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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
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24.06 RESPONSIBILITY – HANDOUT

Suppose that you have a medical condition, and you engaged in behavior that significantly increased the risk of your getting it. Is it your fault?

Levels of Risk

Diving

A bent cave-diver and a bent snorkeler both need access to a hyperbaric chamber. Should we give the snorkeler priority, because ‘it is the diver’s fault he got this way’?

Walking

A hill walker and a couch potato both get struck by lightning. Should we give the couch potato priority?

Fault for Behavior

Alcoholism

Two people need livers, one is alcoholic. Otherwise, their prognosis is the same. Should we think – ‘it is the alcoholic’s fault she got this way’?

Obesity

Should health insurance companies be allowed to charge the obese higher premiums, on the grounds that ‘it is their fault they got that way’?

Here’s an **unpromising** argument for thinking that it is not the alcoholic’s fault:

- P1 (Genetic Determinism)** There is some gene complex G , such that, given certain background environmental conditions, anybody who has it will become an alcoholic.
- P2 (Fault)** For any event, E , and set of conditions C , you are not at fault for E if C is causally sufficient for E and you have no control over C .
- P3** Alcoholics do not have control over their genes or their background environmental conditions.

C Alcoholics are not responsible for their alcoholism

A more promising argument

- P1 (Fault 2)** You are at fault for E only if you know (or should know) that E is a likely consequence of your free actions – where your actions are *free* when they are sensitive to your *second order desires*.
- P2** Typically, an alcoholic’s liver failure is not a consequence of his or her free actions.

C Typically, an alcoholic is not at fault for his or her liver failure.