Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 25 | Issue 2 Article 11

4-1-2008

John Martin Fischer, MY WAY: ESSAYS ON MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Stewart Goetz

are a strong indication that John Searle is wrong to have recently implied that no cultivated and interesting philosophers are currently discussing religious issues. Taliaferro's survey of the current vibrant philosophy of religion scene in the academy begins with the topic of science and religion. He then observes that contemporary philosophy of religion involves a revival of the general approach to philosophy of religion taken by the Cambridge Platonists (with discussions of the divine attributes and the theistic arguments). Taliaferro highlights the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion as a special case study. He then identifies recent instances of cordiality and friendship in some relationships between defenders and critics of religious belief. He closes the chapter with a look at the role of philosophy of religion outside the academy, especially in current debates about the place of religion in the public square.

The book has two appendices. One of them, "A Guide to Further Study," lists centers and societies, journals, and books dedicated to the practice of the philosophy of religion. The other, "Select Contemporary Philosophers," contains four tables listing philosophers (by specific topics) who have done philosophical work in the general areas of (1) non-western and non-traditional religions and movements, (2) divine attributes, (3) theistic arguments, and (4) the problem of evil. Taliaferro also includes a select bibliography. Only a person with a thorough mastery of the field could have provided such complete and helpful lists – indeed, could have written such a valuable and useful book. Philosophers who practice or are merely interested in the philosophy of religion will find this book to be a rich and indispensable resource.

My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility, by John Martin Fischer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 250 plus Index. $45.00 (hardcover)

STEWART GOETZ, Ursinus College

John Martin Fischer is without question one of the leading spokespersons in contemporary philosophy of action for compatiblist views about free will, determinism, and moral responsibility. *My Way* is a collection of first-rate essays by Fischer that have all, except for one (the Introduction), been previously published in other places. The fourth essay in the collection was co-written with Mark Ravizza, while the ninth was co-authored by Eleonore Stump. In this review, I summarize some of the major ideas of *My Way* and then critically interact with a few of them.

Fischer offers us the philosophical view he terms 'semicompatibilism': determinism is incompatible with genuine metaphysical access to alternative possibilities, while being compatible with moral responsibility (p. 133). His primary motivation for defending semicompatilism is the belief that our fundamental standing as free and morally responsible agents should not depend upon what science might or might not ultimately conclude about the truth of causal determinism (p. 138). (Fischer also is concerned about problems for our basic status as free and morally responsible agents that arise

from theological considerations, but I ignore these problems in this review.) While Fischer acknowledges that someone might respond by saying that if science concludes causal determinism is true then so much the worse for our fundamental standing as free and morally responsible agents, he thinks such a response just has to be wrong: "How can something so basic, so important [as our basic freedom and moral responsibility], depend on something so fine and so abstruse [as theoretical physics and cosmology]" (p. 6).

Fischer acknowledges that we normally think of ourselves as having the kind of freedom (libertarian) that "involves genuine metaphysical access to alternative possibilities" from which we choose (p. 6). Why think that determinism is incompatible with this kind of freedom? Fischer says that he is inclined to accept the Consequence Argument, which in philosophical circles is associated with the work of Peter van Inwagen and effectively shows that determinism excludes alternative possibilities necessary for libertarian freedom. The argument's power to convince is so strong because it is "so firmly rooted in common sense" (p. 7). So if we are determined, then there are no metaphysically accessible alternatives and no libertarian freedom of the will.

