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Stories and the Meaning of Life

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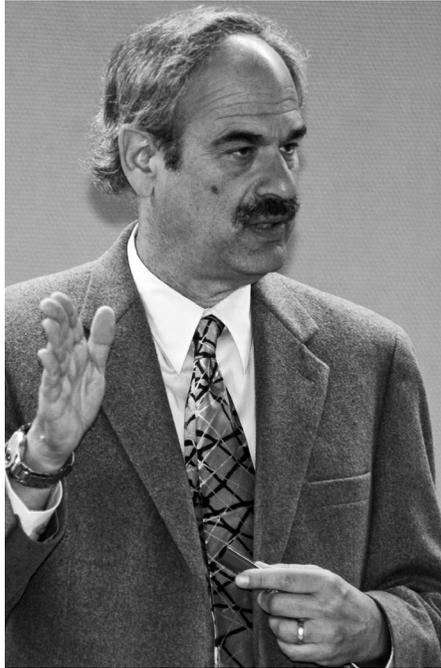
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Stories and the Meaning of Life

John Martin Fischer

I. Introduction: A Framework for Moral Responsibility

In various places I (sometimes in collaboration with Mark Ravizza) have sought to present the elements of a theoretical "framework for moral responsibility".¹ Here I shall begin by sketching the framework in order to give the background for a more detailed development of the idea that the value of acting so as to be morally responsible is the value of a certain distinctive kind of self-expression.

The overall framework for moral responsibility includes (at least) the following elements: a distinction between the concept of moral responsibility and its conditions of application; a distinction between "regulative" and "guidance" control; an argument that guidance control, and not regulative control, is the "freedom-relevant" condition linked to moral responsibility; an account of guidance control in terms of mechanism ownership and moderate reasons-responsiveness; an argument that guidance control, so construed, is compatible with causal determinism; and an account of the value of moral responsibility (in terms of self-expression).

There are various plausible ways of specifying the concept of moral responsibility, including the "moral ledger view," the "fittingness-of-providing an explanation" view, and the "Strawsonian view", which involves aptness for the "reactive attitudes" (resentment, indignation, gratitude, love, and so forth). I do not take an official stand as to the proper analysis of our concept of moral responsibility; perhaps there is no single correct answer here, and our concept involves elements of the various suggestions. Even so, I find it helpful and instructive to take as a working hypothesis some version of the Strawsonian account of the concept of moral responsibility.

But under what conditions does the concept apply? I here follow Aristotle: an agent must meet both some sort of "epistemic" condition and a "freedom-relevant condition". This tracks Aristotle's claim that an agent fails to act voluntarily to the extent that he acts from ignorance or force. My primary focus has been on the freedom-relevant condition.

I offer plausibility arguments for the contention that "acting freely" (an "actual-sequence" sort of freedom) plays the role of the freedom-relevant condition; put in other words, guidance control, and not regulative control, is the freedom-relevant condition associated with moral responsibility. On my view, then, an agent may be morally responsible but never have had genuine metaphysical access to alternative possibilities—he may never have had "freedom to do otherwise". These plausibility arguments employ the thought-experiments that originated

with John Locke and have been dubbed, "Frankfurt-Style Examples", after Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt has argued that such cases—involving a signature sort of pre-emptive overdetermination—imply the falsity of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (the principle that states that freedom to do otherwise is a necessary condition of moral responsibility).

In my view, the moral of the Frankfurt Stories—and it is interesting that these hypothetical examples are frequently referred to as "stories"—is that acting freely (and being morally responsible) is a matter of how the actual sequence unfolds, *not* whether the agent has genuine metaphysical access to alternative sequences. Although I find the thought-experiments instructive and illuminating, I believe that there are other dialectical routes to the same conclusion, and that the thought-experiments should form part of an overall strategy of argumentation.² Even if one doesn't find the Frankfurt-Examples convincing, this should not in itself issue in a rejection of the basic conclusion about the relationship between moral responsibility and freedom to do otherwise. This point resonates with my general methodological approach, according to which stories play a key role, but not the sole or exclusive role in analysis of various phenomena. Thus, the role of Frankfurt-stories is like the role of hypothetical examples in ethics.

