

DELIBERATING AND ANSWERING

Research Project for the *Fonds de Recherche du Québec Société et Culture*

This project seeks to draw philosophical lessons from two important human activities: deliberating about what to do and answering for our actions. By reflecting on them, we can better understand some of our ethical and metaphysical commitments.

1. Scepticism and Naturalism

This project is a natural extension of my doctoral dissertation, which focused on *free will scepticism*. This doctrine claims that humans lack the control that responsible agents bear over their conduct. In my dissertation, I assessed several arguments purporting to show that free will scepticism is problematic *regardless of whether it is true*.

Strawsonian naturalism is one such response to scepticism. It claims that some activities, practices, or beliefs are not the proper object of elimination, justification, or doubt—they are *immune* to scepticism. This is partly because they are *inescapable*, a point that Hume made about induction. This is also because they constitute the *framework* within which doubt makes sense, a point that Wittgenstein insisted on regarding our belief that the external world exists. Peter Strawson (1985, 1998) brought these two conditions together. He added, first, that our practice of holding each other responsible is inescapable and, second, that it is an essential part of our moral framework (only within which doubt about responsibility makes sense). Call *natural* the beliefs, activities, or practices which meet these two conditions.

Strawson's methodology, *descriptive metaphysics*, consists in identifying natural beliefs, activities, or practices and reflecting on them philosophically. I follow this methodology by focussing on two related activities: practically deliberating and answering for our actions. The first consists in weighing reasons to decide what to do; the second consists in explaining one's action by presenting the reasons for which one acted. Both activities are arguably natural. They are certainly inescapable: living without deliberation is unthinkable; and answering for our actions is necessary for profound interpersonal relationships. These activities are also essential parts of our moral framework. The first is perhaps the main forward-looking ethical activity; the second is possibly the main backward-looking ethical activity.

2. Two Connected Activities

Deliberating about what to do and answering for our conduct are conceptually connected in two ways. First, these activities directly concern conduct and reasons. We deliberate to set a course of action by weighing reasons; and we answer for some past actions or omissions (normally ours) by explaining *why* we performed them. Second, deliberating and answering primarily concern the actual causal sequence, namely the way in which events, in fact, occur. When we deliberate about what to do, we aim to find not just ‘some reasons’ in favour of an action, but the reasons on which we will act. When we answer for our conduct, we do not give general reasons for and against what we did; we provide the reasons for which we acted. In both activities, we focus on *our* reasons; to do otherwise is typically disingenuous or deluded.

Once we reflect on the nature of deliberating about what to do and answering for our conduct, we can identify ethical and metaphysical commitments or lessons which come with engaging in these activities.

3. The Metaphysical Commitments

In deliberating and answering, do we commit to the existence of free will, understood as the ability to choose amongst real alternatives? Yes and no.

3.1 Deliberating

Picture Cate Blanchett deliberating about whether to award the *Palme d’Or* to *The Wild Pear Tree* or to *Shoplifters*. She finds this excruciating; she could really choose either! Free will sceptics believe that Cate is mistaken: she has only one real option.

Does this mean that free will sceptics cannot deliberate, or at least deliberate rationally? Friends of the proposal (Alexander, *De Fato*; van Inwagen 1983; Cohen 2018) maintain that in deliberating, we assume that multiple alternatives are open to us; but this assumption is closed to the sceptic. Foes of the proposal (Clarke 1992, Nelkin 2004, Pereboom 2008) respond that in deliberating, we only assume that our deliberation is *effective*; but this assumption is open to the sceptic.

To make progress here, I suggest we take note that in deliberating, we aim to make a decision. And there are norms of deciding: we cannot flat out decide to do what we think is beyond our abilities. We may decide to *try* or to act *provided* that some reasonable assumptions come true. This seems to play against free will sceptics. If we are sceptics, ‘we should [...] come to reinterpret the experiences we call “making up our minds”; and “reaching a decision”. We should come to think of them more like “becoming aware of our intention”’ (Honoré 1999, 159). But this would

be *predicting*, not *deliberating*. Thus, deliberating lands us with a commitment to non-scepticism about free will.

3.2 Answering

Do we commit to anti-scepticism in answering for our actions? Seemingly not. In answering, we give our reasons for action; and we do this to determine our liabilities. Whether we have a free will does not impact the reasons for which we act. Therefore, we determine our liabilities independently of whether we are free (see Strawson 1974).