What about moral responsibility? Do we ordinarily think that it requires metaphysically accessible alternative possibilities? Fischer thinks the answer to this question is 'Yes,' but what we ordinarily think about this issue is mistaken. Our mistake can be explained by distinguishing two kinds of control: regulative and guidance. Regulative control is just libertarian freedom with metaphysical access to alternative possibilities. Guidance control is compatibilist in nature and requires no such access to alternative possibilities. Fischer illustrates guidance control with an example (p. 39). Assume that you are driving your car and use the steering wheel to guide it to the right. Unknown to you, the steering apparatus is broken is such a way that were you to try to turn the steering wheel to take the car in some other direction, the wheel would not turn and the car would continue to go to the right as it now does. Because you do not actually try to do anything other than turn the steering wheel to the right, the apparatus functions normally, and your guidance of the car is exactly as it would have been if the steering apparatus had functioned normally. While moral responsibility requires control of some kind and we ordinarily think this kind is regulative in nature, all that is needed is guidance control: "Whereas we may intuitively suppose that regulative control comes with guidance control, it is not, at a deep level, regulative control that grounds moral responsibility" (p. 40). Hence, while only guidance control is necessary for moral responsibility, their close linkage in our thought leads to the mistaken belief that moral responsibility requires regulative control.

Those familiar with the literature on moral responsibility will quickly realize that the notion of guidance control is closely tied to Frankfurt-style counterexamples (FSCs) to the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP), where (one version of) PAP states that one is morally responsible for a choice at a time t only if one had metaphysically accessible alternative choices at t. A typical FSC is as follows: Black is a neurosurgeon who, when he operates on Jones's brain, inserts a mechanism that enables him (Black) to control what Jones chooses by means of a sophisticated computer. Black wants Jones to vote for Bush and not to vote for Gore. If Jones

were to show any inclination to choose to vote for Gore, then the mechanism would be activated by the computer to cause Jones to choose to vote for Bush. As things turn out, Jones chooses to vote for Bush on his own (with guidance control over his choice and without the intervention of the mechanism). Moreover, it seems that Jones is morally responsible for his choice, even though he was not free to choose otherwise. "So the traditional assumption of the association of moral responsibility . . . with control is quite correct. But it need not be the sort of control that involves alternative possibilities. The point that is supported by the Frankfurt-type cases is that the sort of control necessarily associated with moral responsibility for action is *guidance control*" (p. 40; Fischer's emphasis). Thus, while intuitively we might think that regulative control always accompanies guidance control and is required for moral responsibility for a choice, FSCs help to make clear that it is guidance control alone (without regulative control) that is required for moral responsibility for a choice.

Some might remain unconvinced by FSCs and insist that they do not exclude all alternative possibilities. For example, it is open to Jones to show an inclination to choose to vote for Gore. Fischer believes, however, that showing an inclination is not *robust* enough to ground (ascriptions of) moral responsibility (p. 48). If an alternative possibility is relevant to moral responsibility for an actual choice this must be because that alternative is an action that an agent might have performed instead of the action which he did perform. Showing an inclination does not fit the bill. "On the traditional alternative possibilities picture, it is envisaged that an agent has a choice between two (or more) scenarios *of a certain sort*. . . . This is what is involved in having robust alternative possibilities, and certainly this is the natural way to think about the sort of alternative possibilities that allegedly ground moral responsibility" (pp. 46–47; Fischer's emphasis). And it is thoroughly implausible to think that an agent is morally responsible for an actual choice because it was possible that he show an inclination to choose otherwise. Such an alternative is no more than a flicker of freedom (pp. 40–50).

Fischer concludes that what he calls the 'indirect argument' for the view that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility is unsound. The indirect argument makes use of the premises that causal determinism excludes metaphysically accessible alternatives (regulative control) and that metaphysically accessible alternatives are required for moral responsibility (PAP). Because FSCs undermine PAP, they undermine the argument that determinism excludes moral responsibility. There are, however, what Fischer terms 'direct arguments' for this incompatibility of determinism and moral responsibility, where a direct argument is one that does not make use of PAP (p. 6). One kind of direct argument employs the Principle of Transfer of Nonresponsibility, which is roughly the idea that if one is not morally responsible for p, and one is not morally responsible for 'if p, then q,' then one is not morally responsible for q. Fischer believes this type of direct argument is subject to counterexamples and is, therefore, no more successful than the indirect argument.

