DETERMINISM, INDETERMINISM AND RESPONSIBILITY

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In his influential book, *Ethics*, William Frankena considers the issue of determinism and responsibility in the context of his theory of normative ethics.[1] Frankena is interested in discovering whether and under what conditions, from the point of view of the ethical theory that he has developed, we might be *morally* justified in ascribing responsibility, that is, in praising and blaming. He writes:

> We are asking a question of normative ethics, not, as is usually thought, one of logic or meta-ethics. The question, 'Is moral responsibility compatible with determinism (or indeterminism)?' asks not whether determinism (or indeterminism) is *logically* compatible with responsibility, blame, etc., but whether it is *morally* compatible with them. It asks whether we are morally justified in ascribing responsibility, in blaming, etc., if we take determinism (or indeterminism) to be true.[2]

In accordance with this restriction, Frankena examines several positions that have been taken with respect to the issue, though his major effort is an attempt to show that determinism, if true, need not be incompatible with ascriptions of moral responsibility.

He examines, though not in the following order or under the rubrics I will use, a number of positions that philosophers have held about the compatibility of determinism with moral responsibility. He defines "determinism" as

> the view that every event, including human choices and actions, is caused by other events and happens as an effect or result of these other events.[3]

"Indeterminism," he says,

> denies this, and adds that some events, among them human choices and volitions, happen without any cause or explanation.[4]

It seems significant that, although Frankena has denied that the question is meta-ethical—or logical or "metaphysical"—meta-ethical and "metaphysical" issues emerge at various points in Frankena's discussion.

(1) Some philosophers have held that determinism, if true, would be incompatible with ascriptions of moral responsibility, since if persons cannot avoid the choices they make, it would be improper to praise or blame them for those choices. Thus if ascriptions of responsibility are to be justified, determinism must be false and indeterminism must be true. Generally these philosophers have been deontologists and have rejected the possibility of a merely consequentialist justification of ascriptions of moral responsibility. Many of them seem to have believed that consideration of the issue at the meta-ethical level cannot be avoided, for the normative ethical question about whether we are justified in ascribing responsibility would seem to depend on the meta-ethical question of whether normative ethics is possible at all, and this seemed to them to depend on being able to answer affirmitively the question: "Do we have duties?" To these philosophers it seemed not to make sense to say that we have duties if determinism is true.

(2) Some philosophers have held that indeterminism is or may be incompatible with moral responsibility. Frankena himself, though he does not rule out the possibility that indeterminism may be compatible with moral responsibility, says

> I must confess . . . to a feeling that indeterminism makes things rather too 'chancy'; it seems to mean that there is an element of sheer chance in our decisions and this hardly seems to be compatible with our being free to do *as we choose.*[5]

At the meta-ethical level, I believe that philosophers can be found who are indeterminists and who believe themselves in consequence obliged to deny the possibility of normative ethics. Such I believe is, or was, the Sartre of *L'Être et le Néant*. Everything in one's life is a strict consequence of one's choice of a way of being, but one's fundamental choice is uncaused and unmotivated and not subject to evaluation in terms of any encompassing or "objective" criteria, since the basic choice itself creates causality, causal relations, motives, and norms.

(3) Some philosophers have held that determinism need not be incompatible with moral responsibility. Many utilitarians have held that ascriptions of moral responsibility are compatible with determinism provided that these function to maximize good and minimize evil. One way that they might do this is by functioning as determinants in the causal process, by encouraging people to act in accordance with the principle of utility. Frankena holds his normative position to be deontological rather than utilitarian but argues that

> All we need to add to what the utilitarians say [that the function of holding people responsible and applying sanctions is not retribution but education, reformation, prevention, and encouragement] is that their function is to promote equality as well as welfare.[6]

The two conditions that must hold before ascriptions of responsibility can be justified in this way are (1) We must assume that people are normally free to do as they choose. Ascriptions of moral responsibility would lose their point in contexts in which persons were so subject to control by external threats or manipulation as to lose the freedom to choose and act in accordance with relevant internal factors, namely desires, beliefs, and character.[7] (2) We must

> also assume that the choices and actions of people normally have reasons and are reasonably predictable, and are not the result of such wholly chance

swervings as were attributed to the atoms by the Epicureans or as are now attributed to sub-atomic particles by some indeterminists who appeal to recent physics in support of their position.[8]

The first assumption presumably might hold only for certain social or cultural contexts. The second Frankena sees as clearly compatible with determinism, but perhaps not with indeterminism, though indeterminists might hold that one can find statistical regularity and predictability in human behavior. This is what Frankena finds "chancy."