Especially with my co-author, Mark Ravizza, I have sought to sketch an account of guidance control. On our approach, guidance control involves two chief elements; mechanism ownership and reasons-responsiveness. An agent exhibits guidance control of an action insofar as the action issues from the agent's own, "moderately reasons-responsive" mechanism. Our more detailed accounts of both elements have elicited worries and objections; particularly contentious have been the claim that mechanism ownership involves a certain sort of "subjective" condition, and that reactivity to reasons is "all-of-a piece". I have sought to defend the fundamental ideas where possible. Also, in recent work I have pointed out that the basic elements of the framework for moral responsibility can be preserved while adjusting the specific details; I have argued that I can still accomplish everything I had hoped to accomplish by offering a framework for moral responsibility even without a commitment to a strong subjectivity or to the contention that "reactivity-is-all-of-a piece."³ That is, I can accept slightly adjusted accounts of the fundamental elements of the framework while still maintaining that moral responsibility does not require regulative control, that it is fundamentally a historical notion, and that it is compatible with causal determinism. This is important because some philosophers have apparently dismissed the view because they have found the specific subjective view or the view that reactivity is all-of-a piece troubling.

Finally, I have suggested that the value placed on acting freely and being such as to be held morally accountable is the value of a certain distinctive kind of self-expression. When we act freely, we express ourselves in a way that is perhaps a

form of artistic creativity (or akin to such self-expression). What matters is not that we make a difference to the world, but that we make a certain kind of statement. In acting freely, we make it the case that our lives have a narrative dimension of value; thus, acting freely is the ingredient which, when added to other features, endows our lives with a meaning beyond the simple addition of momentary episodes of welfare, or even the addition of such episodes, weighted for their temporal location. Unlike mere non-human animals, our lives are stories in a strict sense, and they can have a distinctive kind of meaning—narrative meaning.⁴

II. Freedom and the Varieties of Value: A Proposal

I believe that we do indeed value self-expression, and that the value of acting freely (and thus being morally responsible agents) is a species of the value of self-expression. I am inclined to think of this as a sort of "artistic" value, but if it is, it may be a context which is unique or *sui generis* (in a way I shall explain below). Why exactly do we value this sort of self-expression? This is a hard question. I think it is connected to questions about the meaning of our lives.

As I said above, our lives are stories, whereas the lives of rats and even cats are not. Certainly, one can tell the "story" (speaking loosely) of a rock or a rat or a cat, but these accounts are not "stories" in a strict sense. They are not narratives. Of course, it is an interesting and vexed question just what has to be added to a mere account or chronicle of events to get to a "story" (strictly speaking) or a narrative; I am inclined to accept the bare bones at least of the suggestion of David Velleman that the necessary additional ingredient is some distinctive sort of *understanding* provided by the account.⁵ Further, insofar as we act freely our lives have a narrative dimension of value. Along this dimension, one does not simply add together momentary levels of well-being, and the meanings or values of events depend on certain distinctive relationships with other events. Velleman calls these "dramatic" or "narrative" relationships.

When I act freely, I write a sentence in the story of my life; that is, the account of my life is strictly speaking a story (rather than a mere chronicle of events), and my life has a narrative dimension of value. Insofar as a story or narrative is by definition a work of art, I am an artist, when I act freely, and I am inclined to say that the value of my free action is the value of artistic self-expression.⁶ Note that it does *not* follow from the fact that the value of our free action is a species of the value of artistic self-expression that it is a kind of *aesthetic value*; rather, the point is that the value of our free action is a species of the value of artistic self-expression, *whatever that value is*. I take it that artistic self-expression has value from the perspective of human flourishing or "doing well"; in a broad sense (that encompasses "goodness" as well as "rightness", this is arguably a moral value.

Thus, when I act freely, I am by definition engaging in artistic or aesthetic

activity, and this activity can have value for us—a value that is distinct from the value of the product. For example, we might plausibly think that it is valuable—from the perspective of living well or flourishing—to engage in artistic activity; this value is conceptually distinct from any sort of evaluation (aesthetic or even moral) of the product—the sculpture or painting or novel. Similarly, on my view, the activity of my acting freely is a species of artistic activity, and thus it has whatever value we place on this sort of activity. Of course, it does not follow from the fact that my acting freely is a species of artistic activity that the value of the product—the life or perhaps life-story—is solely or primarily aesthetic. (It would be natural to suppose that, because the activity is by its nature aesthetic, the value we place on the product must be a species of aesthetic value; but this is a mistake.) My activity in acting freely is a kind of artistic self-expression, and it thus has the value we place on such aesthetic activity. But the product—my life or life-story—typically is evaluated primarily from the perspective of prudence and morality, although it can also be evaluated from the aesthetic perspective.

