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Responsibility and Inevitability*

John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza

Persons can be held morally responsible for their actions, omissions, and the consequences of those actions (and omissions). We propose to present a sketch of a theory of moral responsibility which shows how the conditions for moral responsibility for consequences are connected to the conditions for moral responsibility for actions and omissions. A major aim of this paper is to employ a principle (defended elsewhere) which associates moral responsibility for actions and omissions with control in order to generate an account of moral responsibility for consequences.

SOME EXAMPLES

There are cases in which a person is morally responsible for an action, although he could not have done otherwise. Here is a rather graphic case of this sort. Sam confides in his friend, Jack. Sam tells Jack of his plan to murder the mayor of the town in which they live. Sam is disturbed about the mayor's liberal policies, especially his progressive taxation scheme. Whereas Sam's reasons for proposing to kill the mayor are bad ones, they are *his* reasons: he has not been hypnotized, brainwashed, duped, coerced, and so forth. Sam has deliberated coolly, and he has settled on his murderous course of action.

Sam is bad, and Jack is no better. Jack is pleased with Sam's plan, but Jack is a rather anxious person. Because Jack worries that Sam might waver, Jack has secretly installed a device in Sam's brain which allows him to monitor all of Sam's brain activity and to intervene in it, if he desires. The device can be employed by Jack to ensure that Sam decides to kill the mayor and that he acts on this decision; the device works by electronic stimulation of the brain. Let us imagine that Jack is absolutely committed to activating the device to ensure that Sam kills the mayor, should Sam show any sign of not carrying out his original plan. Also,

* We are indebted to Sarah Buss, David Copp, Robert Cummins, David Dolinko, Carl Ginet, and David Widerker. Versions of this paper have been read at the University of Arizona; the University of California, Davis; the University of California, Santa Barbara; and the UCLA law and philosophy discussion group. We are grateful to Harry Frankfurt for comments he gave on this paper at the Greensboro Colloquium; although we were not able properly to discuss his criticisms in this paper, we hope to address them in future work.

we can imagine that there is nothing that Sam could do to prevent the device from being fully effective, if it is employed by Jack in order to cause Sam to kill the mayor.

Sam and Jack both go to a meeting at the town hall, and Sam methodically carries out his plan to kill the mayor. He does not waver in any way, and he shoots the mayor as a result of his original deliberations and plan. Jack thus plays absolutely no role in Sam's decision and action; the electronic device simply monitors Sam's brain activity but it does not have any causal influence on what actually happens. Sam acts exactly as he would have acted had no device been implanted in his brain.

Evidently, Sam is morally responsible for what he has done. Indeed, Sam is blameworthy for deciding to kill the mayor and for killing the mayor. But whereas Sam is morally responsible for his action, he could not have done otherwise. Sam could not have done otherwise because of the existence of a "counterfactual intervener" (Jack) who would have caused him (in a certain manner) to behave as he actually did had Sam been inclined to do otherwise. We might say that Sam acts freely and is morally responsible for what he does because no "responsibility-undermining factor" operates in the actual sequence leading to his action. Rather, such a factor—Jack's use of the electronic device to stimulate Sam's brain—operates in the alternative sequence. In cases in which a responsibility-undermining factor operates in the alternative sequence but not in the actual sequence, an agent can be held morally responsible for an action although he could not have done otherwise. The case of Sam and Jack is such a case; let us call it "Assassin." "Assassin" is a Frankfurt-type case.¹

"Assassin" is a case in which Sam is morally responsible for a bad action although he could not have done otherwise. Here is a case in which an agent is morally responsible for a good action although he could not have done otherwise. Matthew is walking along a beach, looking at the water. He sees a child struggling in the water and he quickly deliberates about the matter, jumps into the water, and rescues the child. We can imagine that Matthew does not give any thought to not trying to rescue the child, but that if he had considered not trying to save the child, he would have been overwhelmed by literally irresistible guilt feelings which would have caused him to jump into the water and save the child anyway. We simply stipulate that in the alternative sequence the urge to save the child would be genuinely irresistible.

Apparently, Matthew is morally responsible—indeed, praiseworthy—for his action, although he could not have done otherwise. Matthew acts freely in saving the child; he acts exactly as he would have acted if he had lacked the propensity toward strong feelings of guilt. Here is a

1. Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 828–39, and "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20.

case in which no responsibility-undermining factor operates in the actual sequence and thus Matthew is morally responsible for what he does. It is controversial whether in the case of Matthew a responsibility-undermining factor operates in the alternative sequence, but it is at least clear that the nature of the alternative sequence renders it true that Matthew could not have done otherwise. (Of course, we could alter the case so that there would be a counterfactual intervener associated with Matthew. The case would then be precisely parallel to "Assassin.")

Call the case of Matthew "Hero." In "Hero," Matthew is morally responsible for performing a good action, although he could not have done otherwise. The cases of "Assassin" and "Hero" then show that good and bad actions are symmetrical with regard to the lack of the necessity of alternative possibilities (for moral responsibility). Such cases show that Susan Wolf's asymmetry thesis is false.²

Wolf argues that whereas one cannot be morally responsible for a bad action which one could not have avoided performing, one can be morally responsible for a good action which one could not have avoided performing. Wolf uses the following sorts of examples to provide motivation for her asymmetry claim. If a mother runs into a burning house in order to save her children, she might be morally responsible for doing so even if it is true that she literally could not have refrained from trying to save the children (and from saving them). (This case is similar to "Hero.") And yet if someone steals a book from a store as a result of kleptomania (or brainwashing, hypnosis, and so forth), he is not morally responsible for what he does. In this kind of case, it seems that the agent cannot be held morally responsible for what he had done precisely because he could not have done otherwise.

