

Deontic Morality and Control by Ishtiyaque Haji

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Abstract:

This article is a review of "Deontic Morality and Control" by Ishtiyaque Haji.

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Article:

Deontic Morality and Control. ISHTIYAQUE HAJI. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv, 288.

In everyday life it is common to judge people morally responsible for their actions, but there is a time-honored philosophical challenge to this practice with which we are all familiar. The challenge can be put briefly as follows: moral responsibility requires that agents have a certain kind of control that is compatible with neither causal determinism nor its contradictory, causal indeterminism; hence moral responsibility is impossible. Haji notes that judgments about moral responsibility—which I will call hypological judgments—are not the only category of moral, or morally relevant, judgments. There are also deontic judgments, which have to do with moral obligation, right, and wrong; aretaic judgments, which have to do with moral virtue and vice; and axiological judgments, which have to do with intrinsic and extrinsic value. In principle, a challenge to all such judgments can be made that parallels the challenge to hypological judgments: that they presuppose a certain kind of control that is compatible with neither determinism nor indeterminism and are therefore to be rejected. It is a surprising fact that, whereas the challenge to hypological judgments has been the subject of intense debate for centuries, the analogous challenges to the other kinds of judgments have received comparatively little, if any, attention. In this book, Haji seeks to rectify this omission. He concerns himself primarily with the challenge to deontic judgments. During the course of his discussion he deals in depth with the original challenge to hypological judgments, devotes a chapter to the challenge to aretaic judgments, and makes certain remarks in passing about the challenge to axiological judgments.

Various positions have been staked out in response to the original challenge to hypological judgments. Traditionally, it has been held that the kind of control required for moral responsibility is, or at least includes, the freedom to do other than that which one does. On the basis of this idea, *incompatibilists* have claimed that determinism precludes such freedom and hence precludes moral responsibility, whereas *compatibilists* have denied this. Most compatibilists have been *soft determinists*, accepting that determinism is true but that people can and often do exhibit the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility. Incompatibilists have fallen into two camps: that of *hard determinists*, who accept that determinism is true and hence that moral responsibility is never incurred, and that of *libertarians*, who accept that moral responsibility is sometimes incurred and hence that determinism is false. Ever since Harry Frankfurt's famous and influential challenge to the traditional idea that the kind of control required for moral responsibility involves the freedom to do otherwise, new positions, and new variations on old positions, have emerged. One of the most important is that of *semi-compatibilists*, who hold that determinism is incompatible with the freedom to do otherwise but compatible with the kind of control required for moral responsibility.

Precisely analogous positions can be drawn up in response to the analogous challenges to deontic, aretaic, and axiological judgments. Regarding hypological judgments, Haji defends semi-compatibilism. One of his main goals is to argue that the analogous position regarding deontic judgments is untenable, due to a crucial asymmetry between the two kinds of judgments.

According to Haji, this asymmetry has two aspects. First, deontic judgments presuppose that the agent has the freedom to do otherwise, whereas hypological judgments do not. That hypological judgments do not presuppose such freedom Haji takes to have been persuasively, if not conclusively, demonstrated by Frankfurt and his followers. That deontic judgments do presuppose such freedom Haji takes to be attributable in part to the facts that "ought" and "wrong" both imply "can" and that "ought" is equivalent to "wrong not"; he then explains how "right" is to be correspondingly treated, why no similar argument pertains to hypological judgments, and why Frankfurt-style cases do not succeed in impugning this view about deontic judgments.

The second aspect of the asymmetry between hypological and deontic judgments, according to Haji, turns on the fact that, whereas both kinds of judgments presuppose that agents have "proximal control" over their actions, only hypological judgments presuppose that agents disclose, through their actions, what they morally stand for. Proximal control is the sort of control exerted by agents when there is an appropriate causal connection between certain states involving them (typically, certain beliefs, desires, intentions, and *so on*) and their consequent actions. The causal connection may be deterministic or merely probabilistic, and so both determinism and indeterminism accommodate the possibility that agents have proximal control over what they do. By way of illustration, consider Jones, who is trying to decide whether to have another cigarette. Suppose that he has a set of beliefs and desires that favor smoking and also a set of beliefs and desires that favor not smoking. If determinism is true, only one of these options is causally possible; if indeterminism is true, then both may be (and let us suppose that both are). In either case, whatever it is that Jones does will be something over which he exerts proximal control, insofar as his action exhibits an appropriate causal connection to the relevant set of beliefs and desires. Haji contends, however, that although both determinism and

indeterminism accommodate proximal control, and although both hypological and deontic judgments presuppose such control, it is not the case that both determinism and indeterminism accommodate both kinds of judgments. On the contrary, as I have noted, he contends that determinism rules out the sort of alternative possibilities that deontic judgments presuppose; such judgments are thus consistent only with indeterminism. He contends, further, that indeterminism rules out the possibility that agents disclose, through their actions, what they morally stand for. If, given what he stands for regarding smoking, it remains causally open whether or not he smokes, Jones's eventual action cannot adequately disclose his moral stance. Thus, according to Haji, hypological judgments are consistent only with determinism.