Of course, a work of art such as a sculpture can be evaluated along various dimensions, including both aesthetic and moral. (Here I am talking about the product of artistic activity—the sculpture.) Surely, evaluation is purpose-dependent, and we might have various purposes in evaluating a particular sculpture. We might, for example, want to know whether it is composed of materials that are environmentally sensitive or scarce, or that could only be procured by exploiting people, and so forth; such purposes would give rise to a moral evaluation of the sculpture. But perhaps typically we would want to know whether the sculpture is aesthetically pleasing, and thus our "primary" way of evaluating it would be aesthetic. That is, given the range of human purposes, perhaps the "typical" or "primary" sort of evaluation of a sculpture would be in terms of aesthetic dimensions. Here it might be said that there is a "match" between the sort of activity that issues in the product—artistic or aesthetic activity—and the "typical" or "primary" mode of evaluation of the product.

A life, or a life-story, can be evaluated along different dimensions, including aesthetic, moral, prudential, and so forth. A life or life-story—considered as a product of artistic self-expression—can certainly be evaluated aesthetically. It is perhaps most natural to think about stretches of a life or parts of a life here. For example, athletes are sometimes thought to retire too late; this seems especially prevalent in boxing, and it tends to tarnish or diminish the athletes' entire career. I also believe that certain athletes and coaches have retired "too early"—before reaching the heights they could have reached, or perhaps cutting off a string of accomplishments before its "natural" or "optimum" conclusion. (I believe that the great coach of the San Francisco 49ers, Bill Walsh, retired too early—and I believe he thought this too in retrospect.) No doubt certain academics—even philosophers—have retired too early; but surely none—especially no philosophers—

have retired too late!

I take it that these considerations are essentially "aesthetic", although they surely are related to (or perhaps involve) moral dimensions. They have to do with the trajectory or arc of one's career. Obviously, we can evaluate the trajectory of various of one's projects in addition to one's career, and we also are deeply concerned with the arc of one's relationships with others. Sometimes a relationship maintains its integrity, whereas in other cases a relationship might end abruptly or slowly unravel in an unlovely way.

Although we certainly engage in aesthetic evaluation of aspects or phases of our lives as well as our lives as a whole, I think it is undeniable that the "typical" or "primary" modes of evaluation (given the standard human purposes and interests) are prudential and moral. Thus I suggest that if acting freely is indeed a species of artistic self-expression, this context is *sui generis*: it involves a kind of activity—artistic or aesthetic activity—whose product is not typically or primarily evaluated aesthetically. That is, when we act freely, we tell a story that is most naturally—given the intrinsic nature of human activity and a broad range of human purposes—evaluated in terms of moral and prudential considerations, even though the nature of the activity is artistic. Here then we have perhaps identified what is special and unique about the context of free action: whereas there is a match between the nature of artistic activity and the primary mode of evaluation of (say) a sculpture, there is a striking discrepancy between the nature of free human activity (artistic) and the value of the activity; whereas its nature is a species of aesthetic activity, the typical or primary modes of evaluating the product are prudential and moral.

It is perhaps not surprising that the two elements of this idea about the value of acting freely correspond in some rough way to the two components of the analysis of guidance control. The value of acting freely, on the account I have sketched, is the value (whatever kind of value that is) of artistic self-expression whose product is typically evaluated in terms of prudence and morality. Guidance control is analyzed in terms of two components: ownership and reasons-responsiveness. Ownership posits a special relationship to the self, and this corresponds to the value of artistic self-expression. And reasons-responsiveness pertains to the salient dimensions of assessment of human lives in terms of morality and prudence. Although the relationships here are perhaps less tight than one might like, it is appropriate that there be echoes of the elements of the account of the value of acting freely in the analysis of acting freely. This is one way in which parts of the overall framework for moral responsibility form a unified, cohesive whole.

