Class 14 - Free Will II

I. Identification, and the three questions

In Frankfurt's compatibilism, coercion excuses moral responsibility.
If we act only on our will, though, in the absence of coercion, we may be taken to be responsible.
Frankfurt's case of $Jones_4$ showed that even if we can not act otherwise, even if the universe is determined, as long as our reasons for acting were derived from our will, rather than from external coercion, we can be (or are) held morally responsible.
In later work, Frankfurt explores the notion of identification.
We identify with a behavior when we embrace it, or do it in accordance with our will.
Thus, we can say that Frankfort ascribes responsibility for an action as long as we identify with that action.

Still, Frankfurt originally agreed that when we are coerced, as in the case of $Jones_2$, we are not responsible.
Note that if we are committed to a behavior, or type of behavior, we can identify with it whether or not we are coerced into doing it.
Woolfolk, Doris and Darley look at attributions of responsibility in cases of coercion, and find that the case is not as simple as Frankfurt originally claimed, that coercion excuses moral responsibility.
Ascriptions of moral responsibility are higher if we identify with an action.
Thus, we may be responsible, even in cases of coerced action.

> Persons may be held responsible even when they operated in the grip of forces compelling that action (64).

Thus, we can call the adjusted view mature compatibilism.
Remember, that compatibilism is a way of rectifying the apparently conflicting claims of strict causal (or hard) determinism with the recognition that there are certain actions for which we ascribe responsibility to an agent, and others for which we do not.
We have intuitions that certain agents are responsible, and others are not.
Woolfolk et al. seek experimental confirmation of the intuitions that ground mature compatibilism

Further, Woolfolk et al. are interested in psychological research which relies on a causal discounting principle.
The causal discounting principle, consistent with Frankfurt's original compatibilism, claims that people's attributions of moral responsibility are discounted when an agent is seen to be constrained.
That is, psychologists assume that coercion excuses responsibility.
The causal discounting principle is applied outside of psychology, since questions of moral responsibility are required when determining legal punishments.
If the mature compatibilist is correct, then the causal discounting principle will not be defensible.
For, one has to consider not just whether the agent is constrained, but also whether s/he identifies with her/his actions.

Lastly, for background, there is an assumption, among some philosophers, that the folk are naturally incompatibilists.
Remember, there are two kinds of incompatibilists.
Libertarians argue that we are actually free; they deny determinism.
Hard determinists accept determinism and infer from it that people are never morally responsible.
If people ascribe responsibility in cases of maximal constraint, there would be experimental evidence against hard determinism that could not be explained by libertarianism.
Thus, one might demonstrate that people are naturally compatibilists.

Woolfolk et al. thus seek data concerning three questions:

1. Are folk theories compatibilist or not?
2. If they are compatibilist, are they mature compatibilists, ascribing responsibility even in cases of constraint? Or, do they, as Frankfurt originally did, excuse all coerced action?
3. Is the causal discounting principle consistent with folk intuitions?

II. The Woolfolk experiments

Much of the Woolfolk et al. paper consists of descriptions of their carefully crafted research, designed to help answer the three questions above.
They construct stories with high and moderate constraint, and with high and low identification.
All stories involve a cuckold and a hijacking.
In high identification, Bill wants to kill Frank, because Frank has been having an affair with Bill's wife.
In low identification, Bill finds out about the affair, but comes to grips with it, and is at peace with Frank.
In moderate constraint, Bill is asked by hijackers to kill Frank, but he can (possibly) avoid it.
In high constraint, Bill is threatened by the hijackers and it seems that the only way to avoid killing Frank is to die himself.

To respond to criticisms that defying the hijackers is an option, even in cases of high constraint (i.e. that the situation of high constraint is not really one in which one is coerced), Woolfolk et al. devise a further absolute constraint, under which Bill is given a psychoactive compliance drug which renders him physically unable to avoid complying with the hijackers' requests.
Jonathan made just this criticism in class.
Subjects given the absolute constraint scenario were additionally told to suspend their disbelief about the plausibility of the compliance drug.
It might be interesting to pursue a question about the applicability of results which require a suspension of disbelief; it could be the case that the folk don't really have a notion of absolute constraint applicable to cases such as these.
In other words, if people adopt compatibilism as an alternative to hard determinism when they are told that libertarianism is not an option, the result would not confirm that those people are compatibilists; it would only show that they prefer compatibilism to hard determinism.
People might prefer libertarianism to compatibilism.