To show that this is correct, we must first demonstrate that whether we lack free will is irrelevant *to the considerations marshalled* when answering for our conduct. For this, we must show that answering for our actions just is to give our actual reasons for action. Second, we must show that whether we lack free will is irrelevant *to who is answerable* for their conduct. For this, we must show that we can lack free will and yet have the capacity to act for reasons and explain them.

If this is correct, then the activity of answering for our actions, unlike the activity of deliberating about what to do, does not land us with a commitment to the existence of free will. But it lands us with a commitment to our capacity to act for reasons and explain them.

4. The Ethical Commitments

Consider the following controversial view. We sometimes ought not just to do the right thing, but to do the right thing *for the right reasons* (see McMahan 2009).¹ Does deliberating and answering commit us to this view? No, but they commit us to the ethical significance of reasons. This in turn suggests a way to defend the view from two objections.

4.1 Deliberating

The first objection claims that the view allows a subject to tweak her mind in order to turn impermissible actions into permissible ones (Thomson 2008). An agent could choose her action and *then* select reasons. This sounds like cheating.

The standard response is that this is a red herring: we cannot change our reasons in this fashion (McMahan 2009). But consider the following:

Pandemic: Tanya and Simon are playing a cooperative board game. Simon, who is a board-game enthusiast, tells Tanya that she should move her pawn. Since Simon is reliable and Tanya believes him, she knows that she will do this. Yet Tanya

¹ This view is close to the doctrine of double effect (see Quinn 1989).

deliberates about what to do by weighting reasons for and against moving her pawn.

Tanya's deliberation is rational. It follows that sometimes we can deliberate rationally about what to do despite knowing what we will decide to do.

More generally, deliberation and prediction are two things (Cowan 1969, Clarke 1992). This suggests that we not only deliberate about *what to do* but about *the reasons for which to act*. This seems both natural and legitimate; it is not cheating. Thus, the objection loses its grip, but not because of the standard response.

4.2 Answering

The second objection to consider is that moral obligations are a function of our rights; but no one has the right to be treated in a certain way *for the right reasons*; thus, moral obligations concern actions, not reasons (Scanlon 2008). For instance, I have the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of my handicap. But I have no claim against someone who does not discriminate against me simply to avoid being charged.

The practice of answering for one's conduct gives us reasons to reject this objection. For it shows that, in determining liabilities, what we mainly care about are the reasons for which someone acted. Furthermore, sometimes one is blameworthy *only because of the reasons for which they acted*. For instance, you are blameworthy for offering me a peanut butter sandwich with the false belief that I am severely allergic to peanuts. But it seems that someone cannot be blameworthy without infringing some obligation (Widerker 2000; Copp 2008). Putting the pieces together: we sometimes have the obligation not to do something *for the wrong reasons*. This suggests that our moral obligations (and rights) sometimes concern our reasons, *contra* the objection.

Reflecting on deliberating about what to do and answering for our conduct yields coherent ethical and metaphysical results. Since these results depend on further claims, we should perhaps hesitate to call them 'natural commitments'. They are, at least, interesting lessons learned from natural activities.

5. References

Clarke, Randolph K. 1992. 'Free Will and the Conditions of Moral Responsibility'. *Philosophical Studies* 66 (1): 53–72.

- Cohen, Yishai. 2018. 'Deliberating in the Presence of Manipulation'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1): 85–105.
- Copp, David. 2008. "'Ought' Implies 'Can' and the Derivation of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities". *Analysis* 68 (1): 67–75.
- Cowan, J. L. 1969. 'Deliberation and Determinism'. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1): 53–61.
- Honoré, Tony. 1999. *Responsibility and Fault*. Hart Publishing.
- Inwagen, Peter van. 1983. *An Essay on Free Will*. Oxford University Press.
- McMahan, Jeff. 2009. 'Intention, Permissibility, Terrorism, and War'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 23: 345–72.
- Nelkin, Dana Kay. 2004. 'Deliberative Alternatives'. *Philosophical Topics* 32 (1/2): 215–40.
- Pereboom, Derk. 2008. 'A Compatibilist Account of the Epistemic Conditions on Rational Deliberation'. *The Journal of Ethics* 12 (3–4): 287–306.
- Scanlon, Thomas M. 2008. *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Belknap.
- Strawson, P.F. 1974. *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. Routledge.
- . 1985. *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. Woodbridge Lectures ; 1983. London: Methuen.
- . 1998. 'Reply to Andrew Black'. In *The Philosophy of P.F. Strawson*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, 242–44. Library of Living Philosophers ; 26. Chicago, Ill: Open Court.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 2008. 'Turning the Trolley'. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (4): 359–74.
- Widerker, David. 2000. 'Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities: A Further Look'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 14: 181–201.