III. Implications and Refinements

IIIa. Historical Narratives. I have contended that our exercising our capacity for

acting freely transforms our lives into genuine stories and endows us with the narrative dimension of value. Eric Schwitzgebel has pointed out however that one can write "narratives" that are not most appropriately thought of as works of art. If, say, one writes the history of a family or region, this sort of "narrative" may seem to have the characteristics I have pointed to (including the non-additive dimension of value), but we would not typically say that such a narrative is a piece of art, that writing it is a species of aesthetic activity, and that its value is a kind of aesthetic value. One might then worry that simply having the characteristics of being a narrative and having the narrative dimension of value don't make our lives "works of art" in the relevant sense, or our free actions a species of artistic self-expression, and so forth.⁷

Note however that such narratives—the history of a region or family—do not *themselves* possess the narrative dimension of value. That is, we would presumably judge them by their accuracy in depicting the events in question; it would not be a further virtue of such an *account* that it depicted (perhaps falsely) individuals learning from prior mistakes, flourishing as a result of prior efforts (rather than mere luck), and so forth. Certainly, these features would endow the *lives depicted* with additional value—narrative value, but they would not endow the *narrative itself* with such value. Similarly, although the lives depicted would have the additional dimension of value, we would certainly not attribute greater value to the creator of the (perhaps false) narrative! So family narratives would typically not be works of art, but this does not in any way diminish the plausibility of the claim that we are engaging in artistic activity in freely writing the stories of our lives, and that such free activity helps to endow our life-stories with the distinctive features of certain works of art. And, of course, as I emphasized above, the fact that our activity in creating our life-stories is properly considered a species of aesthetic creativity does not in itself rule out the possibility that the typical or primary modes of evaluation of the *product* is not aesthetic.⁸

IIIb. The Aesthetic Fallacy. My point is that it does not *follow* from the fact that one's free activity is a species of artistic self-expression, that the only or primary or typical mode of evaluation of the *product* be aesthetic. Of course, I have not argued for or certainly *established* that the nature of the activity and the value of the product can pull apart in the way I have suggested. My point here is rather more modest; I wish simply to insist that, insofar as we distinguish between the activity and its product, there is no *entailment* between the nature of the activity and the mode of evaluation of the product. Given that evaluation is purpose-driven, it is not surprising that there are various perfectly reasonable modes of evaluation of the products of artistic activity, and thus that we cannot simply "read off" the (appropriate) mode of evaluation from the nature of the activity. I have sought to carve out a space between the aesthetic nature of our free

activity of writing our life-stories and the appropriate modes of evaluation of those stories. On this picture, it would be a fallacy to infer from the fact that the essential nature of our free activity is aesthetic to the proposition that our lives (or life-stories) should be evaluated exclusively or primarily in terms of aesthetic criteria. I suggest that we call this problematic move, "The Aesthetic Fallacy". Some have attributed to Nietzsche the view that our lives should be evaluated primarily along aesthetic—specifically, literary—dimensions.⁹ Philosophers such as Nehamas emphasize Nietzsche's "aestheticism" and his view of "life as literature." The details of Nietzsche's view—and even the broad contours of it—are in dispute, and I am certainly not qualified to enter into exegetical debates. I simply wish to point out that it would be fallacious to suppose that it follows from the fact that our freely writing the books of our lives is a species of aesthetic activity that the books themselves should be evaluated *primarily* aesthetically.

I am not stating that Nietzsche himself or any of his commentators are guilty of this sort of fallacy; after all, they might think that it is helpful or illuminating or true to say that the primary mode of evaluation of lives is aesthetic, but not because it *follows* from the fact that our free activity exemplifies aesthetic value. I simply want to identify the Aesthetic Fallacy as such; it highlights a problematic *route* to the conclusion that our lives are to be evaluated primarily as works of art—a conclusion I do not in any case endorse. Perhaps someone could argue convincingly that it does indeed follow from the relevant activity's having a certain nature to the product's primarily having that same sort of value, or that it follows from the relevant activity's having this specific nature—aesthetic—that its product must primarily be evaluated aesthetically. In this case what I have called "The Aesthetic Fallacy" would not in fact be a fallacy. But I am not sanguine about the prospects for such an argument, especially given purpose-driven nature of evaluation, and our multifarious purposes.