Lastly, Woolfolk et al. performed a separate experiment (Experiment 3, pp 73-75) to test whether subjects generally attributed greater responsibility in situations of lesser constraint, which they did.
The point of this last experiment was just to verify that any effects of identification are working against a backdrop of a general (folk) theory which negatively correlates constraint with responsibility.

To judge whether subjects attributed responsibility to Bill, when he kills Frank, Woolfolk et al. asked them directly whether they thought Bill was responsible.
In addition, they probed the subjects' thoughts about responsibility with further, related questions (p 67, Table 4.1).
Some of these factors were combined into a further measure, called Bill's blameworthiness, and into an opposing measure, called hijacker responsibility.
As expected, they found that Bill was found significantly more responsible in cases of higher constraint.
More interestingly, Woolfolk et al. found that subjects find Bill more responsible in high identification cases than in low identification cases.

> We found participants' attributions of responsibility for an action to be influenced by the actor's attitude toward that action, even when the action was causally constrained to such a degree that there were no other behavioral options. The degree to which actors "identified" with an action was strongly associated with responsibility for the action being assigned to them (75-6).

III. Descriptive results and normative questions

The three questions which Woolfolk et al. raised with regards to their research were:

> 1. Are folk theories compatibilist or not?
> 2. If they are compatibilist, are they mature compatibilists, ascribing responsibility even in cases of constraint? Or, do they, as Frankfurt originally did, excuse all coerced action?
> 3. Is the causal discounting principle consistent with folk intuitions?

The results show clearly that folk intuitions are more complex than the causal discounting principle may indicate.
Identification, in addition to constraint, affects our attributions of responsibility.

> Our data suggest that the attribution of moral responsibility takes into account noncausal elements, such as identification, in addition to causal factors... Our data support the view that information about outcomes that an actor desires can moderate or override the attributional effects of the actor's perceived control over events (76).

Woolfolk et al. make further, reasonable suggestions for psychological research into folk theories of responsibility.

More interesting, for us, are responses to the first two questions, concerning the philosophical questions about free will and compatibilism.
Woolfolk et al. argue that their data show that, in some contexts, people are not incompatibilists, since they attribute some level of responsibility to Bill, even in the situation of absolute constraint, viz. in situations of high identification.
They take their work as having shown that folk theories reject the principle of alternate possibilities, but the results are even stronger.
The data support a mature compatibilism.
Working backwards to the Frankfurt article, such results would show that people find $Jones_2$ responsible, to some degree, even though he was stampeded by a threat.

But, Woolfolk et al. also deny that folk theories are strictly compatibilist.
They argue that people do not have a simple theory of responsibility attribution.
Instead, they allege, people are contextualists: the amount of responsibility that people attribute depends on a constellation of factors particular to the case.

> Differing considerations are salient to moral responsibility attribution in different contexts, and...patterns of responsibility attribution may also vary culturally and developmentally. We might suspect that along the broad spectrum of moral cognition related to responsibility ascription, which ranges from the determination of criminal liability, to the assignment of credit for scientific discovery, to deciding which sibling should have to clean up the spilled milk, complex considerations often come into play (77).

It is clear that research into people's actual attributions of responsibility introduce complexity into our analyses of responsibility.
We have returned, thus, to the tension between a normative theory and a descriptive theory.
In constructing theories, we aim for simplicity, as we saw in the Quine reading on the scientific method.
But, the simplest theories will have to smooth out the rough edges found in studies such as these.
When we smooth over the rough edges, do we irresponsibly ignore data, in favor of our intuitions?
Or, do we take a normative perspective, in which the actual attributions of responsibility are evaluated according to a prior standard?

Here is another way to put the question: does folk-psychological rejection of the causal discounting principle indicate that we should ascribe more responsibility in cases of higher identification, even in cases of maximal constraint?
Perhaps the folk just get it wrong.