But such cases as "Assassin" and "Hero" both show that Wolf's asymmetry thesis is false and help to indicate why it is false. In Wolf's case of good action, no responsibility-undermining factor operates in the actual sequence. In Wolf's examples of bad actions, some responsibility-undermining factors operate in the actual sequence. Thus, it is natural to say that in Wolf's cases the agent is morally responsible for the good action but not the bad action. But it becomes evident that Wolf is focusing on a subclass of cases of bad actions which the agent could not have avoided performing—those in which a responsibility-undermining factor operates in the actual sequence. But cases such as "Assassin" are ones in which an agent is morally responsible for an action which he could not have avoided performing but in which the responsibility-undermining factor operates in the alternative sequence. Thus, Frankfurt-type cases such as "Assassin" and "Hero" point to the symmetry of good and bad actions with regard to alternative possibilities and they help us to see that Wolf's asymmetry thesis gains plausibility through consideration of a restricted class of cases.

2. Susan Wolf, "Asymmetrical Freedom," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 151–66.

We believe that a different asymmetry thesis is true. This is the thesis that whereas an agent can be morally responsible for doing something which he cannot avoid doing, no agent can be morally responsible for failing to do something which he cannot do. That is, an asymmetry exists between actions and omissions with respect to the requirement of alternative possibilities.³ We have already presented cases of moral responsibility for actions in which the agent could not have done otherwise, so let us consider whether we could construct parallel cases involving omissions.

Consider, first, "Sloth," which is similar in some respects to "Hero." In "Sloth," John is walking along a beach and he sees a child struggling in the water. John believes that he could save the child with very little effort, but he is disinclined to expend any energy to help anyone else. He decides not to try to save the child and he continues to walk along the beach.

Is John morally responsible for failing to save the child? Unbeknownst to John, the child was about to drown when John glimpsed him and the child drowned one second after John decided not to jump into the water. The facts of the case exert pressure to say that John is not morally responsible for failing to save the child: after all, the child would have drowned even if John had tried to save it. John could not have saved the child. John may well be morally responsible for deciding not to try to save the child and even for not trying to save the child, but he is not morally responsible for not saving the child. "Sloth" is no different in this respect from a case exactly like it except that the child would not have drowned immediately; rather, a patrol of sharks which (unbeknownst to John) infested the water between the beach and the struggling child would have eaten him had he jumped in.

Imagine, similarly, that Sue thinks that she can end a terrible drought by doing a rain dance. Of course, Sue is deluded and she does not, in fact, have the power to affect the weather. Suppose also that there are no clouds in sight (and no clouds within hundreds of miles); atmospheric conditions imply that it will not, in fact, rain for weeks. Now, Sue happens to hate the local farmers and she would like to hurt them in any way possible. While falsely believing that she could easily end the drought immediately, she deliberately refrains from doing her rain dance.⁴

Is Sue morally responsible for failing to cause it to rain (i.e., for not ending the drought) in "Rain Dance"? Again, there is pressure to say that whereas Sue might be morally responsible for not doing the rain dance and for not trying to end the drought, she is not morally responsible for not ending the drought. After all, Sue could not have ended the drought.

The cases presented above are cases in which an agent omits to do something good. We now turn to a similar case in which an agent omits

3. This claim is developed and defended in John Martin Fischer, "Responsibility and Failure," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 86 (1985/86): 251–70.

4. This kind of example is due to Carl Ginet.

to do something bad. Just as good and bad actions are symmetrical with respect to the lack of a requirement of alternative possibilities (for moral responsibility), omitting to perform a good action and omitting to perform a bad action are symmetrical with respect to the requirement of alternative possibilities.

Imagine that you are a small-time thug strolling along a dimly lit street in a deserted part of town. Suddenly you spy a shiny, new Mercedes with a flat tire stranded by the side of the road. The driver of the car is a well-dressed, elderly gentleman with a bulging billfold in his breast pocket. You are tempted to hurry over to the car, assault the old man, and steal his money. Fortunately, you decide against this and you continue along your way.

Are you morally responsible for failing to rob the driver? Well, unbeknownst to you (and the driver of the car), the Mafia has put drugs into the trunk of the car. Five mafioso thugs are watching the car from five other cars in the neighborhood. They have strict instructions: if anyone threatens the driver of the car, they are to shoot him with their Uzis. In these circumstances, we can safely imagine that if you had attempted to rob the driver, you would have been killed.

We believe that you are not morally responsible for failing to rob the driver. You might be morally responsible for deciding not to rob the driver, for not deciding to rob the driver, and for not trying to rob the driver. But there is strong pressure to say that you are simply not morally responsible for not robbing the driver, and this pressure comes from the fact that you could not rob the driver. In "Flat Tire," you are not morally responsible for failing to do a bad thing which you could not do.

These cases suggest that an agent cannot be held morally responsible for not performing an action which he cannot perform. Thus, these cases, in conjunction with "Assassin" and "Hero," suggest that actions and omissions are asymmetrical with respect to the requirement of alternative possibilities. That is, moral responsibility for an action does not require the freedom to refrain from performing the action, whereas moral responsibility for failure to perform an action requires the freedom to perform the action. We hold individuals morally responsible not just for actions and omissions but also for consequences of these actions (and omissions). We now wish to turn to some cases of moral responsibility for consequences.

Before proceeding, we should point out that the events and states of affairs which are consequences of what we do can be construed as either particulars or universals. For our purposes, the distinction between consequence-particulars and consequence-universals will be made in terms of criteria of individuation. We shall stipulate that a consequence-particular is individuated more finely than a consequence-universal. Specifically, the actual causal pathway to a consequence-particular is an essential feature of it, so that if a different causal pathway were to occur, then a different consequence-particular would occur. In contrast, we stipulate

that the same consequence-universal can be brought about via different causal antecedents.

For example, in "Assassin" one can distinguish between the consequence-particular, the mayor's being shot, and the consequence-universal, that the mayor is shot. Had Sam shown some indication that he would not shoot the mayor, and had Jack's device played a causal role in producing the outcome, a different consequence-particular would have occurred. (A different consequence-particular would have been denoted by the mayor's being shot.) In contrast, even if Jack's device had played a causal role, then the same consequence-universal, that the mayor is shot, would have occurred. (Note that what is important in the distinction between consequence-particulars and consequence-universals is the issue of individuation, not the sort of phrase used to refer to the different sorts of consequences. In this article we shall generally follow the convention of referring to consequence-universals with such phrases as "that the mayor is shot.")