IIIc. Constraining the Plausible Stories. The purpose-relativity of explanation, together with the multiplicity of human purposes, results in a challenge to the notion that there is some single "fixed meaning" to our lives—some master narrative that is, as it were, "given". Rather, on my account, one's life-story is evaluated along different dimensions, given different purposes. But there is an even more basic way in which I would contest the notion that there is a single, fixed, or given meaning to our lives. The claim that in acting freely, we write a sentence in the narrative of our lives suggests that there is a single story of our lives—a given narrative to which we add sentences. But of course this is an unreasonable picture. Rather, our bodily movements and behavior are subject to different interpretations from different perspectives; although we try to tell our own stories, and we do our best to offer our interpretations, we do not always get to tell our own stories. That is, at least in certain contexts, our stories are told by others—our behavior is at

least in significant respects interpreted by others (and in ways contrary to our own understanding and preferences).¹⁰

Just as I do not suppose that there is a purpose-independent notion of evaluation or a "fundamental" or "privileged" purpose (or set of purposes), I do not suppose that there is a hegemonic perspective from which our stories get told. Thus, I would qualify my somewhat over-simplified formulation, according to which in acting freely, we write a sentence in the narrative of our lives. More carefully, perhaps, in acting freely we constrain the plausible stories of our lives. Whereas various defensible interpretations will still be possible, our behavior can significantly constrain the plausibility of some of these interpretations, thus limiting the range of reasonable life-stories.

Now perhaps this is somewhat deflating. You had perhaps thought of yourself as triumphantly writing the sentences in the book of your life, but now you are merely constraining the admissible stories—certainly a comedown! This picture seems to diminish an agent's control, and, after all, control is supposed to be the basis of moral responsibility (on my approach). I admit that the simpler formulation is snappier and a bit more attractive, but the more refined formulation is after all both humbler and more realistic. Guidance control is indeed the "freedom-relevant" basis of moral responsibility, and, as such, it is a significant and robust sort of control. In exercising guidance control, we determine certain aspects of the unfolding story of the universe; but it would be manifestly ludicrous to demand that we can determine *everything* about this story. I have also argued that it is unreasonable to aspire for what I have called "Total Control", the desire for which I have attributed to "metaphysical megalomania".¹¹ The realization that we don't (always) get to tell our own story—that there are multiple perspectives from which different interpretations of our behavior are offered, none of which is privileged "in advance" or "apart from specific contexts"—is parallel to a humbler, more realistic conception of the sort of control that grounds our moral responsibility (guidance control).

III.d. Life and Works of Art. I have argued that there is a sense in which our lives can be understood as stories. But why not think of our lives as poems, or plays, or other sorts of works of art? I think the question is interesting, and the answer may help to sharpen the view I am defending. Of course, a poem or a play—or, for that matter, a piece of music—can tell a story or determine a narrative, just as much as a novel or short story can. Clearly, the epic poems of Homer tell rich and detailed stories. I would say that the various literary and artistic forms—poems, short stories, novels, plays, even pieces of music—can be thought of as various ways of telling stories—various "vehicles" for storytelling or the determination of narrative content. Our lives, then, considered as a sequence of behaviors or even bodily movements, could be thought of as ways of telling a story—a certain

sort of vehicle of narrative content (relative, presumably, to a perspective with a given set of purposes). Strictly speaking, then, our lives are not stories, but ways of telling stories, or, perhaps more carefully, ways of constraining admissible narrative content. They are—as with poems or plays or novels—the vehicles of content, rather than the content itself.

This point is similar to the notion that a sentence (or perhaps a sentence in a context) is the vehicle for content (say, a proposition that is expressed by the sentence in the context). It is illuminating to distinguish the properties of the vehicles of expression of content from those of content itself; for instance, some philosophers hold that the vehicles of content are structured linguistically, whereas the propositions expressed—the content itself—is not structured at all or at least not linguistically structured. Of course, this particular claim is contentious; for our purposes it is enough simply to mark the distinction between the properties of the vehicles of content and the properties of content.

I suggested above that when I act freely, I write a sentence in the book of my life. Perhaps this was closer to the truth than I had imagined, since sentences—or their utterance or presentation—are good candidates for the vehicles of content, rather than content itself—just as our behavior is the vehicle for telling our stories. (In the more refined formulation, our behavior would be the vehicle for constraining the plausible stories—a way of limiting the admissible narrative contents.)

