

“Doing and Allowing” and Doing and Allowing*

Ben Bradley and Michael Stocker

I. SCHEFFLER’S ARGUMENT

In “Doing and Allowing,”¹ Samuel Scheffler argues for the following conclusion concerning doing and allowing: “Provided people view themselves as subject to norms of individual responsibility . . . , they cannot accept any system of normative responsibility that does not, to some extent at least, assign them greater responsibility for what they do than for what they allow.”² The heart of his argument is in the following passage: “To see oneself as subject to norms of responsibility is to see oneself as having reason to bring one’s conduct into conformity with those norms. But bringing one’s conduct into conformity with norms of individual responsibility is itself something one does, and not something that one merely allows to happen. It requires marshaling the full resources of one’s agency, including one’s capacities for deliberation, choice, and action.”³

It will be helpful to clarify the basic structure of his argument and label the premises. The argument seems to go like this:

P1: To see oneself as subject to norms of responsibility is to see oneself as having reason (or a reason) to bring one’s conduct into conformity with those norms.

P2: Bringing one’s conduct into conformity with norms of individual responsibility is itself something one does rather than allows.

C1: Therefore, to see oneself as subject to norms of responsibility is to see oneself as having a reason to do something rather than merely to allow something.

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1. Samuel Scheffler, “Doing and Allowing,” *Ethics* 114 (2004): 215–39.

2. *Ibid.*, 219.

3. *Ibid.*, 222.

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C2: Therefore, to see oneself as subject to norms of responsibility is to accept (A) that there are morally relevant distinctions between doing and allowing and (B) in particular that we are more responsible for doings than for allowings.

In what follows, we will not question P1 but will argue that P2 is false and that neither A nor B of C2 follows from C1. We agree on these points even though one of us is a strong supporter of maximizing consequentialism and the other is an ardent anticonsequentialist.

Two preliminary and interrelated points should be made. First, Scheffler follows P. F. Strawson and R. Jay Wallace in holding that responsibility is shown, perhaps constituted, by reactive attitudes.⁴ Using indignation as an example of a responsibility-showing or responsibility-constituting reactive attitude, the claim is that your indignation at my doing D (e.g., hitting him) or at my allowing A (e.g., him to be hit) shows that you hold me responsible for D or A, or, perhaps more constitutively, your having indignation at my doing or allowing is what it is to hold me responsible for doing or allowing, and my meriting indignation is what it is for me to be responsible. (Presumably, your indignation at my being mean-spirited or my having a bad character trait, etc., would similarly show or constitute responsibility. But we will confine attention to doings and allowings.)

Second, we wonder whether Scheffler's argument really engages with the traditional doing/allowing disputes. (We have in mind here not the disputes over how to draw the line between doings and allowings, disputes with which Scheffler is not concerned, but rather the disputes over whether the distinction has any moral significance, however the line is drawn.) These have, at least typically, been framed not as disputes about differential responsibility but as deontological and axiological disputes: for example, is it worse to kill than to allow to die? Is there a more stringent duty to avoid killing than to avoid allowing to die? Of course, it is possible that talking about responsibility will illuminate at least some of the issues in the doing/allowing disputes—perhaps by suggesting that unarticulated thoughts about responsibility are at the heart of those disputes.

But to talk about differential responsibility is to talk about a different, even if overlapping, range of issues and cases than those figuring in the doing/allowing disputes. It should be noted that one of Scheffler's main concerns is to criticize consequentialists for denying moral relevance to the distinction between doing and allowing and in particular for not

4. In, respectively, P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson, 59–80 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); and R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

assigning greater responsibility for what we do than for what we allow. But those who, like consequentialists, think that only outcomes matter and that intentions, reasons, motives, and the like do not, may well think it tendentious to investigate the doing/allowing disputes in terms of responsibility, especially as understood by Strawson and Wallace.

We may here be faced with an instance of one person's *modus ponens* being another's *modus tollens*. Those who favor that account of responsibility may think it can be used to show problems with the view that only outcomes matter. We intend our discussion and rejection of Scheffler's claims to be neutral on this issue.