In the case of "Assassin," Sam shoots the mayor without the intervention of Jack's electronic device. In this case, the state of affairs that the mayor is shot obtains. But the same state of affairs could have been caused to obtain in various different ways; in particular, it would have obtained even if Jack had caused Sam to shoot the mayor. Now the question arises as to whether an agent can be morally responsible for a consequence-universal, where the agent could not have prevented the consequence-universal from obtaining. Are there cases in which an agent is morally responsible for the occurrence of a consequence which is inevitable (for him)? (In what follows, we shall be primarily concerned with consequence-universals.)

It appears as if there are such cases. Take, for example, "Assassin." It is plausible to say that Sam is morally responsible not only for shooting the mayor but also for the consequence-universal, that the mayor is shot. And note that Sam cannot prevent the mayor from being shot in one way or another.

Consider the similar case, "Missile 1." In "Missile 1" an evil woman, Elizabeth, has obtained a missile and missile launcher and she has decided (for her own rather perverse reasons) to launch the missile toward Washington, D.C. Suppose that Elizabeth's situation is like that of Sam; she has not been manipulated, brainwashed, and so forth. Further, imagine that she has had exactly the same sort of device implanted in her brain as had been put into Sam's and that there is a counterfactual intervener associated with her who would ensure that Elizabeth would launch the missile if Elizabeth were to show any sign of wavering. We also suppose that once the missile is launched toward the city, Elizabeth cannot prevent it from hitting Washington, D.C.

Now, when Elizabeth launches the missile toward Washington, she apparently does so freely, and we believe that she is morally responsible for the occurrence of the consequence-universal, that Washington, D.C.,

is bombed, although this state of affairs is inevitable for her. She is morally accountable for it, and yet there is nothing that Elizabeth can do to prevent the obtaining of the state of affairs that Washington, D.C. is bombed.

"Missile 2" is exactly like "Missile 1," except that there is no counterfactual intervener (who is poised to manipulate the brain) associated with Elizabeth. Rather, there is another woman, Carla, who would launch the missile if Elizabeth were to refrain. Further, there is nothing that Elizabeth could do to prevent Carla from launching the missile or to prevent the missile from hitting Washington, D.C., once launched. Just as in "Missile 1," Elizabeth freely launches the missile. In "Missile 2" Elizabeth can also be held morally responsible for the fact that Washington, D.C., is bombed, although she cannot prevent this fact from obtaining.

So there are cases in which an agent can be held morally responsible for the obtaining of a state of affairs which is a consequence of what she does and which she cannot prevent from obtaining. But there are other cases in which an agent cannot be held morally responsible for the occurrence of some consequence of what she does, where it seems that the fact that the agent cannot prevent the occurrence of the consequence is precisely what leads to the judgment that the agent is not morally responsible for it.

Consider, for example, "Missile 3."⁵ In "Missile 3" Joan knows that Elizabeth has already launched a missile toward Washington, D.C. But Joan has a weapon which she could use to deflect the missile in such a way that it would hit a less populous area of Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, Joan is located very close to the city and because of this fact, the bomb's trajectory, and the nature of her weapon, she knows that though she can deflect the bomb onto a different part of the city, she cannot prevent the bomb from hitting the city.

Imagine that Joan does employ her weapon to deflect the bomb. When she does this, she may well be morally responsible for the fact that one section of Washington (rather than another) is bombed. But is Joan morally responsible for the fact that Washington, D.C., is bombed? It seems that she is not, and there is a strong tendency to say that she is not morally responsible for the state of affairs that Washington, D.C., is bombed exactly because she cannot prevent this state of affairs from obtaining.

Here is a similar case. Ralph is the driver of a train whose brakes have failed. The train is hurtling down the tracks toward a fork in the tracks. Ralph knows that he can cause the train to take the right fork or the left fork, and he knows that he cannot stop the train. Also, imagine that Ralph knows that both forks lead to Syracuse. When Ralph turns the train onto the left fork, Ralph can be held morally responsible for the fact that the train takes the left fork (rather than the right fork). But

5. We thank David Widerker for suggesting this type of example.

it just seems obvious that Ralph is not morally responsible for the fact that the train ends up in Syracuse given that Ralph is not morally responsible for the fact that he is on this stretch of track in the first place. (Notice that even if Ralph did not know that both tracks lead to Syracuse, we would not hold him morally responsible for the fact that the train ends up in Syracuse.) And what could explain Ralph's lack of moral responsibility for the fact that the train ends up in Syracuse other than the fact that Ralph cannot prevent the train from going to Syracuse in one way or another?

The consideration of the above examples might appear to leave us in a very puzzling situation indeed. On the one hand, there are cases in which an agent is morally responsible for performing an action although he cannot avoid performing that action. On the other hand, various cases suggest that an agent cannot properly be held morally responsible for not performing an action which he cannot perform. Further, there are cases in which it appears that an agent is morally responsible for a consequence of what he has done which he cannot prevent from occurring. But there are also cases in which an agent is not morally responsible for a consequence-universal and in which it is very tempting to say that it is precisely the fact that the agent cannot prevent the state of affairs from obtaining that makes it false that he is morally responsible for it. These intuitions about particular cases appear to be extremely puzzling, if not straightforwardly contradictory.

An adequate theory of moral responsibility would explain and justify the seemingly problematic pattern of intuitions presented above. Specifically, the tasks of the theory are to answer the following two questions. How can we explain the fact that there is no requirement of alternative possibilities for actions, whereas there is such a requirement for omissions? Also, how can we explain the fact that, whereas in some cases in which an agent could not prevent a consequence from obtaining he is morally responsible for the consequence, in other cases in which an agent could not prevent a consequence from obtaining he is not morally responsible for the consequence?

