

Free Will and Responsibility

— You start out your book *Freedom and Belief* by saying that there is no such thing as free will. What exactly do you mean by free will?

— I mean what nearly everyone means. Almost all human beings believe that they are free to choose what to do in such a way that they can be truly, genuinely responsible for their actions in the strongest possible sense—responsible *period*, responsible without any qualification, responsible *sans phrase*, responsible *tout court*, absolutely, radically, buck-stoppingly responsible; ultimately responsible, in a word—and so ultimately *morally* responsible when moral matters are at issue. Free will is the thing you have to have if you're going to be responsible in this all-or-nothing way. That's what I mean by free will. That's what I think we haven't got and can't have.

I like philosophers—I love what they do; I love what I do—but they have made a truly unbelievable hash of all this. They've tried to make the phrase “free will” mean all sorts of different things, and each of them has told us that what it *really* means is what he or she has decided it *should* mean. But they haven't made the slightest impact on what it really means, or on our old, deep conviction that free will is something we have.

...

In other words, there's a fundamental sense in which you did not and cannot make yourself the way you are. And this, as you say, is the key step in the basic argument against ultimate moral responsibility, which goes like this:

(1) You do what you do—in the circumstances in which you find yourself—because of the way you are. (2) So if you're going to be ultimately responsible for what you do, you're going to have to be ultimately responsible for the way you are—at least in certain mental respects. (3) But you can't be ultimately responsible for the way you are (for the reasons just given). (4) So you can't be ultimately responsible for what you do.

— I suppose it's the third step that people have the most trouble accepting.

— Yes, although the step seems fairly clear when you look at it the right way. Sometimes people explain why No. 3 is true by saying that you can't be *causa sui*—you can't be the cause of yourself, you can't be truly or ultimately self-made in any way. [...] There's lots more to say about this basic argument, and there are lots of ways in which people have tried to get around the conclusion. But none of them work.

— I notice that the argument makes no mention of the theory of determinism. But historically the debate over freedom and responsibility has revolved around the truth of determinism, and the question of whether free will and moral responsibility are compatible with it.

— Yes, many people think that determinism—the view that the history of the universe is fixed, the view that everything that happens is strictly necessitated by what has already gone before, in such a way that nothing can ever happen otherwise than it does—is the real threat to free will, to ultimate moral responsibility. But the basic argument against ultimate moral responsibility works whether determinism is true or false. It’s a completely a priori argument, as philosophers like to say. That means that you can see that it is true just lying on your couch. You don’t have to get up off your couch and go outside and examine the way things are in the physical world. You don’t have to do any science. And actually, current science isn’t going to help. Ultimate moral responsibility is also ruled out by the theory of relativity. Einstein himself, in a piece written as a homage to the Indian mystical poet Rabindranath Tagore, said that “a Being endowed with higher insight and more perfect intelligence, watching man and his doings, would smile about man’s illusion that he was acting according to his own free will.”

...

— And in fact, isn’t that an implication of your argument—that no one is truly deserving of blame or praise for anything?

— Well, “truly” is a flexible word—again I think “ultimately” is better—but yes: No one can be ultimately deserving of praise or blame for anything. It’s not possible. This is very very hard to swallow, but that’s how it is. Ultimately, it all comes down to luck: luck—good or bad—in being born the way we are, luck—good or bad—in what then happens to shape us. We can’t be ultimately responsible for how we are in such a way as to have absolute, buck-stopping responsibility for what we do. At the same time, it seems we can’t help believing that we do have absolute buck-stopping responsibility.

from an interview with Galen Strawson

<https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-galen-strawson/>