Relativising Freedom and Responsibility

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One might call this a work in progress, except that ‘progress’ does not seem the appropriate word. What I want to do may be indicated by outlining the context of this discussion and the questions it would like to address.

I start from Ted Honderich’s recent work (I am using the versions on his website rather than their subsequent hard copy). The key issue here is Honderich’s claim that “The real problem of the consequences of determinism is that of dealing with the situation in which we have both the idea of voluntariness and also the idea of voluntariness plus origination, and these two ideas run, shape or at least colour our lives, and the second conflicts with determinism.” (Determinism as true, compatibilism and incompatibilism as both false, and the real problem) That is to say, we do not have one idea of freedom, but at least two ideas, one of which sits quite happily with determinism, while the other commits us to notions that cannot withstand rational scrutiny. His “real problem” is a matter of how we can reconcile ourselves to the falsity or incoherence of these latter parts of our attitude or way of conceiving our situation.

I want to make some unfriendly remarks about what kind of problem Honderich thinks we have and how one would go about telling whether we have solved it.

The questions I wish to address are whether the tactic of relativising our notions of free action and responsibility will suffice to defuse Honderich’s real problem. The idea here is not new. I take my initial example from an early paper by John Mackie. The general approach is familiar: most of us now accept that questions of distance or of simultaneity are not absolute, as Newton supposed, but relative to a frame of reference. The world does not contain absolute relations of these types; all there are are relative notions. While there may still be some deviants who would maintain the genuineness of absolute relations of space and time, even they would, I think, admit that we can manage quite well with the relative scheme. Everyday notions are to be reinterpreted, and may yield astonishing outcomes (such as twin paradoxes generate in special relativity), but we are not agonising over the lost absolutes.

(One thought I have is that, despite its importance and venerable age, the problem of freedom and determinism does not in general impinge on people. Not even philosophers agonise over it. If this is so, it may perhaps give some encouragement to the thought that relativising might be the way to go here too.)

Let us turn to Mackie’s example, which is concerned first and foremost with relativising responsibility. A motor cyclist (A) was exceeding the speed limit. A traffic policeman (B), also on a motor cycle, chased him, and soon both were travelling in excess of 70 m.p.h. An ordinary citizen (C) stepped off a bus into the policeman’s path. C was killed instantly, B died next day. The relativising here is initially with respect to the question of responsibility. Mackie’s position is that “to hold someone responsible for some occurrence is to take his action as the cause of that occurrence … within some field. … In determining responsibility we do not choose the causal field quite arbitrarily; our choice is determined by our moral
expectations, our views about what is normal and proper” (pp. 29-30). Applying these ideas to the example, one person might assume that breaking the law is an intrusion into the normal and proper state of affairs and so hold A responsible for the deaths; another might think that this kind of law-breaking is to be expected but that the police ought not to go overboard in their reactions to it and so blame B for both deaths; and we could imagine someone for whom law-breaking and its all-out pursuit are normal thinking that C is to blame for interfering with it. There are other more complex responses that one could explore, but these illustrate the key point about the allocation of responsibility varying with what is taken to be the norm.

One obvious point about these examples is that the occurrences picked upon as responsible in each case are (i) causes within the given field, and (ii) effects within other fields. We can assume A was exceeding the speed limit for some reason or other; likewise B’s determination to apprehend him was the result of various causal factors; and C’s comparatively careless getting off from the bus was also the result of various causal factors. That C got off the bus at that particular spot was the effect, among other things, of the decision to put a bus-stop there: the cause-effect network is as convoluted as in any other real life case. But none of that affects the fact that the basic claims of responsibility are grounded in actual causal connections in which certain actions of A, B and C are causes.

What Mackie’s relativising disallows is the further question: who, ultimately, was responsible? A question, one might suppose, a god could answer for us. Plainly, as a matter of fact, the actions of all three persons were necessary parts of the story. Deciding on one to blame is not getting the factual story more accurate but the very different matter of deciding which set of expectations to endorse.

Mackie supports the notion that we should assign responsibility only to intentional actions. In our story, each of the actions would count as free in as much as the agents did what they intended to do without coercion or constraint. Mackie’s account would, therefore, seem consistent with more recent contextualist or relativist construals of our talk of freedom. If I may quote my own formulation from some years back,

a claim like I can drive a car is to be understood as saying that There is no obstacle to my driving a car.... To find the ellipsis, we have to notice that obstacles come in various kinds — there are sheer physical obstacles (our anatomy is such that we cannot fly like birds; we cannot have breakfast in London and lunch on Mars; etc.); there are obstacles created by normal, though not invariable patterns of behaviour; there are legal obstacles; there are moral obstacles; there are logical obstacles. Usually when we talk about what we can or cannot do, about our freedoms, we presume that we are talking with reference to some such obstacle field. Perhaps, given that field, there was no obstacle to my doing what I did nor to my doing any number of other things — I could well have done otherwise. But when the determinist affirms that in fact I couldn't have done otherwise (which apparently contradicts our ordinary belief), he invokes a quite unusual obstacle field, viz. the sum of all obstacle fields, the whole universe. With respect to all the

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obstacles there might be, the determinist may be right, but his claim is compatible with our ordinary common sense when this is interpreted as elliptically referring to some much more homely field of obstacles (cf. Mackie, 1982, p. 167).