We believe that the last task—involving consequences—is particularly difficult for various approaches which have been suggested by other philosophers.⁶ In this article we shall develop our own theory of moral responsibility for consequences. In doing so, we shall begin with an account of moral responsibility for actions and omissions, and then we

6. For such accounts, see, e.g., Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), esp. pp. 171–80; Robert Heinaman, "Incompatibilism without the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1986): 266–76; Bernard Berofsky, *Freedom from Necessity* (New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), esp. p. 35; William L. Rowe, "Causing and Being Responsible for What Is Inevitable," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1989): 153–60. We discuss and criticize these approaches in our paper, "Responsibility for Consequences," in *Festschrift for Joel Feinberg*, ed. Jules Coleman and Allen Buchanan (forthcoming).

shall use this account to guide us in developing the theory of moral responsibility for consequences.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIONS

The basic idea behind our approach to moral responsibility for actions is that an agent is morally responsible for performing an action insofar as he controls the action in a certain way. But it is important here to distinguish two different kinds of control.

The two different kinds of control can be illustrated by the following example, "Driver."⁷ Al is taking a driver's education class. He is in the driver's seat operating one set of controls of the car. His teacher is Bart, who is carefully monitoring Al's driving. Al signals to make a left turn and proceeds to turn the steering wheel to the left, thus causing the car to make a left turn. Al can be said to control the car's movement to the left. He has a certain sort of control of the car's turning to the left: "actual causal control." Insofar as Al deliberates in the normal way and there is no malfunction in the car's steering apparatus, Al can be said to have actual causal control of the car's turning left. Note that actual causal control is different from mere causation. If Al caused the car to turn left as a result of some sort of epileptic seizure or perhaps an irresistible impulse, then he would have caused the car's turning left without controlling it.

Below, we shall say a bit about what actual causal control consists in. But now we wish to distinguish actual causal control from a different kind of control: "regulative control."⁸ Suppose that Al's teacher Bart has a dual set of controls of the car. If Bart wishes, he can activate his controls and deactivate Al's; thus, Bart can take control of the car, if he wishes. As things actually work out, Al controls the car's movement to the left and Bart plays no causal role in it. But we can suppose that, by virtue of the second set of controls, Bart has a dual power with regard to the car's turning to the left: he can ensure this event and he can prevent it. That is, if Al showed signs of wanting to turn the car to the right, Bart could override Al's attempt and cause the car to go to the left. Further, Bart could frustrate Al's attempt to cause the car to go to the left, if he wished; Bart could activate his controls and turn the car to the right. When an agent has this sort of dual power over an upshot—he can ensure it and he can prevent it—we shall say that the agent has "regulative control" over the upshot. Whereas Al has actual causal control of the car's movement to the left, Bart has regulative control over it. As things

7. This example is adapted from Nelson Pike, "Over-Power and God's Responsibility for Sin," in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 11–35.

8. The two kinds of control are distinguished in Fischer, "Responsibility and Failure." For a similar distinction, see Michael J. Zimmerman, *An Essay on Moral Responsibility* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), pp. 32–35.

actually proceed, Bart does not have actual causal control of the car's turning left, although he has regulative control over it.

So it is possible that one agent have actual causal control of an event and another have regulative control over it. Further, Frankfurt-type cases (presented above) show that it is possible that an agent have actual causal control of an event but lack regulative control over it. "Driver" would be a Frankfurt-type case if Bart were disposed to exercise his power to ensure that the car turns to the left, should Al show any sign of not turning the car to the left. But "Driver" would not be a Frankfurt-type case if Bart were not so disposed. That is, if Bart were disposed to allow Al to turn the car in any direction he preferred, then Al would have both actual causal control of the car's turning left and regulative control over it. This shows that two different individuals can have regulative control over the same upshot.⁹ (Perhaps Al's regulative control over the car's turning to the left should be called "conditional regulative control" because Bart has granted it to him.)

We have distinguished two kinds of control. What is particularly important for our purposes is that it seems that an agent can control an outcome (in the sense of actual causal control) without having control over it (in the sense of regulative control). We claim that it is a sufficient condition for moral responsibility for an action that the agent has actual causal control of it.¹⁰ But we need to say much more. First, we need to say exactly what the agent must control when he is morally responsible for performing an action. Next, we need to say a bit about what this sort of control—actual causal control—consists in.

In "Assassin," when Sam shoots the mayor, he seems to shoot (and kill) the mayor freely and to be morally responsible for shooting (and killing) the mayor. In "Driver," when Al turns the car to the left, it is plausible to say that he does so freely and is morally responsible for so

9. As Pike argues, this provides a model of how both human individuals and God could have regulative control over human actions. Pike's suggestion is that God can be envisaged as a certain sort of "counterfactual intervener." The claim that both God and human individuals can have regulative control over human actions at least opens the possibility of a certain sort of "free-will defense" against the challenge posed to God's existence by the problem of evil. This sort of defense would claim that human freedom to do otherwise is compatible with God's omnipotence. It is not clear, however, that regulative control (and thus freedom to do otherwise) is required in order to mount a free-will defense; it might be the case that all that is required is actual causal control (and thus acting freely).

10. In this article we are merely trying to give a sketch of one component of a theory of responsibility, the "freedom-relevant" component. Following Aristotle, one might distinguish between an epistemic and a freedom-relevant component of moral responsibility. Aristotle held that one acts voluntarily insofar as one is not in a relevant sense ignorant of what one is doing and one is not compelled to do what one does. We are here focusing on the second component—the freedom-relevant component. There may well be cases in which an agent who meets our freedom-relevant conditions is not morally responsible for what he does by virtue of the fact that he does what he does solely because he believes that he cannot do otherwise; we believe that in such cases the epistemic presuppositions of responsibility are not met.

acting. In both cases we hold the agents morally responsible for their actions. But what exactly are the actions? For the sake of simplicity, we shall adopt an appealing and natural theory of action. This is a Davidsonian theory, according to which particular actions are identical to particular bodily movements. So, for example, the action which is identical to Sam's killing the mayor is the physical event of Sam's squeezing the trigger. The descriptions, "Sam's killing the mayor," "Sam's shooting the mayor," "Sam's doing a dastardly deed," and so forth all pick out the same bodily movement. Also, on this approach, the action which is identical to Al's turning the car to the left is his moving his arms in a certain way. In each case of action, the action is identical to some bodily movement. (Whereas this approach to act-individuation is attractive, it is not necessary to our theory of responsibility; below, we shall briefly indicate how our basic point can be made employing an alternative theory of act-individuation.)

