

## Conceptualizing Moral Responsibility Related to Alcohol Use Disorder

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## **Abstract**

Control and moral responsibility are important considerations in our understanding of alcohol use disorders (AUD). The ability of persons experiencing AUD, especially the degree of freedom they enjoy in the presence of craving is pivotal. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) offer their Theory of Reasons-Responsiveness (TRR) as a theoretical framework to explore the degree of freedom which persons experiencing SUDs have in their ability to drink or not to drink. They propose that in the absence of ignorance and coercion degrees of freedom of choice exist together with moral responsibility.

**Keywords: alcohol use disorder, moral responsibility, control, craving**

## **Introduction**

This is a philosophical perspective exploring the conditions of having control to illuminate how these conditions may influence the moral responsibility of individuals experiencing Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD). On the one hand, there seem to be indications that the behavior of an individual experiencing AUD can be heavily influenced or even determined by her alcohol use. On the other hand, some factors seem to be within the control of the individual experiencing AUD.

According to some philosophical theorists, AUD influences the extent to which people may be held accountable for their actions. Wallace and Levy suggest that less responsibility is placed on individuals suffering from AUD than on others (Wallace, 2006; Levy, 2013). Since people experiencing AUD are impelled by their substance misuse by craving (Becker & Tolstrup, 2016), this leaves us with a question in relation to placing responsibility: how can “control” be applied in the context of AUD, and does the behavioral expression of this disorder make any difference to the attribution of moral responsibility? This study investigates this question on a theoretical level by employing the “Theory of Reasons-responsiveness” (TRR) developed by Fischer & Ravizza (1998).

## **Theory of Reasons-responsiveness**

The TRR is a semi-compatibilist theory of control and moral responsibility (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998).

Compatibilism is the philosophical view that freedom of the will – and with it, moral responsibility – is compatible with (and so not compromised by) a completely deterministic world-view. The TRR is concerned with the basic conditions under which individuals act. It takes as its point of departure the philosophical notion of “will” in relation to human action and freedom. The TRR claims that to count as free, the will of an individual must be led by practical reasoning, which is a human ability to determine the course of their actions. Hence, the TRR does not comment on the cognitive abilities of an agent that are concerned with perception and knowledge. Rather, the TRR attempts to describe the mechanism that leads to a freely willed action (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). The TRR takes an externalist approach to moral responsibility, which places great emphasis on the view that moral responsibility does not rely solely on the individual’s access to her own thoughts. It is possible to make warranted claims about moral responsibility by looking at the process leading to action and evaluate whether that process seems rational to us – regardless of whether it does so to the individual herself. So, the TRR assumes that moral responsibility is not only a question of the internal processes of the individual but also a question of how these processes arose (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). Hence, the history of the individual and the individual’s interaction with the social world are essential to determining the individual’s moral responsibility.

The TRR states that an individual might not have alternative possibilities for acting at a specific moment but

could nonetheless be held morally responsible for her actions, inasmuch as the individual has a free will and is in control (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998).

### **Morally responsible agents**

According to Fischer and Ravizza (1998), the individual can act morally when motivated by moral considerations. However, Fischer and Ravizza point to two conditions which exempt an agent from being morally responsible: ignorance and coercion. For the individual to be responsible, he or she must have knowledge of the circumstances surrounding an action and then act out of appropriate beliefs and intentions. For the act to count as voluntary, there must, moreover, be an absence of coercion. For if an individual is coerced into doing something, she would not act differently even if she had reason to do so, and so coercion undermines her responsiveness to reasons (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998).

### **Guidance control and regulative control in an action**

According to Fischer and Ravizza, we need to look at the characteristics of the *mechanism* leading to action, because focus on the mechanism of an action ensures that moral responsibility is related to what the agent *does* and *how* she does it (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998).

Fischer and Ravizza believe that there are two separate and distinct kinds of “control” in actions, “guidance control” and “regulative control” (1998). Regulative control involves alternative possibilities, like a kind of two-sided power of free action. “Guidance control” does not involve alternative possibilities and it is this, and nothing more, which is required for moral responsibility on Fischer and Ravizza’s account. Two specific conditions must be fulfilled to have such guidance control and, hence, moral responsibility (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998):

1. The mechanism (for a definition of this, see the next section) regulating the relevant behavior must be the agent’s own.
  - a. The individual must see him/herself as an agent. When making choices and actions, individuals must see themselves as influencing the world.
  - b. The individual must accept being a target of other people reactions towards him/her (reactive attitudes) because of the way she acts in different contexts (Darwall, 2006).
  - c. The individual’s view of him/herself as set out in the two stages above must be “placed in the right way”. This means, that when the agent makes choices and actions, she must be able to understand how the action affects others in their immediate social world and how those others affect him/her. This kind of knowledge is learned from one’s parents or from the wider social context. An individual must learn what is involved *in* social practices *through* social practices.

