

Deep thinkers, cognitive misers, and moral responsibility

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Moral responsibility is running out of room. Scientific naturalism destroyed the realm of godlike transcendent powers, and recent research on learned helplessness (Martin Seligman, 1975) dragged will power down from the miracle working sphere of moral responsibility and anchored it squarely within the natural environment that shapes our fortitude and lassitude. Now moral responsibility has retreated to its ultimate citadel: the reflective mind. There, with the support of such philosophers as Daniel Dennett and Charles Taylor, moral responsibility has made stubborn stand.

It is obvious why the once mighty domain of moral responsibility has been narrowed to such a small scope. As psychologists and sociologists and biologists have discovered the causes that shape behaviour and choices and character, knowledge of those causes has undermined claims of moral responsibility. Our sympathies, our mental prowess, even our initiative and fortitude: learning more about the biological and environmental factors that shaped such characteristics – factors that are ultimately our good or bad fortune, not of our own creation – shrinks the space available for just deserts.

So we are not morally responsible for being wise or foolish, strong or weak, brave or cowardly, steadfast or flighty, diligent or lethargic. But no matter how we are shaped on the wheel of our environmental history, there remains (according to embattled defenders of just deserts) a privileged area where we exert special control and for which we are morally responsible. Charles Taylor marks off this space in his influential article, 'Responsibility for self':

The question can always be posed: ought I to re-evaluate my most basic evaluations?

Because this self-resolution is something we do, when we do it, we can be called responsible for ourselves; and because it is within limits always up to us to do it, even when we don't – indeed, the nature of our deepest evaluations constantly raises the question whether we have them right – we can be called responsible in another sense for

ourselves whether we undertake this radical evaluation or not. (Taylor 1976: 221, 224)

Thus we may be virtuous or villainous, and our thinking may be astute or sloppy; but the power of scrutinizing ourselves and our values is a power that we always possess (whether we exercise it or not). That narrow sphere of cognitive power, latent or actualized, is sufficient for moral responsibility. The area of radical rational re-evaluation may be small, but it is large enough to support just deserts.

Daniel Dennett takes a similar tack, securing moral responsibility on an even narrower cognitive foundation. Dennett describes this narrow basis for moral responsibility thus:

... in many cases our ultimate decision as to which way to act is less important phenomenologically as a contributor to our sense of free will than the prior decisions affecting our deliberation process itself: the decision, for instance, not to consider any further, to terminate deliberation; or the decision to ignore certain lines of inquiry.

Dennett then draws the moral for moral responsibility:

These prior and subsidiary decisions contribute, I think, to our sense of ourselves as responsible free agents, roughly in the following way: I am faced with an important decision to make, and after a certain amount of deliberation, I say to myself: 'That's enough, I've considered this matter enough and now I'm going to act,' in the full knowledge that I could have considered further, in the full knowledge that the eventualities may prove that I decided in error, but with the acceptance of responsibility in any case. (Dennett 1978: 297)

Thus for Taylor as well as Dennett, moral responsibility is not built on powers of deliberation. Obviously some are better deliberators than others, and it is equally obvious that the causes of those differences in deliberative ability are not of our own making. Rather, moral responsibility is built on the decision to deliberate, or perhaps (as in Dennett's case) the decision to terminate deliberations. That decision is up to us, and it is a decision that is within the power and control of each of us, and that decision is the basis for justifiably holding us morally responsible: we deserve credit and blame, reward and retribution, because (according to Taylor) we always *could* have started the deliberative process of radical re-evaluation, and (according to Dennett) we *could* have continued it longer. Thus the choice to deliberate or not, and to deliberate profoundly or superficially, is our own doing. That choice is our own responsibility, and the buck stops *here*.

This is very clever philosophical work, and it may be well to pause for a

moment of admiration. Taylor and Dennett have packed the justification for moral responsibility into such a tiny cognitive corner that it all but escapes notice; and then, with a flourish, they draw out the full panoply of moral responsibility, just deserts, rewarded virtue, and retribution.

