Free Will and Moral Responsibility – Thinking Through the Questionnaire

This discussion of the questionnaire on free will and moral responsibility is *not* intended to give definitive "answers" to the problems raised, but rather to give an indication of some considerations that are relevant. Nor is it written from an impartial point of view: other philosophers would have different opinions, and put different weight on the various considerations. You might react strongly against some of what I say, thinking: "That doesn't sound right to me at all!" If so, that's fine: try to use this as a stimulus to think through your own position, and to try to work out a consistent view that deals sensibly and coherently with the various problems. It's not easy, and you probably won't entirely succeed (after all, people have been trying to do this for centuries), but you'll develop your thinking skills in the process, and learn a lot about the issues. In Philosophy, you often learn more from the attempt to reach answers than you do from the answers themselves, and you shouldn't be too disappointed if you can't reach a settled view – the curiosity and puzzlement that comes from appreciating these difficult problems can itself be a positive experience. You might also find that you fundamentally change your mind when you try to wrestle with the issues – if so, this is probably a good thing rather than regrettable: the world would be a far better place if people in general were more open to reflecting critically on their own assumptions and changing their mind accordingly! Practising these skills of reflection and flexible thinking will be useful in many other contexts, both as applied to other philosophical problems and to problems in everyday life.

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After reading these comments on the individual questions, try watching the *General Philosophy* lectures!

(A) Free Will and Moral Responsibility

1. *It is (generally) appropriate to hold people morally responsible for actions that they do freely.*

   Unless you are a complete moral sceptic, you are likely to say "yes" to this. And you're very unlikely to be a complete moral sceptic: can you really refrain from judging – and accordingly treating as morally responsible – someone who, for example, tortures an infant? It may be easy to be cynical about morality in the abstract, but when confronted by real moral horrors, most of us will make such judgements.

2. *It is (generally) inappropriate to hold people morally responsible for actions that they do not do freely.*

   This is more tricky, because it depends how lack of freedom is to be understood. On some conceptions of free will, indeed, *any genuine action* is free, so that an "unfree" action is a contradiction in terms. (As an extreme example, if somebody pushes me hard into a door, then my opening of the door isn't really an action *of mine*.)

3. *Acting under threat reduces freedom, and hence reduces moral responsibility.*

   The two issues involved here might come apart: perhaps acting under threat reduces *moral responsibility*, but not necessarily because it reduces *freedom*. Perhaps my responsibility for, say, opening the safe in response to a threat of having myself and my family shot is reduced, but not because I'm less free: rather, I'm put in a situation in which opening the safe is less *culpable* – less *blameworthy* – that it would be without the threat. When I open the safe, I am doing so (let's assume) reflectively and deliberately, because I judge it better that the robbers should get the money than that my family should be killed: this is therefore a free choice, and indeed it is (plausibly) the *right* choice to make – at least assuming that the safe contains only money, not a nuclear bomb. So I am not *culpable*, because I didn't do anything wrong. But note that this is entirely consistent with saying that *I am morally responsible for what I do*. Thus there is a strong argument for saying that acting under threat does not in general reduce *freedom*, and does not reduce *moral responsibility*, but can reduce *culpability* or *blameworthiness*.

4. *The bigger the threat under which I act, the more my freedom (and hence responsibility) is reduced.*

   See the answer to 3 above. Even if we go that way, though, note that if a threat is such as to disturb my ability to think rationally about my options, *that* might be a reason for saying that my freedom is reduced.

5. *The more my actions are under my conscious control, the more free they are.*

   The line of thought outlined in 3 suggests the answer "yes" here: the paradigm (i.e. standard case) of free action, on this conception, is precisely an action that's done reflectively and deliberately, with awareness of the various possible outcomes and relevant considerations for and against.

6. *If everything that I do is causally determined, then my actions are not free.*

   This is the ancient question of free will and determinism. As a *compatibilist* – someone who believes that determinism and free will are compatible – I would firmly disagree. If the paradigm of a free action is one that's done reflectively and deliberately, then assuming that reflection and deliberation are causally determined – by rational thinking implemented in brain processes – such a free action will indeed be causally determined.

7. *If my actions are to some extent random, then (at least to that extent) they are not free.*

   This is plausible on almost any notion of freedom, since even *incompatibilists* will not usually want to say that free actions are *random*. This indeed is a major problem for incompatibilists – and often posed as a fundamental challenge to them – because it requires the *libertarian* (i.e. the incompatibilist believer in free will) to spell out how an action can be *neither* causally determined *nor* random, and that's proved not to be easy.

   (On a completely separate point, suppose that I deliberately and freely do an action – e.g. throwing a stone into a crowd with the idea of causing injury – which has a random *outcome* – e.g. injuring one person rather than another. In *that* situation, an action which came about randomly – e.g. my action of injuring specific person *N* – might be described as *free* under the description "Peter injured someone in the crowd" but *unfree* under a different description: "Peter injured *N*". But either way, it is very likely to be considered as carrying moral responsibility.)

(B) Moral Responsibility

8. *It is (often or always) appropriate to hold adults morally responsible for what they do.*

   Unless you are a complete moral sceptic (see 1 above), you are likely to say "yes" to this. If adults are not typically morally responsible for what they do, who is?