(4) Some philosophers have held that determinism *is* true and *is* incompatible with responsibility. Frankena believes that Paul Edwards and John Hospers and some interpreters of psychoanalysis have held this view. I believe that Nietzsche held this view; therefore he renounced the role of normative ethicist and attempted to do only *descriptive* ethics. This seems also close to the position of Karl Marx and of the Sartre of *Situations* and the *Critique de la raison dialectique*. Frankena argues that

If one adopts [the position that determinism is true *and* incompatible with responsibility] one must be prepared to propose either that the moral institution of life be radically reconstructed or that it be dropped altogether and replaced by something entirely different. Some such drastic proposal may turn out to be correct, but until its two premisses have been more conclusively established . . . it seems the better part of valor to espouse the position [that if determinism is true it is or may be compatible with responsibility].[9]

Here, it seems to me, the meta-ethical issue emerges very clearly. If Hospers' and Edwards' position is true, then the moral institution of life might need to be radically reconstructed—does this mean merely that we would have to try to live by our theory of normative ethics while doing without ascriptions of responsibility?—or the moral institution of life might have to be abandoned altogether—doesn't this mean that normative ethics might not be possible? Also, the two premisses of the position that need to be established—surely they would not be established or rejected *within* normative ethics, by appeal to Frankena's two fundamental principles of beneficence and equal treatment, but on logical, metaphysical or scientific grounds.

(5) Another position discussed by Frankena is one holding that there is an alternative to determinism and indeterminism. According to this position both determinism and indeterminism are incompatible with moral responsibility. What is required is a contra-causal freedom that Frankena calls "self-determination." Philosophers who have held this view— Frankena names Kant and Roderick Chisholm among them (neither would be bad company for a philosopher to be found in)—deny

both that our choices are always caused by previous events in accordance with natural laws and also that they are in any way matters of mere chance.

Instead, they argue for a special kind of agency; they hold that a self or person is a unique agent capable of a kind of 'self-determination' that is not a function of previous causes and yet is not a matter of chance but of choice, intent, and purpose.[10]

Frankena believes that no proposed accounts of "self-determination" have been entirely satisfactory, and that complete consideration of the theory would involve metaphysics. Thus the best course is the one he has pursued: to show that determinism is not incompatible with moral responsibility.

In specifying the subject matter of normative ethics, Frankena said that normative ethics is directly concerned with judgments of moral obligation ("answering problems about what . . . ought to be done") and moral value and indirectly concerned with judgments of nonmoral value.[11] If meta-ethics "asks and tries to answer logical, epistemological or semantical questions like . . . 'How can ethical and value judgments be justified? Can they be justified at all?' [Not to mention: "What is the meaning of 'free' or 'responsible'?"][12] then the question whether normative ethics itself is possible (makes sense), whether we *have* duties or obligations, if determinism is true, is a meta-ethical question.

Some contemporary writers have held that the truth or falsity of determinism has no bearing on ethics. Others, like Frankena, have argued that determinism is compatible with moral responsibility. Against these views, I would argue that those deontologists, and Kant, who believed that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility were correct. The attempt to deal with the question as primarily one of normative ethics obscures this. In normative terms, one might reasonably argue that we might be able to justify ascriptions of responsibility, even if persons have no options in their choices, in consequentialist terms. But if one asks the meta-ethical question, not about justification or even obligation, but about the meaning of "obligation," then it seems to me that Kant's analysis of the logic of "ought" terms is entirely sound: 'Ought' implies both 'can' and 'possibly may not.' (The first criterion shows why inanimate objects don't have duties, the second shows why God doesn't. This logic applies to judgments about past responsibility: 'should have' means 'could have' and 'could have failed to.' If we reject this it seems necessary to propose

either that the moral institution of life be radically reconstructed [as utilitarians have been trying to do for the past two hundred years] or that it be dropped altogether and replaced by something entirely different [as Nietzsche, Marx, and Sartre proposed].[13]

Certainly many reasons have been given for believing that we need to reconstruct our way of talking about ethics or to replace normative ethics with something else—with stricter or more enlightened legislation, with

behavior modification, positive reinforcement, televised executions, prescriptive and persuasive uses of moral language, glossolalia, etc. Of one thing I am convinced: that though one may hold, and I believe should hold, that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility and thus with a normative theory of ethics, there are no convincing reasons for accepting a determinist position and there are convincing reasons for rejecting determinism.

A. The determinist position that Frankena discusses, though not rigorously defined, is clearly an instance of what Carl Hempel has called the thesis of "universal determinism," a thesis that Hempel characterizes as

inherently vague [and] . . . at the same time [making] a tremendously stronger claim than a physical law, for it asserts the existence of a set of laws sufficient to determine every event in the world of our experience.[14]

It can be suggested that universal determinism is not just vague, but that, in ways analogous to the paradoxes of set theory that Russell discovered, or to the paradoxes generated in cosmology by attempts to "date" the beginning of the universe, as vagueness is removed, contradictions appear. A recent study by Boyle, Grisez and Tollefsen, a study of one such set of contradictions, those related to the so-called fallacy of self-referential inconsistency, can be cited.[15] The argument of these authors is that every attempt to give rigorous argument for determinism can be shown to depend on premises that are incompatible with determinism.[16]

In general it can be argued that all significant deterministic explanation specifies an ideally closed system, closed in the sense that variables not covered by the laws of the system are taken as being able to be legitimately ignored, either because their effects on the system can be viewed as random, or as remote enough to have no causal influence.