We claim, then, that it is by virtue of having actual causal control of a bodily movement that an agent is morally responsible for the action that is identical to that bodily movement. So, for example, it is by virtue of Al's controlling (in the sense of actual causal control) the physical event of his moving his arms (thus causing the steering wheel to move) that he is morally responsible for turning the car to the left.

Next, we need to say what actual causal control of an event consists in. Elsewhere, we have in a sketchy and preliminary way proposed the hypothesis that the "weak reasons-responsiveness" of the mechanism issuing in action is a sufficient condition for moral responsibility for that action.¹¹ Here, we propose that weak reasons-responsiveness is an attractive analysis of actual causal control. The basic idea, then, is that an agent is morally responsible for performing an action insofar as the bodily movement identical to the action issues from a weakly reasons-responsive mechanism.

We shall here give a very brief sketch of weak reasons-responsiveness. It is beyond the scope of this article fully to discuss and defend the claim that weak reasons-responsiveness is the proper analysis of actual causal control, where such control is sufficient for moral responsibility. Rather, here we wish simply to give enough of the content of the idea to render it plausible that it is an analysis of actual causal control. This will allow us to give an account of moral responsibility for action which will later guide the development of the account of moral responsibility for consequences.

To say whether an action issues from a weakly reasons-responsive mechanism, we first need to identify the kind of mechanism that actually

11. John Martin Fischer, "Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility," in *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions*, ed. F. Schoeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 81–106; and Mark Ravizza, "Is Responsiveness Sufficient for Responsibility?" (University of California, Riverside, typescript).

issues in action. It is important to see that in some cases intuitively different kinds of mechanisms operate in the actual sequence and the alternative sequence. So, for instance, in "Assassin" the ordinary process of practical reasoning issues in Sam's act of squeezing the trigger, but a different type of mechanism (involving direct electronic stimulation of Sam's brain) would have operated had Sam shown any sign of wavering.

We cannot here develop an explicit account of mechanism-individuation. It suffices for our purposes to note that Sam's actual-sequence mechanism is intuitively of a different sort from the alternative-sequence mechanism. Similarly, we would want to say that in "Hero" Matthew's actual-sequence mechanism is of a different sort from his alternative-sequence mechanism; in the actual sequence, he quickly deliberates and decides to save the struggling child, and his reasoning is uninfluenced by any overwhelming urge. However, in the alternative sequence his deliberations are influenced by an overwhelming and irresistible urge to save the swimmer. Whereas it is difficult to produce an explicit criterion of mechanism-individuation, we believe that it is natural to say that in cases such as "Assassin" and "Hero" different sorts of mechanisms issue in the actions in the actual and alternative sequences.

In order to determine whether an actual-sequence mechanism of a certain type is weakly reasons-responsive, one asks whether there exists some possible scenario in which that type of mechanism operates, the agent has reason to do otherwise, and the agent does otherwise (for that reason). That is, we hold fixed the actual type of mechanism, and we ask whether the agent would respond to some possible incentive to do otherwise. If so, then the actually operative mechanism is weakly reasons-responsive. In contrast, strong reasons-responsiveness obtains when a certain kind *K* of mechanism actually issues in an action, and if there were sufficient reason to do otherwise and *K* were to operate, the agent would recognize the sufficient reason to do otherwise and thus choose to do otherwise—and do otherwise.

One way to see the difference between strong and weak reasons-responsiveness is to look at a case in which a person is disposed toward weakness of the will. Imagine that I have a good reason to go to the movies and (as a result of the ordinary, unimpaired human faculty of practical reasoning) I decide to go, and do go to the movies. Suppose, however, that I would still go to the movies even if I were to have a good reason not to go. For example, I would still go to the movies even though I had a deadline for a paper that I could not meet if I went to the movies. In this latter case I would be weak-willed. Insofar as the actual mechanism which leads to my action would not respond to the reason I would have, if I were to have a good reason to do otherwise, it is not strongly reasons-responsive. But this is entirely compatible with the existence of some reason to which the actual mechanism would respond. For example, even if I am disposed toward weakness of the will, presumably I would not go to the movies if a ticket cost one hundred dollars.

A disposition toward weakness of the will need not rule out moral responsibility. Thus, strong reasons-responsiveness of the mechanism actually issuing in action is not a necessary condition for moral responsibility; rather, we believe that it is at least a promising idea that the weak reasons-responsiveness of the mechanism issuing in action is a sufficient condition for moral responsibility for the action.¹² (Strong reasons-responsiveness implies weak reasons-responsiveness; of course, the converse does not hold.)

Above, we claimed that in "Assassin" different sorts of mechanisms operate in the actual sequence and the alternative sequence. Now we can be more specific. In the actual sequence, Sam's unimpaired faculty of practical reasoning operates, and this mechanism is weakly reasons-responsive. In the alternative scenario, the mechanism issuing in action includes a kind of direct electronic stimulation of the brain which renders the mechanism not weakly reasons-responsive: if that type of stimulation were to occur, then Sam would shoot the mayor no matter what reasons there were. Thus, it is by virtue of the fact that a weakly reasons-responsive mechanism issues in Sam's act that he is morally responsible for that act. He has actual causal control of his action although he lacks regulative control over it (and the ability to do otherwise). He is in control of his action although he lacks regulative control over it.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR OMISSIONS

We have sketched an account of moral responsibility for actions. This account implies that one can be morally responsible for an action even though one cannot avoid performing it. We now wish to develop an account of moral responsibility for failures to act. This account will make clear the relationship between moral responsibility for actions and omissions. In particular, it will explain why actions and omissions are asymmetrical with regard to the requirement of alternative possibilities.¹³

When an agent does something, he brings about a certain event, some bodily movement. But when an agent omits to do something, he (typically) fails to bring about the same type of possible event, a possible bodily movement. Actions and omissions then involve different relations between an agent and some possible bodily movement; in actions the relation is a certain sort of causation, and in omissions the relation is the lack of this sort of causation.