II. REASONS AND DOINGS

We first target P2: bringing one's conduct into conformity with norms of individual responsibility is itself something one does rather than allows. According to Scheffler, to bring one's conduct into conformity with norms involves taking those norms to be reasons that should guide one's action. Furthermore, Scheffler argues that "responding to a practical reason—trying to be guided by that reason—is always a primary manifestation of one's agency. It is always, we may say, something that one does."⁵ Thus, to bring one's conduct into conformity with norms is to do something rather than allow something to happen. The crucial claim here is a thesis we will call Scheffler's Thesis about Reasons and Doings (STARD): acting on a reason shows or constitutes a doing, not an allowing.

We reject STARD; acting on a reason is not sufficient for a doing. Suppose someone is considering whether to allow something to happen, more fully whether to allow it or prevent it or, perhaps, whether not just to allow it but to bring it about. Suppose, for example, that he is deliberating whether to let his child choose which college to attend, or whether to let distant children die of starvation, and so on. This person can be actively engaged in practical reasoning. He can consider any of these allowings in light of the values and reasons of his moral views, and he can act based on his reasoning. That is, based on his reasons he can decide to allow it or prevent it, or not just allow it but bring it about. By Scheffler's account, since this involves practical reasoning and acting on reasons, it thus involves doings, not allowings. But these examples are among the archetypal allowings figuring in and constituting the doing/allowing disputes.

One might suggest that once we see how much active guidance by reasons these so-called allowings involve, we should be happy to reclassify them as doings. And, of course, they do speak of what the agent does: "You allowed her to go to a terrible college; you allowed them to die.

5. Scheffler, "Doing and Allowing," 224.

That's what you did. You should have enrolled her at our alma mater; you should have contributed to Oxfam." They do speak of the agent as an active, practical being.

Yes, of course. But to go that way is not to deal with the doing/allowing disputes. It is to deny that the cases in question are cases of allowings that figure in these disputes, despite the fact that they are among the very sorts of cases that figure prominently in those debates.

Further, Scheffler's argument is directed at "consequentialist reformers who advocate . . . radical expansion" of responsibility⁶—presumably reformers such as Peter Singer, who think reasonably well-off Americans bear great responsibility for the suffering they allow to happen to people in other countries. If such "allowings" count as doings by Scheffler's lights—and they would, if the Americans act on reasons when failing to send money to Oxfam—his argument fails to give us any reason to think responsibility should not be radically expanded in the way Singer and others suggest.

We are, however, sympathetic to another reply: whether or not Scheffler's claims do engage with the doing/allowing disputes as they have been presented, his claims about doings and allowings, especially their connections with reasons, are important—not because of how they illuminate the doing/allowing disputes, which they may well not do, but because of how they illuminate other features and relations of doings, allowings, and reasons. We agree with this, but it is irrelevant to our argument against STARD, for that argument was concerned with the truth of STARD, not with how STARD lines up with doing/allowing disputes.

We have argued, so far, that contrary to Scheffler's claims, acting on a reason is not sufficient for an act to be a doing. Nor, for that matter, is being done for a reason necessary for an act to be a doing. (We are concerned to show this to help illuminate the relations among doings, allowings, and reasons, not to argue against Scheffler. He does not claim that acting on a reason is necessary for doings.) If inadvertently, perhaps negligently, Michael drives his car into a crowd, it may be said that he allowed it to run off the road, onto the sidewalk. It may also be said that he has injured or killed people on the sidewalk. But these last are doings—what he has done, not just what he allowed. If so, then we have examples of doings that are not cases of acting on a reason.

We are not denying that acting on a reason can make a difference to one's level of responsibility. We are inclined to hold that had Michael driven into the crowd for a reason, that could show more responsibility than inadvertently allowing it to happen. We are also inclined to hold that had Michael allowed it to happen for a reason, that could show

6. *Ibid.*, 219.

more responsibility than his inadvertently driving (a doing) into the crowd. What seems to make the difference here is whether Michael has acted on a reason, not whether he has done something rather than allowed something. This might seem to support the claim that more responsibility is to be assigned where one has acted on a reason than where one has not. However, this claim is not STARD and does not help Scheffler derive his desired conclusion.