Some have argued that a completely deterministic model of brain functioning can be given, such that "the brain is understood . . . as fully as we understand a typewriter."[17] But even these writers have argued that the internal determinants of behavior cited by Frankena—character, desires, beliefs—are not functions of brain functioning, but are (as Dewey would have held) more nearly patterns of response to the interaction between brain and environment. They are not closed systems or parts of a closed system.

B. Very often what seem to be causal explanations in dispositional terms (character-traits) are not causal explanations but descriptions. Very often dispositional statements are causal, as for instance the unsatisfactory but nevertheless relevant answer in Moliere's play about why opium induces sleep. "Because it has a dormitive virtue." Inadequate, but on the right track. This can be seen by contrasting it with the kind of answer we would give a student who asked: "Why do I always fall asleep when I am reading my philosophy assignment?" We wouldn't say that philosophical works possess a dormitive virtue. (Only some of them do, e.g., T. H. Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics*.) We might look for a causal explanation: he doesn't have good sleep and exercise habits, waits until too late to begin studying, etc. But there are *some* dispositional statements involving traits of character that would satisfy us as giving reasons for behavioral phenomena that we would not think of as causal. Someone is late to a meeting and we ask why. We are told, "Oh, he is always late." (This in contrast to the case of someone who is usually on time.) Here we are told that it isn't necessary to look for further reasons. But we wouldn't take his disposition, his "always being late," as *causing* his present lateness. In his important study *Causality*, Mario Bunge has listed seven types of explanation used in science, some of them often confused with causal-deterministic explanation, none of which is strictly deterministic. He has suggested that more penetrating analysis might discover more non-deterministic modes of explanation.[18]

Part of the trouble with Frankena's discussion of indeterminism is that in defining it he merely makes it the contradictory of determinism—some events are not causally determined—hence if determinism is false, indeterminism must be true. However, in his criticism of indeterminism he treats it as a position according to which choices might normally occur without having reasons, like the chance swervings of Epicurus' atoms. After the fact, we can always give reasons, not necessarily irrelevant, to explain choices, but there is no necessity that the factors cited need be looked at as *causing* the choices. We are often able successfully to predict behavior on the basis of non-causal dispositions. It is interesting that Erik Erikson in his book on Gandhi says that from the principles of psychoanalysis he can explain neurotic behavior but not normal or supernormal behavior—i.e., why Gandhi was creative in the way he was or why a saint becomes a saint. Statistically accurate prediction of neurotic or normal character structure is possible on the basis of psychoanalytic principles, but it is not plausible that such prediction would become deterministic if more, or all, relevant data were known.

C. If determinism is false, then indeterminism, as the contradictory of determinism, is true, though we may expect this term too to possess the same intrinsic vagueness as "determinism." If indeterminism is true, however, attempts to remove the term's vagueness should not result in the generation of contradictions but in specifications or differentiation of the concept. Certainly for moral responsibility to be made understandable, more than a vague concept of indeterminism will be required. One may say that indeterminism is a necessary but not sufficient condition of normative

ethics. For normative ethics to hold, something like Kant's or Chisholm's concept of "self-determination," or a Peircean concept of final causation, must be true.

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

[1] William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973, second edition), pp. 73-78, also 71-73.

[2] Ibid., p. 73.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p. 76.

[6] Ibid., pp. 75, [74].

[7] Ibid., p. 75.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., p. 76.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., pp. 8-10, 5.

[12] Ibid., p. 5

[13] Ibid., p. 76.

[14] Carl G. Hempel, "Some Reflections on 'The Case for Determinism,' " in Sidney Hook, ed., *Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Modern Science* (New York; Collier Books, 1958), p. 175.

[15] Joseph Boyle, Germain Grisez, and Olaf Tollefsen, *Free Choice: A Self-Referential Argument* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1976).

[16] Several years ago, William Marshall Urban developed an analogous argument in *Humanity and Deity* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1951).

[17] Robert W. Fuller, *Causal and Moral Law* (Waterbury, Conn.: Center for Advanced Studies, Wesleyan University, 1967), p. 11.

[18] Mario Bunge, *Causality: The Place of the Causal Principle in Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 16 ff. The eight types listed by Bunge (including deterministic explanation) are quantitative self-determination, causal determination, interaction, mechanical determination, statistical determination, structural determination, teleological determination, dialectical determination.

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