Unfortunately for this moral responsibility refuge, natural science has now scouted this cognitive corner. Recent psychological studies have looked very closely at when and why people engage in careful cognitive inquiries – and when and why they do not. The choice to carefully cognize – whether regarding one’s own ‘radical re-evaluation’ or something more mundane – is not an extraordinary act that establishes moral responsibility; to the contrary, it is shaped just as our other characteristics and preferences are shaped, and as grounds for moral responsibility it works no better than fortitude or intelligence or physical strength.

Research has revealed what psychologists call ‘need for cognition’. The need for cognition is a stable factor, distinct from cognitive ability, and varying from individual to individual (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). The need for cognition motivates both engagement in and enjoyment of effortful cognitive activity (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey and Tighe 1994). Some people are ‘cognitive misers’. Confronted with situations in which most people would think long and hard, they engage in very little reflection. Cognitive misers have little intrinsic motivation to engage in careful cognition, they do not enjoy it, and are generally less practised and less effective at it. In contrast are the ‘chronic cognizers’, who enjoy thinking, require little external stimulus to engage in cognitive efforts, and think at more length and greater depth.

Thus Alice, who is a chronic cognizer, continues to deliberate and inquire and examine, while Barbara (a cognitive miser) ceases deliberation and acts. In both cases the choice is their own, and – as Dennett emphasizes – that will contribute to their ‘sense of themselves’ as responsible deciding agents. But why is Alice a more profound and willing cognizer, and Barbara a cognitive miser? Most likely it is the result of early influences:

Children who learn, through observation and experience, that they can cope with their problems through reason and verbal influence rather than through physical force or flight should tend to develop higher levels of need for cognition because of the demonstrated import of good problem solving skills in charting a course through the hazards of life. (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein and Jarvis 1996: 246)

Furthermore, children whose need for cognition has been successfully nurtured may subsequently have it diminished:

Individuals who initially enjoy thinking and effortful problem solving but who are subjected to high levels of what they perceive to be

continuing and controlling surveillance, time pressure, and external reward may pay a price over time in terms of their level of need for cognition. Payment for grades for extended periods of time, for instance, may hinder the development of an individual's intrinsic interest in effortful cognitive endeavours if these rewards create the self-perception that the student is a 'pawn' to the source of external rewards. (p. 246)

So Barbara, who has been shaped as a cognitive miser, now engages in shallow deliberative processes. She chooses to stop deliberation and act after superficial reflection. It is her choice and her act, of course; but does she deserve reproach for being such a sloppy thinker, and making poor and impetuous choices? Does Alice, who thinks more diligently and profoundly, deserve special reward for her wiser choices? Barbara makes bad, ill-considered, impulsive choices, and they are her own. But her cognitive superficiality is the result of a formative situation that did not reward early careful cognizing; or perhaps rewarded it in ways that shaped her to regard careful cognizing as under the oppressive control of others.

Why did Alice become a careful cognizer, and Barbara a cognitive miser? The answers to those questions may be complex and controversial, but the present point is simple. If we reject the view that such cognizing is a matter of inexplicable, miraculous choice – and such libertarian mysteries are precisely what Dennett and Taylor are struggling to avoid – then deeper examination of cognitive choosing and careful deliberation will soon uncover formative factors that undermine claims of just deserts and moral responsibility. Alice and Barbara make their own choices, including their own choices concerning whether and how much to deliberate about their choices; but their moral responsibility for those choices is another question altogether.

One of Dennett's provocative examples shows the problems with his approach to preserving moral responsibility. Tom is 'implanted' with the belief that he has an older brother in Cleveland. The implantation process leaves his rationality and most of his belief system intact (a few beliefs may be altered to make the implanted belief less obvious; for example, Tom's belief that he is an only child is also revised). Tom now acts on the implanted belief. Is he morally responsible for his acts? Dennett claims that determining Tom's moral responsibility requires answering several more questions:

did he make a reasonable effort to examine the beliefs on which he acted? If the extent of his brainwashing is so great, if the fabric of falsehoods is so broad and well-knit, that a reasonable man taking normal pains could not be expected to uncover the fraud, then Tom is excused. Otherwise not. (1978: 252)

So again, Tom is not morally responsible for his specific beliefs, but for thinking (or failing to think) with sufficient care and depth.

