many

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Kane, “Two Kinds of Incompatibilism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1989), 254.

early influences for which we are not responsible. These decisively shape our characters, our motives, the general bent and strength of our capacity to make efforts of will. We may later engage in conscious and intentional shaping procedures—call them S-procedures—designed to affect and change our characters, motivational structure, and wills. Suppose we do. The question is then why we engage in the particular S-procedures that we do engage in, and why we engage in them in the particular way that we do. The general answer is that we engage in the particular S-procedures that we do engage in, given the circumstances in which we find ourselves, because of certain features of the way we already are. (Indeterministic factors may also play a part in what happens, but these will not help to make us responsible for what we do.) And these features of the way we already are—call them character features, or C-features—are either wholly the products of genetic or environmental influences, deterministic or random, for which we are not responsible, or are at least partly the result of earlier S-procedures, which are in turn either wholly the product of C-features for which we are not responsible, or are at least partly the product of still earlier S-procedures, which are in turn either the products of C-features for which we are not responsible, or the product of such C-features together with still earlier S-procedures—and so on. In the end, we reach the first S-procedure, and this will have been engaged in, and engaged in the particular way in which it was engaged in, as a result of genetic or environmental factors, deterministic or random, for which we were not responsible.

Moving away from the possible role of indeterministic factors in character or personality formation, we can consider their possible role in particular instances of deliberation and decision. Here too it seems clear that indeterministic factors cannot, in influencing what happens, contribute to true moral responsibility in any way. In the end, whatever we do, we do it

either as a result of random influences for which we are not responsible, or as a result of non-random influences for which we are not responsible, or as a result of influences for which we are proximally responsible but not ultimately responsible. The point seems obvious. Nothing can be ultimately *causa sui* in any respect at all. Even if God can be, we can't be....

(iii) The third option begins by accepting that one cannot be held to be ultimately responsible for one's character or personality or motivational structure. It accepts that this is so whether determinism is true or false. It then directly challenges step (2) of the Basic Argument. It appeals to a certain picture of the self in order to argue that one can be truly free and morally responsible in spite of the fact that one cannot be held to be ultimately responsible for one's character or personality or motivational structure. This picture has some support in the phenomenology<sup>6</sup> of human choice—we sometimes experience our choices and decisions as if the picture were an accurate one. But it is easy to show that it cannot be accurate in such a way that we can be said to be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our choices or actions.

It can be set out as follows. One is free and truly morally responsible because one's self is, in a crucial sense, independent of one's character or personality or motivational structure—one's CPM, for short. Suppose one is in a situation that one experiences as a difficult choice between A, doing one's duty, and B, following one's nonmoral desires. Given one's CPM, one responds in a certain way. One's desires and beliefs develop and interact and constitute reasons for both A and B. One's CPM makes one tend towards A or B. So far the problem is the same as ever: Whatever one does, one will do what one does because of the way one's CPM is, and since one neither is nor can be ultimately responsible for the way one's CPM is, one cannot be ultimately responsible for what one does.

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<sup>6</sup> Phenomenology: the study of how things appear to and are experienced by knowing subjects.

Enter one's self, S. S is imagined to be in some way independent of one's CPM. S (that is, one) considers the deliverances of one's CPM and decides in the light of them, but it—S—incorporates a power of decision that is independent of one's CPM in such a way that one can after all count as truly and ultimately morally responsible in one's decisions and actions, even though one is not ultimately responsible for one's CPM. Step (2) of the Basic Argument is false because of the existence of S.

The trouble with the picture is obvious. S (that is, one) decides on the basis of the deliverances of one's CPM. But whatever S decides, it decides as it does because of the way it is (or else partly or wholly because of the occurrence in the decision process of indeterministic factors for which it—that is, one—cannot be responsible, and that cannot plausibly be thought to contribute to one's true moral responsibility). And this returns us to where we started. To be a source of true or ultimate responsibility, S must be responsible for being the way it is. But this is impossible, for the reasons given in the Basic Argument.

The story of S and CPM adds another layer to the description of the human decision process, but it cannot change the fact that human beings cannot be ultimately self-determining in such a way as to be ultimately morally responsible for how they are, and thus for how they decide and act. The story is crudely presented, but it should suffice to make clear that no move of this sort can solve the problem.

“Character is destiny,” as Novalis is often reported as saying.<sup>7</sup> The remark is inaccurate because external circumstances are part of destiny, but the point is well taken when it comes to the question of moral responsibility. Nothing can be *causa sui*, and in order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects. One cannot institute oneself in such a

way that one can take over true or assume moral responsibility for how one is in such a way that one can indeed be truly morally responsible for what one does. This fact is not changed by the fact that we may be unable not to think of ourselves as truly morally responsible in ordinary circumstances. Nor is it changed by the fact that it may be a very good thing that we have this inability—so that we might wish to take steps to preserve it, if it looked to be in danger of fading. As already remarked, many human beings are unable to resist the idea that it is their capacity for fully explicit self-conscious deliberation, in a situation of choice, that suffices to constitute them as truly morally responsible agents in the strongest possible sense. The Basic Argument shows that this is a mistake. However self-consciously aware we are, as we deliberate and reason, every act and operation of our mind happens as it does as a result of features for which we are ultimately in no way responsible. But the conviction that self-conscious awareness of one's situation can be a sufficient foundation of strong free will is very powerful. It runs deeper than rational argument, and it survives untouched, in the everyday conduct of life, even after the validity of the Basic Argument has been admitted.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, by George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss*, Bk 6, Ch 6. Novalis was the pseudonym of German poet and theorist Georg Philipp Friedrich

Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772-1801); George Eliot was the pseudonym of English novelist Mary Anne (or Marian) Evans (1819-1880).