The upshot of Haji's inquiries is a novel, intriguing, disturbing view: whereas indeterminism precludes, but determinism is compatible with, its being the case that people are morally responsible for their actions, precisely the opposite is the case with respect to people's actions being morally obligatory, right, or wrong. Hypological judgments and deontic judgments are thus not only wholly independent of one another but moreover incompatible with one another. Haji supplements this finding with an argument to the effect that aretaic judgments are similarly autonomous but, like axiological judgments, do not presuppose that agents have a certain kind of control over their actions, let alone one that is compatible with neither determinism nor indeterminism. Hence, whereas the challenges to hypological and deontic judgments have real bite, the corresponding challenges to the other kinds of moral judgments do not.

I have offered merely a glimpse of the main themes in Haji's book. It is full of details and subtleties that I do not have space here to discuss. His treatment of the issues he addresses is extremely thorough, and he takes great pains to do justice to the relevant literature, which is voluminous. He tends sometimes to get bogged down in the details, and as a result his presentation is often a bit messy and repetitive, but this is a minor complaint. The discussions are otherwise engaging and insightful, and the important point is that Haji resolutely refuses to skimp on any relevant matters of substance.

And what of these matters? I confess that I find a great deal of what Haji says very congenial. The view that the various kinds of moral judgments are autonomous is one that I have myself defended; so, too, the view that deontic judgments presuppose the freedom to do otherwise whereas hypological judgments do not. These views are of course controversial, having implications that many find unpalatable, and Haji's treatment of them will doubtless fail to win over everyone. Still, any opponents that remain must pay close attention to his arguments, since they are so thorough.

I am not persuaded by everything that Haji says. In particular, I find his discussion of the second alleged aspect of the asymmetry between hypological and deontic judgments problematic. Consider Jones, who is trying to decide whether to smoke. Suppose that indeterminism is true and that this renders his eventual decision causally undetermined. Whatever decision Jones makes, there will be (some measure of) an explanation of why he made it, an explanation that is grounded in the relevant set of beliefs and desires; and this set will, let us suppose, furnish Jones with proximal control over that decision. What is lacking, however, is any explanation of, or control over, his making this decision *rather than* the other. This lack of a contrastive explanation or control, Haji believes, does not undermine deontic judgments regarding Jones's

behavior but does undermine hypothetical judgments regarding it. I am inclined to think that just the opposite is the case.

First, I cannot see how it can be that Jones ought, say, not to smoke, if he cannot control *whether* he does *so*. (It might be thought that Frankfurt-style cases show how this is possible; but these are cases in which alternative possibilities are lacking, and Haji himself argues-correctly, I believe that deontic judgments presuppose that the agent has the freedom to act otherwise.) Suppose that Jones does refrain from smoking. Insofar as he has proximal control over doing so, why not then say that he acts as he ought? Well, the problem is that, as far as his control is concerned, he could just as well have smoked instead. Should we then say that he would have done wrong? This seems too harsh, since he couldn't control whether he acted in this way. But, if we cannot say that his smoking would have been wrong, then we cannot say after all that he ought not to have smoked.

In contrast, given that there is a set of beliefs and desires that favors each of Jones's options, it would seem that both options would disclose, at least in part, what he stands for; hence the claim that this (alleged) presupposition of hypothetical judgments is not satisfied is debatable. It might be replied that neither option can fully disclose what he stands for, and that this is why he is not responsible for whatever it is that he does. But this, too, is problematic. It would unacceptably preclude responsibility in all cases in which a person is of two minds what to do, since neither "mind" reflects all that he or she stands for. Perhaps, though, the issue is not whether the agent's stance is unequivocal but whether it has been decisively endorsed. Suppose that Jones's final judgment is that it would be best not to smoke, despite the attractions of smoking. Well then, if, despite this judgment, the causal indeterminacy inherent in his situation were to eventuate in his smoking, I think we must agree that his smoking would not disclose what he stands for on balance; and if such disclosure is required for responsibility, then he is not responsible for smoking. But suppose that the causal indeterminacy eventuates in his not smoking. His doing **so** would then seem to disclose what he stands for on balance, and so I see no reason to deny, on this basis, that he is responsible for his behavior. (This is not to say that there might not be some other reason that is tied to Jones's lack of control over whether he smokes—a lack of control that is *not* attributable to some Frankfurt-style feature of his situation—to deny that he is responsible for his behavior.)

Haji's book is rich, subtle, and creative. Anyone concerned with the metaphysical presuppositions of moral judgments should study it carefully.

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