12. This claim needs to be defended against various difficulties. For some preliminary discussion, see Fischer, "Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility"; and Ravizza. We plan further to discuss these issues in future work.

13. Some philosophers claim that it is a conceptual truth that if a person omits to do something, then he can do it. Of course, if this claim were true, then the asymmetry thesis would follow straightforwardly from the claim that moral responsibility for action does not require freedom to do otherwise. We do not agree with this conceptual point, but if the reader does, then he should replace any occurrence of "omission" with "failure to act."

Now we can propose a principle pertaining to moral responsibility for actions and omissions.¹⁴ Suppose that doing X and not doing X both involve relations between the agent and some possible bodily movement X'. We propose that moral responsibility for doing X or for not doing X requires some sort of control of X'. That is, the principle states that moral responsibility for doing X or for not doing X requires one of the two sorts of control of X': actual causal control or regulative control.

This principle treats acts and omissions symmetrically at a deep level: both responsibility for actions and responsibility for omissions require some sort of control of a bodily movement X'. But we can now see exactly why actions and omissions are asymmetrical with regard to the requirement of alternative possibilities. This asymmetry can be derived from the symmetric deep principle and the analysis of actions and omissions (as involving different relations to the same type of possible bodily movement).

When one performs an action freely, one has actual causal control of the relevant bodily movement X'. Thus, when an agent freely does something, he has at least one sort of control of X', and thus he can be held morally responsible for his action. But when one omits to do something, one does not have actual causal control of the relevant bodily movement X'. (This follows directly from the definition of omissions.) For example, when an agent fails to raise his arm, he does not cause (in a certain way) the bodily movements involved in raising his arm. So in the case of an omission, if the agent is to have any sort of control of the relevant event X', he must have regulative control over it. But since regulative control over X' includes the power to ensure that X' occur, it follows that if an agent who omits to do X is to have regulative control over X', then he must be able to do X.¹⁵

We have derived the result that moral responsibility for an omission requires the freedom to do the act in question whereas moral responsibility for an action does not require the freedom to fail to do the action. The asymmetry thesis follows from a symmetrical deep principle. This principle connects responsibility with control in a certain way.¹⁶ When considering actions and omissions, the event of which one must have some sort of control is a bodily movement. In the next section, we shall show how the deep principle connecting responsibility with control can be extended very naturally to apply to the consequences of what one does.

14. This principle was originally proposed in Fischer, "Responsibility and Failure."

15. It might be argued that an omission is properly analyzed as a relation between an individual and a set of possible bodily movements rather than one possible body movement. If this is correct, then our basic point still holds: control of any sort would still require regulative control over at least one member of the relevant set and, thus, the ability to do the action in question.

16. In John Martin Fischer, "Responsibility and Control," *Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1982): 24–40, it is argued that moral responsibility should be dissociated from control. The sort of control discussed there is regulative control; however, here we have distinguished two sorts of control, and we have argued that moral responsibility can be associated with the existence of at least one sort of control.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONSEQUENCES

Theory.—As pointed out above, agents can be held morally responsible for consequences of their actions where these consequences can be construed as either particulars or universals. So when Sam shoots the mayor in “Assassin,” he can be held morally responsible for the consequence, the mayor’s death, or, perhaps, that the mayor dies.

Under what conditions is someone morally responsible for a consequence of what he does (or omits)? It is very appealing to extend our deep principle of moral responsibility as follows. An agent is morally responsible for a consequence of what he does insofar as he has some sort of control of it. But now the relevant event of which the agent must have control is not merely a bodily movement. When assessing moral responsibility for consequences, we need to consider whether the agent has control both of his action and of some event in the external world. So, for example, if Sam is morally responsible for the mayor’s death, he must have some sort of control of the mayor’s death—an event in the world external to Sam’s body.

As argued above, there are two sorts of control. And there does not appear to be any reason to deny that these two types of control apply to consequences (as well as acts and omissions). Also, it seems very plausible that, parallel to the situation with actions, actual causal control of a consequence is sufficient for moral responsibility for that consequence. But now we need to extend the account of actual causal control to consequences.

We shall say that an agent has actual causal control of some consequence insofar as it issues from a responsive sequence. But in contrast to actions, the sequence leading to a consequence includes more than the mechanism issuing in a bodily movement; it also includes the causal pathway from the action to the event in the world.

It is helpful, then to distinguish two components of the sequence leading to a consequence. The first component is the mechanism leading to action (bodily movement) and the second component is the process leading from the action to the event in the external world. We shall say that in order for the sequence leading to a consequence to be responsive, both the mechanism leading to the action must be weakly reasons-responsive and the process leading from the action to the consequence must be “sensitive to action.”

Suppose that in the actual world an agent *S* performs some action *A* via a type of mechanism *M*, and *S*’s *A*-ing causes some consequence *C* via a type of process *P*.¹⁷ We shall say that the sequence leading to *C* is responsive if and only if there exists some action *A** (other than *A*)

17. We shall here assume that there is just one causal sequence leading to the consequence. We believe that our theory can be generalized to apply to cases in which more than one causal chain leads to a consequence. We shall not discuss such cases in this paper; thus, in this paper we are concerned with cases of “preemptive overdetermination” rather than “simultaneous overdetermination.” Further, the focus here is on what might be called “action-triggered” consequences. There might also be “omission-triggered” consequences

such that: (i) there exists some possible scenario in which an M-type mechanism operates, the agent has reason to do A*, and the agent does A*; and (ii) if S were to do A*, others' behavior were held fixed, and a P-type process were to occur, then C would not occur.

Before proceeding to show how this principle can be applied to explain our intuitive judgments about the cases discussed above, let us take a moment to discuss a few points which should help both to clarify and to illustrate our principle. First, in formulating the definition of a responsive sequence, we make use of the intuitive notion of a "type of process" leading from the action to the event in the external world. This is parallel to the notion of a kind of mechanism issuing in action. As above, we concede both that process-individuation might be problematic and that we do not have an explicit theory of process-individuation. But, as above, we believe that there is a relatively clear intuitive distinction between different types of processes.