9. *It is appropriate to hold drug addicts responsible for continuing to take drugs.*

   This might depend on the extent of their addiction, but if their compulsion to take drugs is so great that they have effectively lost all rational control over their behaviour in these circumstances, you might well answer "no".

10. *If a person does something wrong when drunk, he is less culpable than if he had been sober.*

    An important distinction here is that you might judge someone less culpable *for the ultimate wrong action* (e.g. driving into a pedestrian), but just as culpable overall because they are *responsible for getting themselves drunk in the first place*. If you take this view, then you would probably consider a drunk driver less culpable if they were not responsible for their drunkenness (e.g. if their drink had been spiked, and they were unaware of it).

    Another important point to note: you might consider that someone should be punished for causing an accident by drink-driving just as harshly as if they had done it deliberately, *not* because they are actually just as culpable, but rather, because you think there are practical benefits in having a law that's equally harsh regardless (e.g. as a deterrent to those who would otherwise be tempted to drink and drive, or to prevent people from taking advantage of lax punishment for drink-driving to "accidentally on purpose" run over their enemies while drunk). It should not be assumed, therefore, that legal penalties always have to reflect moral culpability.

11. *It is appropriate to hold young children morally responsible for what they do.*

    Most would say "no", as least if the children are very young, because they lack the necessary capacity for rational reflection and assessment of outcomes, and also lack the necessary moral concepts. Again, however, notice that the theoretical and practical can come apart. Parents may well apply terms like "right" and "wrong", and reward or punish young children accordingly, even if they actually believe the children lack moral responsibility, precisely because they want the children to *learn* the appropriate concepts and behaviour by this means.

12. *It is appropriate to hold dogs morally responsible for what they do*

    Similar comments might apply to dogs, whose understanding of actions and consequences – and arguably perhaps moral concepts – is intermediate between that of a very young infant and that of an older child. Whether dogs can feel genuine guilt is unclear, but they can certainly learn about "good" and "bad" behaviour.

13. *It could be appropriate to hold a robot responsible for what it does.*

    There is an obvious sense in which a robot – or indeed any machine – can be held as *causally* responsible for some outcome (e.g. "That mess came about owing to the action/malfunction of the automated digger"). Whether *moral* responsibility can properly be ascribed to an AI is a different matter, and your answer might depend on whether you take moral concepts to involve *feeling* and *consciousness*. But these issues are too big to discuss further here.

14. *A premeditated murder is more culpable than a spur-of-the-moment "crime of passion".*

    Most people would say "yes", which makes sense if the paradigm of morally responsible action is thoughtful, deliberate action, which accordingly reflects the agent's settled intentions. A crime of passion might reflect instead only the individual's immediate reaction (e.g. of intense jealously on discovering that a lover is unfaithful), and thus be far less under rational control.

15. *A planned theft or fraud is more culpable than one done opportunistically.*

    Likewise, most people would say "yes", and for the same reason. An opportunistic theft might reflect a moment of weakness, whereas a deliberately planned crime suggests more settled criminal intent.

16. *A crime is more culpable if done by an habitual criminal than by someone of generally "good character".*

    More tricky. You might say "yes" on a similar basis to 14 and 15 above, or you might think that the crime is all the worse when it stains an otherwise blameless record. This might depend on the specific details of the case.

17. *A crime is less culpable if done under threat, e.g. "I'll kill you if you don't open the safe".*

    Most would definitely say "yes" – see 3 above for a similar case.

(C) Free Choice

18. *Ice cream is my absolutely favourite dessert, so I choose ice cream.*

    Free, and arguably a paradigm of free choice (as long as my desire for ice cream isn't compulsive – see 9 above). I select one thing in preference to others, fully aware of what choices are available and of the relevant benefits and harms. If choosing ice cream in these circumstances isn't a free choice, then what is? (Of course an incompatibilist will disagree, saying that because my choice is determined by my longstanding and utterly predictable preference for ice cream, it is therefore unfree. But this is arguably a strong objection to incompatibilism!)

19. *I've been given strict medical advice to avoid sugar, so I choose fruit.*

    Again free, for the same reason – I'm aware of the options and their consequences, and rationally selecting according to my preferences. Obviously the fact that my favourite choice has medical drawbacks is disappointing, but if I choose fruit rationally and deliberately in the light of this awareness, that seems to be a free choice.

20. *There's only one portion of ice cream left, and my friend loves it, so I choose fruit to allow her to have it.*

    Yet again, free – I'm making a reasoned judgement on the basis of the facts that I'm aware of.

21. *My boss whispers, with a serious look, "if you take the ice cream, you're fired!", so I choose fruit.*

    Yet again, free *in the sense relevant to moral responsibility* – I'm making a reasoned judgement on the basis of the facts that I'm aware of. But note that there is more than one notion of "freedom", and in case like this, where I am being inappropriately threatened in such a way as to distort my choice of action, we might want to say that my freedom is being impinged on in much the same way as it is in a repressive state, for example one that threatens me with prison if I say anything against the government. In such a state, I am free in the *philosophical* sense to shout, for example, "The President is a crook – down with the government!" in the sense that it is a choice of action subject to my deliberate control, with awareness of the various potential consequences etc. But I am not free in the *political* sense, because doing such an action will be seriously – and unfairly – detrimental to me.