We would further note a reason to question whether it is the having of a reason (for a doing or an allowing) that is determinative. At least in some cases, what reason Michael had or lacked and why he had or lacked it might be relevant and might even reverse the judgment. Suppose he allowed something evil to happen out of indifference to the well-being of others or because of a general misanthropy. Suppose further that he welcomed what he was allowing. We think that might show more responsibility, and certainly a worse character, than many innocent, perhaps inadvertent and innocent, doings. We think this might be true even if Michael, unknowingly, inadvertently allowed it to happen—if his unknowingness, his inattention was due to, say, indifference or misanthropy.

III. THINKING AND DOING

We have just suggested that Scheffler can (and perhaps should) be taken as far less concerned with the doing/allowing disputes than he is with STARD. However, though Scheffler does say that STARD is the “fundamental point” he is making,⁷ he does not need to establish the truth of STARD in order to establish P2. For P2 merely says that whether or not acting on a reason is always sufficient for a doing, conforming or intending to conform oneself to a norm of responsibility is sufficient for (and may well be) a doing. And even if STARD is false, there may be something peculiar about this particular sort of acting on a reason—conforming to norms of responsibility—that ensures that it must involve a doing. We think this claim is important and certainly worth investigating. We say this while acknowledging that this claim may well not line up with the doing/allowing disputes (which may make some philosophers all the more willing to pursue the claim).

It is to this claim that we now turn. Our view is that it is mistaken. We do not think that conforming, or intending to conform, to a norm is a doing.

What is it, then, that Scheffler takes to be the peculiar feature of conforming one’s behavior to norms of responsibility? He says that such conforming requires “marshaling the full resources of one’s agency,

7. *Ibid.*, 223.

including one's capacities for deliberation, choice, and action."⁸ And marshaling resources, he says, is not the sort of thing one merely allows to happen. But we think 'marshal' may be too strong, giving what some, especially some non-Kantians, might see as too biblical an account of the moral life, seeing it as an ongoing fight against contrary impulses and temptations.

For these and similar reasons, some philosophers—perhaps inspired by Aristotle and Iris Murdoch—would hold that Scheffler here focuses too much on and gives entirely too much importance to decisions and acts of will. Some would also hold that talk of marshaling comes at least close to describing the conflicted state Aristotle calls *enkratia*. They might grant that marshaling is accurate enough about what it is like when a person is struggling, perhaps learning, to be good, or when a person is conflicted, but not what it is like to be a wholeheartedly good, mature person, with a settled and stable character.

This has direct bearing on issues of responsibility. For the reasons just indicated, it might now be held that instead of accepting Scheffler's claim about marshaling, doing, and responsibility, we should hold that "to see oneself as subject to norms of responsibility" requires trusting oneself and one's moral appreciations, to see straightway what is to be done, and to act accordingly. This, further, would be understood in terms of allowings—allowing oneself to see, allowing oneself to act—or at least in terms closer to allowings than to marshalings. It would also be understood as holding that we are more responsible for, and show more responsibility in, such allowings than for those arguably *enkra*tⁱc doings, Scheffler's marshalings.

A more moderate position would be to see room, perhaps need, for both of these positions: that both the doings of marshalings and these allowings can show responsibility and that seeing "oneself as subject to norms of responsibility" requires both. (We leave open the issue of which shows more responsibility.)

However, we think that even this more moderate position is mistaken or certainly misleading. We do not think that what Scheffler urges are well understood as doings, nor do we think that what those philosophers influenced by Aristotle and Murdoch might urge are well understood as allowings.

The issues are too complex to settle easily or quickly. So we will simply start with the bald claim that if Scheffler is right that these are doings, he thereby shows how these are unlike many other sorts and instances of thinking, reasoning, applying rules and standards and of making ourselves good at doing all this—all and any of which, we will abbreviate as thinking. Thinking—including his marshalings—we will

8. *Ibid.*, 222.

suggest, does not provide us with good models or examples of doings. (We focus explicitly on these so-called doings, but we have parallel, and often identical, worries about those so-called allowings.)