Some incompatibilists have opted for a different kind of direct argument against the compatibility of causal determinism and moral responsibility. This argument makes use of the idea of sourcehood. Its proponents point out that while non-robust alternatives are not adequate to ground moral

responsibility for an actual choice, they do serve as signs that causal determinism is false. If there were no flickers of freedom, then causal determinism would obtain and the agent would not originate, initiate, or be the robust source of his actual choice. While Fischer concedes that there is a strict sense of the idea of origination which entails the falsity of causal determinism, there is no good reason to think that this strict sense of origination is required for moral responsibility. A less strict, compatibilist notion of origination will suffice for moral responsibility. Thus, "apart from a reliance on the requirement of regulative control, how could it be argued that the relevant notion of origination must be indeterministic?" (p. 16)

As Fischer states, "[a] lot, then, is at stake in evaluating the Frankfurt-type examples" (p. 40). If FSCs are successful, then "[t]he dialectical terrain has shifted in a way that is felicitous for compatibilism" (p. 17). This terrain is supposedly more felicitous for compatibilism because the debate about the compatibility or incompatibility of moral responsibility with determinism has shifted from a context in which metaphysically accessible alternative possibilities are the focus to one where the actual sequence of events is front and center (p. 138). One might be tempted to think that this advantageous movement has occurred because FSCs make clear in one fell swoop that an agent like Jones is morally responsible for his choice even though he is determined to choose as he does. Fischer thinks that Frankfurt-style compatibilists (compatibilists who make argumentative use of FSCs) should not, and need not, think this way. Rather, they should use FSCs in a two-step argument in support of the view that Jones is morally responsible. The first step is to argue from FSCs that metaphysically accessible alternative possibilities (alternative choices) are irrelevant for moral responsibility. Thus, if Jones is not morally responsible for choosing to vote for Bush, this is not because he was not free to choose to vote for Gore. After the first step, the Frankfurt-style compatibilist should and need only say that "I don't know at this point whether [Jones] is morally responsible for his [choice], but *if* he is not, it is *not* because he lacks alternative possibilities" (p. 128; Fischer's emphases).

The second step is to consider whether it is plausible to think that causal determinism in the actual sequence of events directly or in and of itself (without reference to metaphysically accessible alternative possibilities) excludes moral responsibility. Not surprisingly, Fischer concludes that it does not. While certain kinds of causal determinism rule out moral responsibility (e.g., those kinds that involve unconsented-to covert manipulation by other agents), others do not. There are "plausible ways of distinguishing between objectionable sorts of manipulation and mere causal determination" (p. 132). On Fischer's view, causal determinism of an agent's action that issues from a reasons-sensitive mechanism which is owned by the agent is compatible with moral responsibility for that action.

There are many more important issues in this important and challenging book, but a reviewer must draw the line somewhere, if he is to leave any space to engage the author's ideas. Therefore, I turn to a critical examination of some of the ideas I have summarized. I begin with Fischer's claim that "[t]he dialectical terrain has shifted in a way that is felicitous for compatibilism" (p. 17). As I have pointed out elsewhere ("Frankfurt-Style Counterexample and Begging the Question": henceforth, FSCBQ),"[1]

it is difficult to see how the dialectical terrain has shifted at all. This is because (again, see FSCBQ) Fischer's two-step argument begs the question against the incompatibilist about determinism and moral responsibility. It does so because the FSC on which it depends assumes the truth of causal determinism in the actual sequence of events. Hence, the two-step argument shows the alleged irrelevance of alternative possibilities for moral responsibility only by assuming the truth of determinism.