Even if we say that our lives are (simply put) ways of getting to narratives—or vehicles for telling stories—we might also say that the vehicles themselves share some interesting properties with (say) poems. Now of course it is difficult to specify exactly what are the defining characteristics of poetry. One idea would be to specify poetry in terms of a given set of forms; but this would leave out much contemporary, free-form poetry. Another idea would be to define poetry in terms of the dominance or hegemony of a particular trope: metaphor. Again, this would seem problematic, insofar as much poetry does not seem to use metaphor as the hegemonic trope, and many other literary forms make heavy use of metaphor. Whereas it is very difficult to give the essence of poetry, I believe it has to do with *economy of expression*. On this way of thinking of poetry, certain lives could certainly be thought to be similar to poems insofar as they embody a kind of elegance.

IV. Conclusion

Perhaps following Nietzsche, various philosophers have accepted some version of "aestheticism" or the idea that life should be modeled (in some way) on art. Of course, I have interpreted this idea in a quite specific way, eschewing some of the more extravagant versions of the doctrine. I have suggested that the value

we place on acting freely is connected in certain ways to the meaning of our lives. One way in which this is true is that acting freely renders us artists in the sense adumbrated above; in virtue of acting freely, our lives can be stories and can have narrative value. We care about acting freely, then, to the extent that we value engaging in artistic self-expression. Additionally, our free actions are artistic activity of a specific kind, whereas the products of this aesthetic activity are typically (although not exclusively) evaluated in moral and prudential ways; our free action is thus a special sort of aesthetic activity. It may be that we *especially* care about the sort of artistic self-expression whose product is typically evaluated in moral and prudential terms: although I cannot here argue for this claim, it seems plausible to me that the aesthetic activity in creating a product with deep prudential and moral value is particularly important to us. I would further suggest that we care especially about products that are assessed prudentially and morally that *come from this particular avenue—artistic self-expression*. So the value of the artistic self-expression is enhanced by issuing in a product that is typically evaluated morally and prudentially, and the value of such a product is enhanced in virtue of coming from a distinctive sort of artistic activity. It might be said that what makes our lives or life-stories so uniquely special and valuable is that they are in the realm of the moral and prudential, but *arrived at via the aesthetic*. The meaning of life, then, occurs at the *intersection* of the aesthetic, moral, and prudential.

I think there is an additional feature of this sort of self-expression (connected to the meaning of our lives) in virtue of which we deem it valuable. In Richard Taylor's fascinating essay, "The Meaning of Human Life," he argues that a crucial element in our lives' having the distinctive sort of meaning they possess is our power of *creativity*.¹² He says:

If you were to learn that the rest of your life would be spent digging an enormous hole, then it would perhaps be a reassurance of sorts to be told that you were actually going to enjoy doing it. If, further, you were born with, or at any early age conditioned to, a strong desire to do this, then you would not need to have such a task assigned to you—you would go to great lengths to gain the opportunity and consider yourself lucky if you got it. And you would someday view the great hole you had dug with a deep sense of fulfillment. And therein does each of us find, in varying degrees, the very picture of his or her own life.¹³

Taylor goes on to say that what transforms our lives into *meaningful* lives is *creativity*:

That one word ["creative"] sums it up, and, if really understood, discloses entirely what is missing, not only in all the animate and inanimate existence that surrounds us but in the lives of the vast majority of human beings. It is

also what philosophers have always sought as godlike or what makes man, in the ancient metaphor, the image of God. For what is godlike is not blind power, or aimless knowledge, or unguided reason, but simply creative power. It is the primary attribute in the very conception of God.¹⁴

Roderick Chisholm thought of the agent as a kind of Godlike first cause. Perhaps we are indeed the images of God, but not in virtue of having the power to create *ex nihilo* or to transcend the network of natural causation or even to make a certain kind of difference to the world. Perhaps it is simply in virtue of our power of artistic self-expression that we are creative in a way that renders us images of God, even if pale images.¹⁵

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Notes

¹ See, for example: *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994); (with Mark Ravizza, S.J.) *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998); *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and (with D. Pereboom, R. Kane, and M. Vargas), *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2007).