As can be seen, I did not try to say how we fix which fields are in question, but perhaps there are no general answers to that kind of question. Anyway, the approach seems similar to what has been offered more recently as contextualist or relativist construals of talk about abilities or freedom.

To return to the notion of ultimate responsibility, it is this notion that Mackie picks on in his much later discussion of freedom and determinism (Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, Penguin, 1977, pp. 224-5) as one of the unfounded conceptions that we should excise from our thinking. Honderich’s approach says that these notions are too ingrained in us to be easily shaken off. His latest position seems to be that perhaps this fact, and the apparent truth of our picking on particular causal factors as the cause, suggest some sort of truth in this incompatibilist side of our thinking.

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3 One detailed discussion can be found in ‘Epistemic Modals in Context’ by Andy Egan, John Hawthorne and Brian Weatherson. Contextualism regarding freedom is usually seen as stemming from John Hawthorne’s ‘Freedom in Context’ Philosophical Studies, 104: 63-79 (2001).

4 To see some of what he says, there is this reflection on his autobiographical work:

There are things in my past life that I wish were not there. I wish I had done better in a number of respects. In a word, I have some guilts of a certain kind. I hold myself responsible for them in a certain way. I hold myself responsible for them in exactly the way that seems to presuppose origination and the falsehood of determinism.

This may of course just be a fact about a common sort of neurotic personality, a personality subject to a kind of self-abuse. But there are an awful lot of us. A great many of us, at any rate in Western culture, share this kind of attitude to ourselves.

To come to the point, it can seem that this way of holding oneself and others responsible contains a truth. That is, it is not just an attitude or desire, but it does contain something as true or false as determinism, and in fact something as true. (Determinism’s consequences: The Mistakes of Compatibilism and Incompatibilism, and What is to be done now)

There is also this short suggestion:

There is a problem about isolating a single condition in a causal circumstance and dignifying it as the cause. The problem, a paradox if you will, is that in a
One problem with Honderich’s stance is that it is difficult to see how one could show that one has solved his problems. His earlier idea that the problem lay in our attitudes did not seem to acknowledge sufficiently that attitudes incorporate beliefs about the nature of things, so that they might be vulnerable to changes in one’s factual opinions. True, an attitude may survive its belief’s supersession, and this is what Honderich was reporting, since it was clear that he did not then endorse the incompatibilist views upon which the attitudes in question were built. To his latest waverings on this matter, one might reply that in reflecting on one’s past one does indeed regret certain things, but one sees these as not purely one’s own actions but one’s actions entangled in a wider context, so that the regret is not just for my supposedly originated action but for the state of the universe at that time. But, of course, the danger is that one will be seen as failing to appreciate the seriousness of Honderich’s issue; one simply reveals one’s own superficiality.

Similarly with respect to the issue of picking out some factors among those that are causally required. One might say that picking on the traffic policeman’s actions, rather than the presence of oxygen, is explanatory because it picks on something intrusive, unexpected, rather than on a feature that is shared with the explanation of a hundred other occurrences. But again one runs the danger of being told that one has simply not seen the enormity of the problem.

What I want to ask is whether becoming self-conscious about the relativity of freedom and responsibility (involved with the notion that these ideas incorporate a usually elided reference to a field) will provide a satisfactory resolution of the problems Honderich thinks remain. Are we, to echo Briony again, just assuming too much in allowing fields to be chosen to suit each case, in assuming sufficient implicit grasp of what is appropriate and what isn’t by way of influence on an action or decision?

Relativised freedom involves ignoring a range of factors. Is that self-inflicted blindness or is it justifiable? As Briony’s paper says, we typically do ignore certain types of factor, and maybe we are liable to overlook important issues in so doing. One recent discussion makes the point that in many cases our interest is in the possession or otherwise of general abilities or capacities rather than in what might be true of the specifics of a particular case. I can cook an omelette, and that may be of more relevance to you than the fact that in this room at this point in time I cannot cook an omelette since we don’t have a stove or a frying pan or eggs. But should we only be caring about the limited range of obstacles we usually do use, rather than the determinist’s all-encompassing field? To put the worry in terms of the notorious principle of alternative actions, my relativist says ‘yes, I can cook an omelette now’ –

clear sense this cause is no more explanatory of the effect than any other condition in the causal circumstance. All are required or necessary conditions. But the cause seems to be exactly that -- more explanatory. That is exactly what is conveyed by calling it the cause. Evidently there is the very same problem about a causal line. In a clear sense it cannot be more explanatory than any other chosen succession of items or states, say presences of oxygen. But it is more explanatory, isn’t it? (After Compatibilism and Incompatibilism)

5 J.K. Campbell, ‘Compatibilist Alternatives’. 
in the sense that cooking an omelette is part of my repertoire\textsuperscript{6} but not in the sense that here and now I could do so instead of trying to say something pertinent to our deliberations. But perhaps not. I am as it happens trying to do some philosophy, but there are no obstacles from our usual set of internal lacks that stop me from cooking instead. There may be other factors that make cooking impossible here and now, but they don’t get a look in our usual obstacle field for what I can or cannot do.

I hope the questions I have been asking make sense. I am sorry I haven’t provided much by way of answers to them.