We do not deny that there will be difficult questions about process-individuation. Nevertheless, all that is required for our purposes is that there be agreement about some fairly clear cases. If we are unsure about an agent's moral responsibility for a consequence in precisely those cases in which we are unsure about process-individuation, then at least the vagueness in our theory will match the vagueness of the phenomena it purports to analyze.

Second, in ascertaining the responsiveness of a particular sequence involving a mechanism issuing in action, an action, and a process leading from the action to a consequence, we "hold fixed" the type of mechanism and the type of process. If it is the case that a different mechanism or process would have taken place if things had been different (i.e., if the case is a Frankfurt-type case), this is irrelevant to the responsiveness of the actual sequence. Further, imagine that we are testing the sensitivity of a particular process leading from an action to a consequence. Suppose that the agent actually performs a certain action, thus causing some consequence, and that no one else actually performs that type of action. Under these conditions, we "hold fixed" others' behavior when we test for the sensitivity of the process leading from action to consequence. The point is that, when we are interested in the sensitivity of the process to action, we are interested in whether there would have been a different outcome, if the agent had not performed a certain sort of action and others' behavior is held fixed.¹⁸

for which an agent might be morally responsible. For example, in "Assassin" it seems as if the counterfactual intervener, Jack, might also be (fully) morally responsible for the fact that the mayor is assassinated, insofar as it is assumed that Jack could have prevented this consequence. We believe that omission-triggered consequences can be handled in a way parallel to the way suggested in the text in which action-triggered omissions can be handled.

18. For the sake of completeness it is worth noting that the counterfactual intervener in a Frankfurt-type case need not be another agent (whose action in the alternative sequence would bring about the consequence in question). As Frankfurt points out, the role of counterfactual intervener may be played "by natural forces involving no will or design at

The theory claims that the sequence leading to a consequence includes more than just the mechanism issuing in action. Thus, it is not surprising that both components—that is, the mechanism leading to the action and the process leading from the action to the event—are relevant to actual causal control of a consequence, where only the first component is relevant to actual causal control of an action. Thus, the theory of actual causal control of a consequence involves two stages. It will be seen below that this two-stage approach helps us appropriately to distinguish different cases of responsibility for consequences which are inevitable. Further, it is important to note that when considering responsibility for consequences, the second component should not be considered in isolation from the first. Our definition of the responsiveness of the sequence leading to a consequence requires a certain sort of linkage of the two components of the sequence.

Applications.—With the principle of moral responsibility for consequences in hand, we can explain the intuitive judgments about cases described above. We shall focus on consequence-universals in our discussion below, but a few words about consequence-particulars are in order. We have stipulated that consequence-particulars are individuated in a fine-

all" (see Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," p. 386, n. 4). Thus, in "Missile 2" we could eliminate Carla and suppose instead that had Elizabeth not freely launched the missile, natural forces would have caused the missile's triggering mechanism to malfunction and fire the rocket at Washington, D.C. (Perhaps a stray bird would have flown into the missile's launching apparatus and this would have triggered the firing.) Given these types of examples, it seems that in evaluating the sensitivity of a process, one wants to hold fixed not only the actions of other agents in the actual sequence but also any natural events which play no role in the actual sequence but which would, in the alternative sequence, trigger causal chains leading to the consequence in question. For convenience we can group both other actions that would trigger causal chains leading to the consequence (e.g., Carla's firing the missile in the alternative sequence) and natural events that would do so (e.g., the bird triggering the missile's firing in the alternative sequence) under the heading "triggering events." Using this intuitive notion of a "triggering event," a more precise formulation of the conditions for a responsive sequence may be given; the original formulation remains the same except for condition ii, which should now read, "(ii) if S were to do A*, other 'triggering events' were held fixed, and a P-type process were to occur, then C would not occur." As was the case with the notions of 'mechanism' and 'process', we acknowledge that there will be difficult questions about the individuation of triggering events. However, all that is needed for our purposes here is that there be intuitive agreement about some clear cases. The intuitive idea of a triggering event is further developed and discussed in Fischer and Ravizza, "Responsibility for Consequences." Finally, it should be noted that the analysis of a responsive sequence given above is for cases of individual responsibility; it is not intended to address cases of simultaneous overdetermination in which several agents may be jointly responsible for the consequence produced. We believe that a similar analysis may work in these cases, but in evaluating the responsibility of any one agent it might be necessary to "bracket" the other triggering events that simultaneously produce the consequence in order to ascertain if the agent's action was part of a responsive sequence that was sufficient to produce the consequence. The issues involved in such cases of joint responsibility are complex, and we cannot fully pursue them in the present essay.

grained fashion. It follows from this sort of method of individuation together with our account of sequence-responsiveness for consequences that whenever the mechanism issuing in an action is weakly reasons-responsive, the total sequence issuing in the consequence-particular will be responsive. This is because with particulars, the second component will always be sensitive to action insofar as a different action along the causal pathway would lead to a different consequence-particular. So on our approach, the question of moral responsibility for particulars will reduce to the question of whether the mechanism leading to the relevant action is weakly reasons-responsive.

Let us turn to consequence-universals. In “Assassin” Sam is morally responsible for the consequence-universal that the mayor is killed. In this case, the actual-sequence mechanism (ordinary practical deliberation) is weakly reasons-responsive, and the process leading from action to consequence (ordinary physical laws, no “abnormal circumstances”) is sensitive to action; had Sam not squeezed the trigger (either as a result of his own deliberation or because of Jack’s intervention) and others’ relevant behavior were held fixed, the mayor would not have been killed. Thus, the two components necessary for actual causal control are present, and Sam can be held morally responsible for the fact that the mayor is killed, although he could not have prevented it.

Exactly the same considerations apply to “Missile 1”: Elizabeth is morally responsible for the consequence-universal that Washington, D.C., is bombed, by virtue of having actual causal control of it: both components of the actual sequence issuing in the consequence-universal are suitably responsive and, thus, the total sequence is responsive. And she has such control of the consequence even though she cannot prevent it from occurring.