Since the publication of *My Way*, which includes Fischer's response to my argument in FSCBQ (pp. 198–201), Fischer has come to agree that the argument in FSCBQ about begging the question is correct. Can the compatibilist put together any non-question-begging argument against the libertarian that will shift the terrain in favor of the former? A compatibilist like Fischer who believes that so much hinges on FSCs might try to construct one that does not beg the question against the libertarian. The literature is filled with such attempts and libertarian responses to them. If it should (continue to) turn out that all such attempts either clearly beg the question or are so controversial that the charge that they beg the question is at least as plausible as the attempts themselves, then perhaps it would be wise to reconsider the relationship between determinism and alternative possibilities. As I suggested in FSCBQ, perhaps we should not be surprised that an FSC begs the question against the libertarian because as a matter of fact determinism and the lack of alternative possibilities are really just the same thing. In FSCBQ, I tried to muster some support for their identity by citing van Inwagen's concept of determinism. Van Inwagen defines 'determinism' as "the thesis that there is at any instant exactly one physically possible future."[2] If one is a little more permissive than van Inwagen and allows for the possibility of a nonphysical as well as a physical future, to say that at any instant there is one and only one possible future is to say that at any instant there are no alternative possible futures. Thus, if we let 'D' represent determinism and '~AP' represent 'no alternative possible futures,' D just is ~AP. One possibility this identity of D and ~AP raises is that PAP is identical with what we can call 'the principle of determinism' or 'PD,' which is that determinism directly (i.e., without going through PAP, where PAP is distinct from PD) entails the lack of moral responsibility (a person is morally responsible for his choice at a time *t* only if he was not determined at *t* to choose as he did). Given this identity between PAP and PD, it seems wrong to assume that libertarians must arrive at PD indirectly by means of PAP. They need not but can directly assent to both PAP and PD because they are the same principle.

Is there any reason to think that PAP and PD are identical, where this reason is something other than the intuition that they are the same thing? Harry Frankfurt briefly mentions the possibility that D and ~AP are identical, and thus that a person is not morally responsible for his choice simply because it was causally determined.[3] He also adds that he does not find the suggestions that D is identical with ~AP acceptable. He asks us to consider a person who tells us that he did what he did because he was unable to do otherwise or because he had (was determined) to do it. Frankfurt notes that we often accept these statements as valid excuses, and such statements may at first glance seem to support the identity of D and ~AP. But he believes that our acceptance of them presupposes a belief in more than

what is said literally. "We understand the person who offers the excuse to mean that he did what he did *only because* he was unable to do otherwise, or *only because* he had to do it. And we understand him to mean . . . that when he did what he did it was not because that was what he really wanted to do."[4] Frankfurt's attempt to explain away what is literally said is suspect for at least two reasons. First, a person who tells us he did what he did because he was unable to do otherwise or because he had to do it might very well have wanted to do what he did, believed that he ought not do what he wanted to do, and not have done what he did except for the fact that he was unable not to do it because he was determined to do it. Second, a person might very well utter these words in a context where his wanting to do something that is good deterministically led to his doing it. Because he knows this was the case, he is insisting that he does not deserve any praise or reward for doing what he did.

As I stated in FSCBQ, I do not know how to resolve the question about the identity of D and ~AP in any non-question-begging way. But I also do not think that there is a non-question-begging argument against a compatibilist view of determinism, alternative possibilities, and moral responsibility and in support of a libertarian view of these matters. Borrowing some terminology from Fischer, I believe that when we come to the issues of freedom, moral responsibility, determinism, and alternative possibilities we ultimately reach a "dialectical stalemate" (pp. 166–67). But even though Fischer's way with regard to these issues is not my way, I am happy to say that *My Way* is a wonderful collection of essays by a superb philosopher. It is a book well worth reading.

NOTES

1. Stewart Goetz, "Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples and Begging the Question," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. XXIX, ed. Peter A. French, Howard Wettstein and John Martin Fischer (Oxford: Blackwell), 2005, pp. 83-105.
2. Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 3. Richard Taylor (*Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1983], p. 34) defines 'determinism' as the principle that "there are antecedent conditions . . . given which [something] could not be other than it is."
3. Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): p. 838.
4. Ibid.2

Personal Identity in Theological Perspective, ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton and Mark R. Talbot. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2006. vi + 226 pages. $20 (paper).

FRANK B. DILLEY, University of Delaware (Emeritus)

The title of this volume misled this reviewer who was expecting a collection of papers on "Personal Identity in Theological Perspective" to have at its theme "personal identity" issues—bodily continuity, continuity of