² For other strategies, see R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1994), and Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking, 2003).

³ John Martin Fischer, "Reply: The Free Will Revolution," part of a book symposium on John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility, Philosophical Explorations* Vol. 8, No. 2 (June 2005): 145-156; and "The Free Will Revolution (Continued)", *Journal of Ethics* (special issue in honor of John Martin Fischer; this essay is in part a reply to Carl Ginet, Alfred Mele, Ishtiyaque Haji, and William Rowe), Vol. 10, No. 3 August 2006:315-46.

⁴ John Martin Fischer, "Responsibility and Self-Expression," *Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1999): 277-297, reprinted in *My Way*, pp. 106-123; and "Free Will, Death, and Immortality: The Role of Narrative," *Philosophical Papers* 34 (2005), pp. 379-404.

⁵ David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003), pp. 1-26.

⁶ In my paper, "Responsibility and Self-Expression," I contended that the value of free action is identical to the value of a kind of self-expression, but not necessarily artistic self-expression: p. 117. My view in the text thus represents a change.

⁷ See note 6 above. In "Responsibility and Self-Expression," this worry prompted me to propose that the value of our free action is the value of self-expression, but not necessarily artistic self-expression.

⁸ Note that, on my terminology, it is lives, but not narratives, that have "narrative value". Of course, narratives (and the novels, plays, and so forth that express these narratives) can have aesthetic value (and can be evaluated along other

dimensions, including the moral dimension—but narratives (as opposed to the lives they depict) themselves would not have "narrative value".

⁹ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Different interpretations of behavior issue from different perspectives; thus, I may see my behavior as having a certain meaning, as being embedded in a certain narrative, whereas a third party may interpret it quite differently. (Obviously, individuals occupying various different perspectives might see my behavior as being parts of various different narratives.) These claims are about the interpretation of the behavior and the associated content of the story. The idea that from my perspective my behavior has a particular meaning has nothing essential to do with *how I experience my life*. That is, various versions of what Galen Strawson has called the Narrativity Thesis—a thesis about experience—are entirely orthogonal to my contentions here in the text, as well as to my contention that in acting freely, we endow our lives with "narrative value":

There is widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories. I'll call this the *psychological Narrativity thesis*, using the word 'Narrative' with a capital letter to denote a specifically psychological property or outlook. The psychological Narrativity thesis is a straightforwardly empirical, descriptive thesis about the way ordinary human beings actually experience their lives. This is how we are, it says, this is our nature.

The psychological narrativity thesis is often coupled with a normative thesis, which I'll call the *ethical Narrativity thesis*. This states that experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood. (Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* XVII (4) (2004), pp. 428-52, esp. p. 428.

My theses are about the structure and etiology of value, whereas Strawson's theses are about experience.

¹¹ John Martin Fischer, "'The Cards That Are Dealt You,'" *Journal of Ethics* (special issue in honor of Joel Feinberg) Vol. 10, Nos. 1-2 (2006): 107-29; also, see Fischer et. al., 2007.

¹² Richard Taylor. 1981. "The Meaning of Human Existence," in Burton M. Leiser, ed., *Values in Conflict: Life, Liberty, and the Rule of Law*. New York: MacMillan Publishing. pp. 3-27

¹³ Richard Taylor, pp. 23-4.

¹⁴ Richard Taylor, p. 24.

¹⁵ This paper is a substantially revised version of: John Martin Fischer, "A Reply to Pereboom, Zimmerman, and Smith," part of a book symposium on John Martin Fischer, *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility, Philosophical Books* Vol. 47 No. 3 (2006): 235-44. In her insightful contribution, Angela Smith encouraged me to acknowledge more explicitly the social dimensions of moral responsibility. I concede that my development of the account of moral responsibility might suggest an overly individualistic picture, but I do not believe that, in the end, I am committed to a problematic sort of atomism. I certainly grant that the statements we care about (in acting freely) are *typically* parts of "conversations". In making such statements, we make connections—connections with other people and even causes "larger than ourselves" that are valuable parts of meaningful lives. I am inclined to accept the idea that we care about writing sentences in the books (stories) of our lives (on the simpler formulation), where these sentences are typically parts of conversations with others we care about. In thus making a statement, I make a connection. In writing my story, I help to write our story. My way becomes a part of our way.

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