We could start our examination of this by considering the roles of, for example, sensitivity and openness in thinking.⁹ Often enough, when we see the tree ten feet in front of us, there is nothing (more?) for us to do. We allow ourselves to see it; we allow the tree to impress itself on us. Many cases of arithmetic are similar: unlike young children, we no longer do the sum of two plus three, getting five. According to Spinoza, if we understand what a plane triangle is, we do not have to do anything to know that the sum of a given triangle's interior angles is 180 degrees. In "Deciding to Believe,"¹⁰ Bernard Williams argues that one cannot decide to believe. We do draw conclusions—for example, that the butler is guilty. However, to avoid a miscarriage of justice, this had better be an exercise that involves sensitivity and recognition. And at times, there is no difference between seeing the conclusion and drawing it. At times, to see it is to draw it.

A lot of thinking is, of course, directed and superintended. At times we have to work, overcoming reluctance and other impediments, in order to focus or keep focused on a problem, an issue, a lecturer, or a book, in order to follow, understand, and evaluate what is going on. These might look like doings. (They might show what is different about seeing the tree and looking at it.)

But let us look at believing or coming to a belief, agreeing with Williams that we cannot decide to believe. To come to a belief, we often have to work hard. This work might look like a doing. But typically it will involve seeing and being open to the evidence—seeing it as evidence, perhaps only after allowing ourselves to see it as evidence, which can involve putting aside our prejudices or how things looked at first. Having seen it as evidence, we have to assess its weight as evidence—which might look like a doing. But doing the assessment can involve recalling the relevant standards, recognizing how they bear on this, and so on. Once again, these may look like doings. But it can and almost certainly does involve the allowings of a flexible, free flow of imagination; openness; sensitivity to implications, to which avenues of thought are worth following, whether standards of evidence have been met or violated; and so on.

No matter where we look, we find doings (or what may look like doings) shot through with allowings (or what may look like allowings)

9. As well as Aristotle and Murdoch, see Graeme Marshall, "On Being Affected," *Mind* 77 (1968): 241–59.

10. Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 136–51.

and vice versa. At each “point,” in each part of the process, of thinking, for example, of coming to a belief, it is hard to classify what is there taking place as a doing or as an allowing.

We find it unhelpful, even if not inaccurate, to see these as mixtures of doings and allowings. It is not that they involve only allowings and no doings or only doings and no allowings but rather that as soon as we examine what seem like doings (e.g., the work), we find what seem like allowings alongside them or underlying them, and so too for what seem like allowings and doings.

Our view is that it may be good to recognize that these are (involve) amalgams of doings and allowings. However, we think it better to recognize that the disjunction ‘doings or allowings’ and the conjunction ‘doings and allowings’ fit poorly here. The better understanding might have it that they are instances of activity, of actualization, *energeiai* in Aristotelian terms,¹¹ instances of the exercise of our “faculties.” Or perhaps, as may be somewhat different, we should see them as mixtures of activity and passivity. Here we should remember that at least for humans, there are few, if any, cases of pure activity or pure passivity but only mixtures of both.¹²

IV. THINKINGS AND RESPONSIBILITY

Premise 2 (P2) is false; it is not plausible or helpful to characterize as doings the thinkings involved in conforming one’s behavior to a norm. There are two further, related points to make about thinking as a doing or an allowing: we doubt that as a general rule we do (or think we should) assign greater (or lesser) responsibility to what Scheffler says are the doings than to the allowings and other nondoings involved in moral thinking. On our view, these allowings and nondoings can show as great or greater responsibility and can merit the same or even stronger reactive attitudes than the doings Scheffler considers.