But persons with a high need for cognition are likely to engage in the cognitive effort required to reveal and resolve inconsistencies in their beliefs, while cognitive misers are less inclined to engage in such inconsistency-revealing cognition (Thompson and Zanna 1995; Lassiter, Briggs and Slaw 1991; Srull, Lichtenstein and Rothbart 1985). And again, whether one is an eager cognizer or a cognitive miser is not something for which one is morally responsible. A cognitive miser will not uncover the implanted inconsistent belief, while a chronic cognizer will. But neither deserves special credit or blame, unless they deserve credit or blame for being cognitive misers or chronic cognizers; and the implausibility of that has already been examined.

Champions of cognition-based moral responsibility may be tempted to fall back on Taylor's approach: if we find that we are cognitive misers, then it is 'always up to us' to 'radically evaluate' ourselves and resolve to be more diligent cognizers. But such a suggestion moves in a fatally tight circle: whether we have the motivation to carefully cogitate concerning our need for cognition is not something for which we are morally responsible, and pushing the analysis through further circles and levels will not alter that. Even apart from the circularity of such a proposal, its implausibility is obvious. On Taylor's view we become cognitively motivated because we choose to be eager cognizers; but it is more plausible to conclude that we are careful reflective cognizers because we are strongly cognitively motivated. That is, strong need for cognition motivates radical and deep self-evaluation, rather than deep self-evaluation transforming one into an eager cognizer with a strong need for cognition.

Dennett is correct that the process of deliberation gives us a sense of our choices being our own. Such decisions, as Dennett insists, contribute 'to our sense of ourselves as responsible free agents' (1978: 297); and that is why Taylor's suggestion of radical re-evaluation, and the hierarchical analyses of Gerald Dworkin and Harry G. Frankfurt – 'I desire this, but do I really will to desire this?' – are appealing accounts of our own free choices. Such reflective deliberation is a good means of making a choice my own, a choice that I have made myself, a choice for which I am 'responsible' in the sense that I am responsible for making my own decisions, and no one has authority over me. But none of this establishes moral responsibility for my choices. It does not establish that I justly deserve praise or blame, reward or retribution, or any form of 'just deserts' for my reflective (or less than reflective) choices. Barbara's faulty impetuous choices are her own, as are Alice's wiser more deliberative choices; but both are shaped by factors – including their strong or weak need for cognition – which cannot support

moral responsibility.

If I run a marathon, the running is my own. Since I am a minimally competent adult, making my own choices, the running is, in one sense, my own responsibility. It does not follow that I am morally responsible: that I deserve blame or credit for running well or ill. Likewise, if I deliberate about a choice, the deliberative choice is my own; it does not follow that I am morally responsible for the quality or quantity of the deliberation, nor for my wise or foolish choice.

Ultimately, then, choices to carefully cognize work no better as grounds for moral responsibility than do choices to exert sustained effort or even choices to run a long distance. But it is not surprising that this should be difficult for philosophers to recognize. Philosophers are chronic cognizers running in packs of chronic cognizers. Among philosophers, choosing to cognize deeply appears to be a capacity equally open to all. But it is no more plausible for philosophers to propose this as grounds for moral responsibility than it would be for an assembly of marathoners to suggest that everyone can simply choose whether to run twenty-six miles at a sustained rapid pace.

A. E. Housman suggested that:

Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think.

For reflection-intoxicated chronic cognizers, philosophical reflection may be the beverage of choice. But whether you drain the reflective cup to its dregs or sip it lightly, it is not the elixir of moral responsibility.

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