

Can people reasonably blame the circumstances of their environment or upbringing for their moral failure? (Autumn 1993)

The circumstances of environment and upbringing, so various and often seemingly so poisonous to human development, may sometimes be cited as the 'cause' of moral failure, or at least as very powerful mitigating factors when a wrong has been perpetrated. The mentality that crime is essentially an illness or disease to be treated, rather than an offence demanding retribution, rests on the strong interpretation of 'cause' in the statement: poor environment, upbringing, and so on, *cause* moral failure. In the paragraphs below, I seek to examine the validity of the view that external factors like environment and upbringing may be blamed when people do wrong. This will necessarily involve the question of free will and a survey of the theories of hard and soft determinism, and of libertarianism.

Those of a deterministic school of thought would answer yes to the above question. In essence, deterministic thinking sees events as inevitable effects of antecedent causes; some focus on the possible genetic predispositions, others on sociological, still others on both. So-called *soft* determinism, drawing on psychological analyses of human behaviour, locates causes *inside* the mind – one's desires, aversions, and so on - as part of the combination of causes in the cause-effect sequence. All shades of determinism share the conviction that human behaviour is in theory predictable. Some see in soft determinism a way of reconciling the notions of free will and determinism – hence its other name: compatibilism. In truth, though, soft determinism is no less deterministic than hard determinism. Focusing on the 'fuzzier' world of desires, aversions, and so on, multiplies and meshes the cause-effect interaction, but still leaves no room for the notion of free will.

Citing upbringing or environment as the cause of moral failure undoubtedly has superficial appeal. Many feel repelled by the kind of harsh retributionism of earlier centuries, in which

mitigation seemed to play too little a part. Seeing upbringing and environment as causes of moral failure would provide a kind of general amnesty for every criminal whose upbringing and environment were in some way deprived. In essence, it says that the criminal did not fail, but was merely a victim of some other failure. But this conclusion has disturbing implications: if 'negative upbringing' thoroughly conditions a 'negative character', perhaps 'positive upbringing' conditions a 'positive character'. As free will yields wholly to sociological determinism, blame and praise become meaningless, as indeed does the notion of person. If one seriously believes that influences such as upbringing *cause* (in the strong sense) the wrongdoing of sane adults then it must be allowed that the wrongdoer's parents or guardians could make a similar claim: '*I couldn't bring him up any better because I wasn't brought up well ...*'. Rapidly, one sees a fuller implication of deterministic thinking: what happened had to happen; what will be, will be. When one allows upbringing or environment as real causes of (rather than influences in) human wrongdoing, one deconstructs, pulls apart, the 'I' of human agency: if the 'I' in 'I did wrong' is not really 'me', then what of the 'I' in 'I love you' or in 'I have thought long and hard about this'?

A further difficulty arises when one considers the person blaming 'the circumstances of the environment or upbringing for their moral failure'. Assuming that the person is a sane adult, I am entitled to take their assertion with a pinch of salt since it is very much in their interest to escape blame and subsequent punishment for their failure. Subjecting their assertion to more scrutiny, I realise that it is a neat inversion of Spinoza's: '*men ... are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes of them*'; here the assertion is presumably: 'I was ignorant (morally) of my actions but conscious of the causes of them'.

So it seems to me that strictly speaking, environment or upbringing cannot be the cause of a failure we call moral because moral failure presupposes freedom and responsibility on the part of the agent. That we can make authentic choices for good or ill is central to the libertarian view of human action; this view would have it that the cause-effect sequence of the physical world does not trespass into the realm of moral decision making, *until and unless a person him or herself is seen as the 'cause' of their moral behaviour*. The libertarian might highlight the experience of open-ended deliberation as inherent in one with free will. Deliberation concerns one's own future choices, in which a course of action is not decided, and yet, the libertarian argues, the final decision resides with the person. This sense of being able to deliberate and to decide is universal and fundamental: can it be illusory? Strictly speaking, it *could* since the conviction of being free is contingent on experience; it cannot be a *necessary* truth as can, say, a proposition of mathematics. However, to reject the notion of human freedom on the grounds that it cannot be a necessary truth is to retire to a world of impenetrable scepticism: on similar grounds one could reject basic sense data such as *'I'm typing these words'* or *'there are other people in the world'* or *'I am sitting on a chair'*. Furthermore, one could even call into question any process of deliberation and judgement, such as the deterministic theories proposing that the sense of freedom is essentially illusory.

This view of the person possessing moral autonomy is also central to the Judeo-Christian understanding of the Fall, personal sin, loss of grace, mercy and redemption. So the response to moral failure must, in this tradition, include blame. As C. S. Lewis puts it: *'... to be punished, however severely, because we have deserved it, because we 'ought to have known better', is to be treated as a human person made in God's image'*. The removal of retribution from the purposes of punishment is more insidious than an over-emphasis on it: after all, retribution, as C. S. Lewis has pointed out, is the only

connection between the concept of punishment and the notion of just deserts. Modern Catholic teaching emphasises the first purpose in punishment as retributive - *to redress the disorder caused by the offence (Catechism of the Catholic Church)*.

To my mind, this does not rule out the consideration of poor environment and upbringing as mitigating circumstances; but to consider them as causes of the crime of a sane adult is problematic - a person with the awareness to recognise the negative effects of environment or upbringing should have some ability to counteract them. This inconsistency has always been recognized in the Judeo-Christian tradition; the sorry tale of human fall and deepening alienation from God (and from one another) as told in Genesis always puts the blame squarely on the bad choices of human beings. When Adam and Eve fall, when Cain murders Abel, there is always the question: *'What have you done?'*. The implication being that a person who can relate the wrong done by them must also be responsible for it. Furthermore, the evil consequences visited on humanity as a result of sin testify either to the responsibility of humanity for its deeds or to the capriciousness of a God who randomly harms beings created by him.

Positively, the question above calls for reflection on the extent to which circumstances of upbringing and environment may stunt or warp moral development in the person; such reflection may in time lead to a predictive power over certain kinds of aberrant behaviour, and to a response aimed more at cure than punishment. For example, pioneering work with a class of criminals tagged 'predators' because of their extreme psychotic tendencies points to the causative influence of a 'toxic memory', a terrible event buried in the subconscious which outs by way of bizarre violence in later life. It is often argued that environment and upbringing cannot lie behind wrongdoing because others in similar circumstances to those of the wrongdoer have led more upright lives. This argument is not to

my mind conclusive; when people talk about the influence of environment or upbringing they are not really talking about an external reality so much as an *internalising* of external reality; similar surroundings make different impressions in different minds. The argument contained in the question above takes on more plausibility when it is allowed that certain people are more susceptible than others to the baleful influence of poor upbringing and environment because of the way they internalise these realities. Perhaps the interplay between a person's psychological make-up, their upbringing and environment can so hinder a person's socialization and moral development that they never progress beyond a kind of 'moral childhood'. If this be true then calls from such thinkers as Karl Menninger to treat

crime more as an illness should receive attention in these particular situations.

In conclusion, the question above is best answered by a 'no with qualifications' rather than by a 'yes with qualifications'. At most, the question calls for consideration of environment and upbringing as mitigating circumstances, thus offsetting the kind of retributionism that would ignore totally the criminal's personal history. Still, there are profound objections to considering environment and upbringing as causal in the strong sense since this ultimately devalues the person as a free agent and suggests a kind of closed determinism from which there is no escape.