Note that Elizabeth is also deemed morally responsible for the consequence-universal that Washington, D.C., is bombed in “Missile 2.” Again, the actual sequence issuing in the consequence is responsive. (When ascertaining whether the actual sequence leading to the bomb’s hitting Washington is responsive, we hold fixed the inaction of Carla.)

But in “Missile 3,” Joan is not morally responsible for the consequence-universal that Washington, D.C., is bombed. This is because the sequence including Joan’s action and the process leading from her action to the event of Washington’s being bombed is not responsive. Of course, the first component is weakly reasons-responsive (and thus Joan can be held morally responsible for her action of deflecting the bomb). But the sequence is not responsive because the second component—the process leading from action to event in the world—is not sensitive to action. That is, the world is such that no matter how Joan acts, the bomb will hit Washington, D.C. (Exactly parallel remarks apply to “Train.”)

Our principle of moral responsibility for consequences, then, explains the intuitive judgments about the examples presented above. Further, the theory explains why there is an important difference between such

cases as "Missile 1" and "Missile 2," on the one hand, and "Missile 3" and "Train," on the other. The agent could have prevented the relevant consequence-universal in none of these cases. But, whereas in the first two cases the relevant consequence-universal issues from a responsive sequence, in the last two cases the consequence-universal does not issue from a responsive sequence.

Once it becomes evident that responsiveness of a sequence leading to a consequence requires the second component—sensitivity to action—as well as the first component, it becomes clear that the latter two states of affairs are interestingly different from the first two. In "Missile 1" and "Missile 2" the responsibility-undermining factor occurs in the alternative to the first component of the actual sequence. In "Missile 3" and "Train," the factor that rules out responsibility for the consequence-universal is part of the second component of the actual sequence. If one did not recognize that the actual sequence leading to a consequence contains two components, one could mistakenly think that the only way to explain the agents' lack of responsibility in "Missile 3" and "Train" is to say that the agent could not have prevented the consequence-universal from obtaining. But our theory allows us to avoid using this sort of explanation, which in any case would lead to the wrong result in such cases as "Missile 1" and "Missile 2."

Conclusion.—We have developed, in an admittedly sketchy manner, a theory of moral responsibility. The theory associates responsibility with control in a certain way. Responsibility for actions and omissions is associated with control of a bodily movement. Responsibility for consequences is associated with control of a bodily movement and also an event in the world (external to one's body). It is sufficient for responsibility for actions and for consequences that the agent have actual causal control of the relevant event; whereas the sequences pertinent to actual causal control of actions involve one component, the sequences pertinent to actual causal control of consequences involve two components.¹⁹ There is in general no requirement of alternative possibilities for moral responsibility either for an action or for a consequence, insofar as actual causal control is compatible with the lack of alternative possibilities. But whereas actual causal control is sufficient for responsibility for actions and consequences, regulative control is required in order to be morally responsible for an omission. Thus, there is a requirement of alternative possibilities for moral responsibility for omissions. The theory of moral responsibility

19. Having adopted a Davidsonian theory of act individuation, we draw a contrast here between action and consequence. If, however, we adopted a finer-grained theory of act individuation, the relevant contrast would be between "basic actions" and "nonbasic actions." That is, only the first component would be relevant to moral responsibility for basic actions, whereas the two components might be relevant to moral responsibility for nonbasic actions. For a fine-grained theory of act individuation which incorporates a distinction between basic and nonbasic actions, see Alvin Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

which associates responsibility with control has accomplished the tasks we set for it.

CONCLUSION

Consider the following principles:

- PAP A person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.
- PPA A person is morally responsible for failing to perform a given act only if he could have performed that act.
- PPP1 A person is morally responsible for a certain event-particular (consequence-particular) only if he could have prevented it.
- PPP2 A person is morally responsible for a certain state of affairs (consequence-universal) only if (that state of affairs obtains and) he could have prevented it from obtaining.²⁰

In this article we have argued against PAP and PPP2 and we have defended PPA. Elsewhere, an argument has been made against PPP1.²¹ If PAP, PPP1, and PPP2 are indeed false, then there is good reason to suppose that the true theory of moral responsibility will be an “actual-sequence” theory: it will focus on features of the actual sequence leading to action, and it will not require alternative possibilities. (Of course, as the theory developed above shows, an actual-sequence theory might require that the actual sequence contain certain dispositional features, such as “responsiveness.” Thus, insofar as what happens in other possible worlds is relevant to dispositional features of the actual world, what happens in other worlds can be relevant to moral responsibility, even on an actual-sequence approach. What is crucial is that what happens in other possible worlds is not relevant in virtue of indicating that the agent had genuinely open alternative possibilities.)

Our commonsense framework of moral responsibility ascription involves assigning moral responsibility to agents for omissions. Thus, in order to develop a full theory of moral responsibility which is an actual-sequence approach, it would be necessary to argue that in any case of apparent moral responsibility for an omission, there is some action, consequence-particular, or consequence-universal for which the agent is morally responsible (and to which there need be no alternative possibility). If a full actual-sequence theory of moral responsibility can be developed, then some support will have been provided for “semicompatibilism,” the doctrine that moral responsibility is compatible with causal determinism even if causal determinism is incompatible with the existence of alternative possibilities.

20. For the formulation of such principles, see Van Inwagen.

21. Fischer, “Responsibility and Control,” and John Martin Fischer, “Review of Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*,” *Philosophical Review* 97 (1988): 401–8. The argument implies that, even on the fine-grained criterion of individuation for event-particulars, there is reason to reject PPP1.

Of course, from the claim that moral responsibility does not require alternative possibilities it does not immediately follow that semi-compatibilism is correct. This is because causal determinism might threaten moral responsibility directly (and not via ruling out alternative possibilities). But even if the rejection of such principles as PAP, PPP1, and PPP2 does not entail semicompatibilism, it does constitute an important step toward establishing it. Further, if the particular actual-sequence theory of moral responsibility which we have sketched is at least approximately correct, then there is even more support for semicompatibilism because it is plausible that responsiveness (as defined above) is compatible with causal determinism.²²

22. For this sort of argument, as applied to the responsiveness of the mechanism leading to action, see Fischer, "Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility."