

BOOK REVIEW

John Martin Fischer, *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2006, xiv + 260 pp. (indexed). ISBN: 0-19-517955-2, \$45.00 (Hb).

In *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility*, John Martin Fischer brings together updated versions of some of his earlier papers with some of his recently published essays in which he elaborates on key themes in his work and, in places, breaks fresh ground.

Central to Fischer's view of compatibilism is a distinction between regulative control and guidance control. Regulative control is control over which of two or more possible futures becomes actual. To exercise such control is to make a difference to how events unfold. Fischer joins incompatibilists in holding that causal determinism precludes regulative control, but breaks with them in denying that such control is required for moral responsibility. For this reason, he dubs his position semi-compatibilism. In his view, guidance control, which is compatible with determinism, captures the condition for responsibility that pertains to freedom.

Someone exercises guidance control when she acts from her own, moderately reasons-responsive mechanism or process. A mechanism, such as practical reason or unreflective habit, is reasons-responsive if and only if it is disposed to recognize and react appropriately to some possible reason to do otherwise. Such a mechanism is moderately reasons-responsive only if, further, there is an intelligible pattern among the good reasons it is disposed to recognize. This excludes weakly reasons-responsive mechanisms, such as ones that would recognize only a handful of bizarre countervailing reasons. At the same time, in offering this account, Fischer allows us to hold responsible ordinary agents who fail to respond appropriately to sufficient reasons for action. He eschews strong reasons-responsiveness, the implausibly strong requirement that a mechanism track sufficient reasons.

In addition to moderate reasons-responsiveness, the possession of guidance control requires that a mechanism be the agent's own. Unlike many influential compatibilists, Fischer construes ownership of action

diachronically. Specifically, a mechanism is our own only if our history includes a process of taking responsibility for it, where this means coming to see ourselves, on the basis of good evidence, as a fair target of blame for wrongdoing that issues from that mechanism. This condition is meant to exclude cases of mind control, as when an agent's practical reasoning is subject to the influence of an artificially implanted desire. Since taking responsibility for ordinary instances of practical reasoning does not entail taking responsibility for manipulated instances, in offering this account, Fischer plausibly allows us to let mind-control victims off the hook. Even when such mechanisms are moderately reasons-responsive, they are not an agent's own.

In "Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities," Fischer attacks the link between regulative control and moral responsibility. In doing so, he believes that he has defused the only serious threat facing compatibilism. Less serious, in his estimation, are the challenges posed by two other arguments for incompatibilism, the direct argument and the ultimacy argument. The proponents of both arguments purport to establish that determinism precludes responsibility without recourse to the premise that determinism precludes regulative control.

The direct argument features a transfer of non-responsibility principle, to the effect that if nobody is, or ever has been, even partly morally responsible for some state of affairs; and if nobody is, or ever has been, even partly responsible for the fact that the existence of that state of affairs implies the existence of another state of affairs; then nobody is, or ever has been, even partly morally responsible for the second state of affairs. If determinism is true, the argument runs, every present fact is entailed by other facts for which no one is even partly responsible; a description of the world in the distant past, conjoined with a complete statement of the laws of nature. It seems to follow that nobody is even partly morally responsible for any state of affairs at all. In earlier work, Fischer countered this argument with so-called two-path cases, scenarios in which a consequence is ensured by two sets of causally sufficient conditions, one of which preempts the other. In one of his examples, originally due to Mark Ravizza, an agent's detonating an explosive device at a certain time triggers an avalanche at a later time, leading to the destruction of an enemy camp at a still later time. But if the agent concerned had not detonated the device then, natural processes of erosion would have culminated in an avalanche at the same time at which it actually occurred, leading to the destruction of the camp at the same later time anyway. Since the existence of the preempted pathway does not count against the agent's responsibility, Fischer maintains that the transfer of non-responsibility principle should not be accepted.

An incompatibilist might wish to reply that the direct argument proves the incompatibility of responsibility with determinism in so-called one-path cases, and that the burden of proof falls on Fischer to explain why adding a second, preempted pathway should make any difference. In “The Transfer of Non-Responsibility,” Fischer takes up such responses, arguing that incompatibilists are wrong to think that they can claim success in one-path cases before they have answered the challenge from two-path cases. Since, Fischer concludes, it would be question-begging to insist that the agent is not responsible in two-path cases, just as it would be question-begging for compatibilists to insist that the agent is responsible, the outcome is a stalemate, not the telling blow incompatibilists might have thought they had struck. The argumentation in “The Transfer of Non-Responsibility” is especially resourceful, and Fischer succeeds in raising doubts about how far the direct argument, even when thoughtfully modified, can go in advancing the incompatibilist’s cause.

The alternative to the direct argument is the ultimacy argument, which has risen to prominence in the last decade. The premises of this argument are that responsibility requires that the responsible agent be the ultimate source of what he is responsible for, and that determinism precludes this. Though it was Fischer who first adumbrated this argument, the recent essays in *My Way* contain his first explicit discussions of it. In his view, the first premise of the ultimacy argument rests solely on the intuition that we cannot be morally responsible when our deliberations are intermediate links in causally deterministic chains. The force of this concern, Fischer believes, derives from the thought that such intermediacy would preclude regulative control, as indeed it would. But having argued that regulative control is not required for responsibility, he sees no cause for concern here. The claim that such intermediacy precludes responsibility seems to be a mere restatement of an incompatibilist position, not a new reason to take that position seriously.

Source incompatibilists may say that Fischer has underestimated the ultimacy argument. After all, he accepts that being an intermediate link in some deterministic chains, such as chains involving mind control, subverts responsibility. In such cases, Fischer maintains, the manipulated mechanism is not the agent’s own because she has not taken responsibility for it. To use one of Fischer and Ravizza’s examples, let us consider an agent whose urge to punch her friend in the nose is artificially implanted by direct neural stimulation, and whose operative mechanism, a moderately reasons-responsive instance of practical reason, issues in an unprovoked punch. On Fischer’s view, the exculpating factor is not the manipulation *per se*, but the agent’s attitude toward it, the fact that she presumably would not see manipulated practical reason as part of what

she has taken responsibility for in taking responsibility for ordinary practical reason. Source incompatibilists can plausibly maintain that the manipulation, and not just the agent's attitude toward it, figures more directly in the exculpating story. In their view, manipulation threatens responsibility by virtue of something it shares with ordinary deterministic agency, the fact that the agent is not the ultimate source of her action. In so supporting the link between responsibility and ultimacy, incompatibilists cannot be accused of simply restating their position or expressing their incompatibilist leanings. Instead, they are offering an alternative explanation of an intuition that Fischer shares, the intuition that manipulation precludes responsibility-relevant ownership of action.

In "Responsibility and Manipulation," Fischer responds to Derk Pereboom's influential four-case argument, which features a principle similar to the first premise of the ultimacy argument, as well as a scenario in which someone is caused by neuroscientists to reason in a rationally egoistic manner. Fischer's verdict is that an agent then is responsible but not blameworthy. But Fischer's verdict is problematic for at least three reasons. The judgment that such an agent is responsible is a counterintuitive consequence of synchronic accounts of ownership. If Fischer fails to avoid such consequences with his diachronic account, its advantage over the simpler accounts is questionable. Furthermore, Fischer's explanation of the distinction between responsibility and blameworthiness is puzzling. To maintain that an agent is responsible, Fischer must suppose that the agent has taken responsibility for his manipulated practical reason, and this in turn implies that the agent is responsible for the particular action that issues from the mechanism. What needs to be explained, then, is how someone can be responsible for knowingly doing what is morally wrong without being blameworthy for doing it. What Fischer ends up claiming, however, is that someone can be responsible in the general sense that she is an apt candidate for blame when she acts, but without being blameworthy for her particular action. He ends up distinguishing being a responsible agent in general from being responsible for a particular action, when he needs to distinguish responsibility for a particular wrong action from blameworthiness for that action. It is not obvious how the latter distinction might be drawn. Finally, Fischer's basis for supposing that the agent in question has taken responsibility for the manipulated mechanism is that he has presumably taken responsibility for his ordinary practical reason, and Pereboom has stipulated that the agent is routinely subject to manipulation. However, we can alter the scenario so that the manipulation is an isolated occurrence. In that case, Fischer would presumably deny that the agent is responsible or blameworthy, since the operative mechanism would not be the mechanism for

which responsibility has been taken. But then the account would face criticism from source incompatibilists, who can plausibly maintain that the agent is not responsible or blameworthy whether or not his operative mechanism counts as ordinary. Source incompatibilists avoid thorny questions about mechanism-individuation. The agent is not responsible for her action, a source incompatibilist may claim, simply because she is not its ultimate source.

The essays in *My Way* cover much ground, yet there is considerable thematic unity. While *My Way* should be closely read by specialists interested in Fischer's semi-compatibilist program, Fischer's lucid approach to some of the debate's main intricacies give *My Way* broad appeal.

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