By this interaction, the agent will learn what is involved in moral interaction independent of whether this interaction is based on sound or unsound moral input.

2. There must be “responsiveness to reasons” in the action mechanism.

The individual must be able to give due consideration to different reasons and let them prompt her to act in a specific way. Fisher and Ravizza distinguish between a receptive and a reactive aspect (1998). When “receptive to reasons”, an individual first acknowledges her reasons before performing an action. Secondly, she must then be able to translate these reasons into actions and so be “reactive”. In order to be “receptive to reasons” there must, moreover, be a certain pattern in the way the individual acknowledges reasons. To discern and evaluate this pattern, Fischer and Ravizza introduce a third party who must understand the values, preferences and beliefs of the specific individual as well as the personal resources of the individual (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). This again underlines the externalist nature of the TRR: whether an individual is acting freely and responsibly can and should be determined “from the outside”.

### **The mechanism of action**

According to the TRR, a mechanism is what defines the specific way in which an action occurs (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). We should look at the characteristics of the mechanism in order to determine whether control and moral responsibility are present, focusing especially on the mechanism’s overall ability of making the individual act as she does act in another way, and thereby evaluating whether the mechanism affords real control. By looking at the characteristics of a mechanism, it is possible to shift the focus from an individual and her own experience to the process that actually leads to action. Moral responsibility is based on the “actual sequence of events”: what the individual does and in which way it is done (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998, 2006).

### **Habit and craving**

The perspective of Fischer and Ravizza can improve our understanding of the disease model of addiction by introducing mechanisms as the foundation of human actions. Irrespective of the extent to which addiction might be influenced by biological, genetic or cultural factors. The work of Fischer and Ravizza addresses certain longstanding questions concerning human reasoning and actions in contexts where alcohol is involved (Yaffe, 2002).

Actions performed out of habit and driven by craving are not based on practical reasoning as other actions are (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). Yet, when an individual act out of habit or is craving-driven and appears to outsiders to be behaving unreflectively, she might still, according to Fischer and Ravizza, be displaying an awareness of the reasons for acting in a particular way (drinking). When an individual recognizes the reasons to act in a

certain way, even while impelled by habit or craving, she is, according to the TRR, considering these reasons in order to decide an immediate practical question, such as “do I want to drink now?” The individual might not be deliberating about further consequences, and therefore practical reasoning is set aside at that particular moment. However, “recognizing reasons” does not consist in a move from non-reflective reasoning to reflective reasoning. Rather, it consists in the individuals’ awareness that there *are* alternative ways for them to act (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998).

### **Actions have traits: Habit and craving**

Fischer and Ravizza note that actions have certain defining or characteristic traits (1998). When considering actions in the context of alcohol use, habit and craving can be considered traits of the action. Given the presence of these traits, actions in the context of alcohol use may appear to be less within the scope of the individual’s control. However, it is important to note that actions characterized by habit and craving need not be characterized by ignorance or coercion and therefore moral responsibility is not ruled out.

When habits and craving are involved in an action, we can look at the history of the action and evaluate whether the individual had “guidance control” and was responsive to reason.

Even if the individual has no control over a trait in the first place, she can decide if she wants to preserve it. For example, choosing to not be in a situation with alcohol present is to control the *expression* of habit or craving. (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). Fisher and Ravizza argue that if the individual can choose to be in a specific situation at one given point in time, then the individual can choose similarly at another point in time. Hence, if an agent recognizes reasons against to drinking, but still drinks, she might be morally responsible for her actions.

### **Discussion**

Drawing on this action-orientated theory, we suggest that a person experiencing Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) may be morally responsible for her actions. This interpretation may appear controversial, since we often tend to think that AUD is beyond the control of the individual, and in many respect it certainly is. The Theory of Reasons-Responsiveness (TRR) acknowledges that there might be mitigating circumstances such as the influence of an AUD but that these factors solely limit the significance of moral responsibility and do not remove it.

The TRR proposes that the individual become acquainted with aspects of herself in interaction with her immediate social world through her upbringing. Hence individuals will have to take responsibility for their actions based on circumstances which might be beyond their control. One difficulty with this interpretation of moral responsibility is that individuals from dysfunctional backgrounds seem to have the same moral responsibility as those raised in healthy environments.

According to the TRR, an individual experiencing AUD who has had a troubled upbringing might still fulfill the requirements for taking responsibility. The implication is that an individual with AUD will, at times, be able to understand how her choices and actions affect those around her. Moreover, she can see herself as an apt candidate for reactive attitudes such as praise and blame in her interactions with her social world – this is part of becoming a moral individual. Still, we might question whether an individual with a troubled upbringing can develop appropriate reactive attitudes. However, Fischer and Ravizza (1998) do not make a distinction between healthy or unhealthy reactive attitudes. When an individual experiencing AUD recognizes the presence of reactive attitudes, even if not healthy, she is in a process of moral development (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998).