    It is important to recognise that philosophical and political freedom might well turn out to be quite different concepts (though no doubt related).

(D) Free Bargaining

22. *They offer me £150, and I reckon it's a good bargain, so I accept the money and give them the phone.*

    Seems entirely free.

23. *They offer me £50, persuading me that it's a good bargain by showing me an advertisement that later turns out to be fraudulent (it was offering £130 for such phones, but had been amended to say £30).*

    Seems free in a sense, but in cases where I am being misled by false information, there is a sense in which I am not in such complete control over the action that I am taking. Much more could be said here (including links to the point that an action can be described in multiple ways, as mentioned briefly under 7 above), but space is limited!

24. *They pull out a gun and threaten to shoot me if I don't give them the phone.*

    See 3 and 4 above.

25. *They threaten to punch me if I don't give them the phone.*

    Again, see 3 and 4 above. Assuming that my rational capacities aren't affected by the threat, and I am able to weigh up reflectively what I want to do in the light of the relevant consequences, then the magnitude of the threat has no impact on whether my action is free or not. Notice that these questions would be trickier if you were inclined to take the view that a threat undermines free will, because then there would be a serious question over how big the threat has to be to have that undermining impact. (Maybe the threat of being shot undermines free will – but the threat of a mere punch, or just being embarrassed? Where do you draw the line?)

26. *They threaten to abuse and embarrass me if I don't give them the phone.*

    Same again.

27. *They hypnotise me and then tell me to give them the phone.*

    Assuming that hypnotism genuinely gives them control over what I do (which may be debatable), this would seem to remove my freedom, because the action is no longer subject to my own rational control.

28. *I'm a drug addict, desperate for money to buy a fix quickly, so I accept £50 for the phone.*

    See 9 above. Perhaps my addiction to drugs is beyond my own control – I fervently wish to be rid of the desire for them, but find that it keeps coming back, compulsively. In that case, denying free will here seems plausible.

(E) Free Bargaining and Responsibility

29. *They offer me £150, and I reckon it's a good bargain, so I accept the money and give them the phone.*

    Morally responsible, and culpable – it's not up to me to be selling your phone (unless I happen to know that you're thinking of parting with it and would be happy for me to do this on your behalf).

30. *They pull out a gun and threaten to shoot me if I don't give them the phone.*

    Morally responsible, but not culpable – I did the right thing giving them the phone.

31. *They threaten to punch me if I don't give them the phone.*

    Morally responsible, but perhaps not culpable (or at least significantly reduced culpability compared to 32 below). Being punched is a significant harm, but probably I should be brave enough to protect your phone and take the risk.

32. *They threaten to abuse and embarrass me if I don't give them the phone.*

    Morally responsible and culpable: I shouldn't be giving away your phone to avoid such a trivial harm to myself.

33. *They hypnotise me and then tell me to give them the phone.*

    As in 27 above, not morally responsible, and therefore not culpable.

34. *I'm a drug addict, desperate for money to buy a fix quickly, so I accept £50 for the phone.*

    See 28 above. If I'm not free here, then I plausibly lack moral responsibility, and hence culpability.

(F) Free Actions

35. *I want a glass of water, so I take a glass from my cupboard, go to the tap and fill the glass etc.*

    Totally free – if this isn't, what is?

36. *Driving along the road to work, I slow down to avoid going through a red light ahead.*

    Totally free in the *philosophical* sense. But note from 21 above that if the constraints on what I'm allowed to do within the law are *excessively* onerous or unjust, then you might want to say that I lack *political* freedom. This is completely implausible in the current case, because traffic lights are an instrument to enhance mutual coordination for our safety, not instruments of repression.

37. *I want a hot drink, with both tea and coffee available in my kitchen – after some thinking, I make tea.*
38. *I want a hot drink, and toss a coin to decide which kind – "tails" comes up, so I make tea.*
39. *I want a hot drink, and always prefer tea to coffee when both are available. So I make tea.*
40. *I want a hot drink, and always prefer tea, but in any case there's no coffee. So I make tea.*

    All free, though in the case of 38, my primary action seems to be that of choosing to follow the decision of the coin, rather than choosing to have tea. In the case of 40, my choice is made within slightly narrower constraints than 39, but *every choice we make* is made within some constraints or other, so it's implausible to deny freedom here.

41. *Playing chess, I see immediately that taking the knight wins. So I take the knight.*
42. *After a long calculation, I work out that taking the knight definitely wins. So I take the knight.*
43. *After a long attempt at calculation, I reckon that taking the knight probably wins. So I take it.*
44. *Without thinking it through, I like the look of the position after taking the knight, so I take it.*
45. *I've no idea about the position, but I have to move quickly. So I take the knight.*

    All free, but arguably more free when more under rational control (e.g. 41 or 42, rather than 44 or 45). It's worth noting that this also goes with *more* predictability rather than *less* – which is against the spirit of incompatibilism.