This holds for thinking involved in morality or ethics. It also holds for thinking quite generally. Sometimes we celebrate an innovator for having fought through to a conclusion; sometimes we celebrate someone who “just sees” what is to be done; sometimes we think poorly of

11. On *energeia/ai*, see Terry Penner, “Verbs and the Identity of Actions—a Philosophical Exercise in the Interpretation of Aristotle,” in *Ryle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Oscar P. Wood and George Pitcher, 393–460 (London: Macmillan, 1970); L. A. Kosman, “Aristotle’s Definition of Motion,” *Phronesis* 14 (1969): 40–62, and “Substance, Being, and *Energeia*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 2 (1984): 121–49. On *energeia* as actualization, see also Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Longmans, Green, 1874), vol. 1, essay 4, sec. 2, 230–51.

12. Again, see Marshall, “On Being Affected.” See also David Rapaport, “Some Metapsychological Considerations concerning Activity and Passivity,” in *The Collected Papers of David Rapaport*, ed. Merton M. Gill (New York: Basic, 1967), 530–68.

someone for working and struggling to reach an answer that should have been obvious from the outset or for the banality of his conclusions; and so on, ringing all the changes.

We should also take seriously the claim made by the psychoanalyst David Shapiro that active thinking in the sense of doing thinking—controlling it, superintending it, directing it, marshaling it—is a characterizing “style” of paranoid thinking and, to a lesser degree, of obsessive-compulsive and other forms of rigid thinking. These all are characterized by the lack of autonomous, flexible thinking, of freely flowing openness and sensitivity to both the world and to what one knows and thinks.¹³

Of course, these last considerations show merely that there are some instances of allowings that carry at least as much responsibility as similar doings. Perhaps Scheffler can accept this. If so, we wonder what exactly Scheffler is saying when he says that doings carry greater responsibility than allowings. Rather than speculate about this, we will put the question to the side, for in this article we are not attempting to show that the doing/allowing distinction never has any moral significance—only that Scheffler fails to show that it does have moral significance.

V. COMPARISONS WITH WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE

We turn, finally, to Scheffler’s derivation of C2 from C1. The claims, again, are as follows:

C1: To see oneself as subject to norms of responsibility is to see oneself as having a reason to do something rather than merely to allow something.

C2: To see oneself as subject to norms of responsibility is to accept (A) that there are morally relevant distinctions between doing and allowing and (B) in particular that we are more responsible for doings than for allowings.

That Scheffler thinks C2 follows from C1 can be seen in this passage, among others: “Insofar as he is determined to comply with the norms of responsibility, he treats the [doing/allowing] distinction as significant, for securing compliance with the norms is itself a primary manifestation of his agency,” that is, a doing.¹⁴ Scheffler seems to think that if he can show that conforming one’s behavior to a norm must involve a doing rather than an allowing, he will have shown that the doing/allowing distinction is “significant” to anyone interested in conforming his behavior to norms. But significant in what way? He might have shown

13. See David Shapiro, *Neurotic Styles* (New York: Basic, 1965), and *Autonomy and Rigid Character* (New York: Basic, 1981).

14. Scheffler, “Doing and Allowing,” 228.

that the distinction is instrumentally significant, that those who wish to conform their behavior to norms would need to do something, rather than allow something, in order to accomplish the responsibility-conferring feat of conforming one's behavior to norms. But this is not to show that there is differential responsibility between relevantly similar doings and allowings.

Suppose that despite what we have argued in the previous sections, Scheffler is right to say that accepting norms of responsibility is a doing, that is, for conceptual reasons, that accepting is a doing; necessarily, it is a doing. This entails that it is impossible to conform one's behavior to norms via allowings. As noted above, we disagree, but if Scheffler were right about this, how could it show that these doings of conforming carry more responsibility than allowings of conforming? For there are, and can be, no allowings to be compared with those doings.

As we see matters, if an act of a certain sort—for example, conforming one's behavior to norms of responsibility—cannot be performed via an allowing, then acts of that sort are not germane to the question of differential responsibility between doings and allowings. Thus, even if, contrary to what we have argued, conforming behavior to norms is a doing rather than an allowing, this fact is irrelevant to the assignment of responsibility to the agent.