Yet one may intuitively think that an individual raised in an environment with alcohol use disorder does not have the same moral responsibility on misusing alcohol as do individuals raised in a healthy environment, free of alcohol. In both cases reactive attitudes are present, but we might question whether they are placed or “patterned” appropriately in both cases, as required by the TRR. We suppose that the reactive attitudes of an individual who has been raised in an environment with AUD might develop differently from those of individuals raised in families without alcohol misuse.

Fischer, in response to this concern, suggests that we pay attention to the value of an action when attributing moral responsibility to an individual. He argues that an individual’s life is like a book and the individual acts are like the meanings of the sentences in the book. The meaning of any given sentence is related to all the other sentences in a book, and the relationship between the acts and overall structure of an individual’s life is similar to this. E.g. in some circumstances an individual experiencing AUD does not act in accordance with that which, in the public sphere, is considered part of the good life (e.g. not getting drunk every day). Rather, the individual experiencing AUD is “writing the book” in accordance with *her* life. Fischer argues that there is more to it than values or preferences at a given moment – e.g. drinking alcohol in a specific situation. Hence, it is about the broader picture of the life of the individual experiencing AUD, even if we think that an individual who has been manipulated is not morally responsible, Fischer assumes that an individual can *express* herself in the right way. Hence, the individual is writing the story of her life to which specific moral judgments are attached (Fischer, 1999).

Fischer argues that if an individual experiencing AUD is capable of moral behavior, we can place moral, then, she is open to moral judgement. Fischer exemplifies how an individual who is unimpeded can exhibit self-expression in an action. If an agent is unimpeded from acting at will, no freedom-undermining factors are present. An individual being manipulated, for example, is impeded from his personal self-expression (Fischer,

1999).

Yet some might argue that alcohol affects the individual's brain and therefore the individual cannot act unimpeded. This would have the consequence that an individual experiencing AUD who has had a troubled upbringing and been heavily exposed to alcohol would not have a moral responsibility. However, it seems correct that most aspects of an individual's life history, even in the cases of individuals experiencing AUD, are unlike a process of manipulation. We do not tend to view individuals who grew up under unfortunate circumstances and only later in life experienced AUD as having been subject to outright manipulation. If we maintain this intuitive difference, then we can't neglect discussions of the moral responsibility of individuals experiencing AUD.

Fischer and Ravizza seek to capture this intuition by introducing the concepts of reasons-responsiveness and the reasons-responsive mechanism (Fischer, 2000, 2012). Fischer draws a clear line between direct manipulation and the consequence of a troubled upbringing.

Consistent with the approach in the TRR which places emphasis on the individual, Fischer and Ravizza introduce a third party to evaluate whether there is a clear pattern in the individual's recognition of reasons for an action. Again, this places great emphasis on the historical aspect in the life of an individual but not so as to exempt the individual from responsibility.

However, we might question the notion of introducing a third party as a valid way of recognizing patterns, if the third party has been raised under different moral circumstances than those of the relevant individual. When evaluating an action, each individual will focus on different aspects. For instance, if suffering from AUD, a person might well not act in accordance with what is deemed most appropriate in the public realm. A third party could have difficulty evaluating the reasons behind the actions of an individual with AUD. Fischer argues that having moral responsibility is a matter of the value attached to an action. We must be able to understand why the individual acts as she does, as viewed from third party perspective (1999). However, Fischer acknowledges that moral reasons do not need to be *correct* moral reasons (Fischer, 1999).

The third party considers the preferences of the individual and whether these are, as a minimum, in accordance with reality. Fischer and Ravizza argue that the pattern or the intrinsic preferences must, as a minimum, comply with moral standards within a society. One needs to have knowledge of the society within which a moral evaluation is being made (Fischer, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

Moral responsibility can be grounded in guidance control, even in circumstances that might have contributed to AUD risk. According to the TRR, the individual's earlier life circumstances are secondary to whether she

could be held morally responsible for her actions or not. In other words, there can be multiple reasons for experiencing AUD, but this has limited significance when considering moral responsibility. Only when ignorance or coercion is present, can a person experiencing AUD be relieved of moral responsibility for her actions. The capacity of a person experiencing AUD to become abstinent is not linked to her cognitive abilities but to the specific properties of her action-producing mechanism. Insight into how persons experiencing AUD thinks and acts can help clinicians and caregivers to place greater emphasis on actions than underlying causes. The person experiencing AUD and the clinician/caregiver may investigate a specific action and the considerations related to the act and hereby make considerations of the person experiencing AUD explicit. This can help shift the focus from presupposed perceptions of alcohol misuse to the core of the struggle related to staying abstinent.

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