

Free Will or Determinism - A Conundrum

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Free Will - In a situation with more than one realistically possible choice of about equal likelihood, for example: “about face, via turning left” and “about face, via turning right” given that I chose one way, I could have chosen the other. Or, in the thought experiment of being able to repeat this act ten times, all else being equal, I will chose to turn via the left about as often as I chose to turn via the right.

James points out, “. . . either universe *after the fact* and once there would, to our means of observation and understanding appear just as rational as the other. There would be absolutely no criterion by which we might judge one necessary and the other matter of chance.” (James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, p. 45)

Determinism - Everything that happens is caused by a preceding happening (or collection of happenings), and thus any future happening is totally dependent on past happenings, and is thus entirely predetermined.

An Antinomy - There appears to be little new that might be said about this approximately 2000 year-long debate. Indeed, I agree with Benson Mates who suggests that it is an antinomy, “a contradiction between principles or conclusions that seem equally necessary and reasonable; a paradox” (*American Heritage Dictionary*) The best we can do is see how much we can know or understand as we dance around this center that cannot be reached.

The Liar’s Paradox - “If a man says ‘I am lying,’ what he says is true if and only if it is false.” (Mates, *Skeptical Essays*, pp. 18-21) Attributed to Eubulides of Miletus, fourth century B.C. Approaches to resolution are not compelling. They include:

“no meaningful sentence can be about itself . . . semantic closure is blocked” This relates to Godel’s theorems that “it is impossible to formulate a complete and consistent axiom system for arithmetic.” (Falletta, *Paradoxicon*, p. 81)

“ordinary rules of logic do not hold . . . the logic of natural language is best regarded as multivaried,”

“it involves a category mistake and is therefore nonsensical.”

Mates argues that the free will/determinism issue is like the liars paradox. In the same category is the “knowledge of the external world” problem, and probably by derivation, some forms of the mind/brain problem.

Animate/Inanimate - Possibly a problem here is confusing--or asserting-- the rules that govern inanimate things with those that apply to animate things. (Taylor, *Action and Purpose*) How reasonable is it to use the rules that govern things to apply to organisms with conscious intention?

Reasons vs. compulsive determinism - We do not normally make choices totally arbitrarily, without reasons. Possibly, even most often, the reasons are compelling to the degree that the term ‘choice’ is a false attribution. We are directed by our genetics and our culture--nature and nurture--in all that we do. However, that direction is not absolute. Only when looking backwards is everything determined.

Does acceptance of God imply determinism? - “Does not the admission of . . . freedom preclude utterly the notion of a Providence governing the world? . . . [No] provided you do not restrict the Providence to fulminating nothing but *fatal* decrees. If you allow him to provide possibilities as well as actualities to the universe, and to carry on his own thinking in those two categories as we do ours, chances may be there, uncontrolled even by him, and the course of the universe may be really ambiguous . . .” (James, p. 62)

Doesn't everyday observation of causality demand determinism? - “Every event is the effect of antecedent events, and these in turn are caused by events antecedent to them, and so on . . . Human actions are no exception to this rule; for, although the causes of some of them are much less well understood than the causes of certain other types of events, it can hardly be denied that they do have causes and that these causes determine their effects with the same certainty and inevitability that are found in every other kind of case. In particular, those human actions usually called *free* are, each of them, the ultimate and inevitable effects of events occurring long before the agent was born and over which he obviously had no control; and since he could not prevent the existence of the causes, it is clear he could not avoid the occurrence of the effects. Consequently, despite appearances to the contrary, human actions are no more free than the motions of the tides, or the rusting of a piece of iron that is exposed to water and air.” (Mates, p. 59)

Put another way, we are like a Newtonian billiard table on which the motions of the balls are known for all time if they are known now.

However, consider this in the extreme. Assume that the events of today are the result of the interaction of cosmic particles billions of years ago. How likely do you think it is that every road would be where it is, matching every bridge, and that every house would have all its walls? Wouldn't there be some gross imperfection? Or, to use a metaphor, how likely do you think it that if a very, very large pile of bricks exploded that the bricks would land in the form of a house?

Doesn't the modern physics of materialist reductionism demand determinism? - “. . . nature consists of particles and their relations with each other, and since everything can be accounted for . . . [by the laws of physics that apply to] those particles and their relations, there is simply no room for freedom of the will. . . . [There is] no evidence that there is or could be some mental energy of human freedom that can move molecules in directions that they were not otherwise going to move. So it really does look as if everything we know about physics forces us to some form of denial of human freedom.” (Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science*, ch. 6)

Quantum Aside - Modern quantum-mechanical, statistical probability does not get us out of this. If it applies at all at the macro scale, at the most it replaces determinism with randomness, which is hardly free will.

The Moral Dilemma - “. . . we are morally responsible only for those of our actions that are freely done . . . we are not responsible for actions we cannot help doing, [so by the arguments of determinism] then it follows that nobody is morally responsible for anything.” (Mates, p. 60)

“What interest, zest, or excitement can there be in achieving the right way, unless we are enabled to feel that the wrong way is also a possible and a natural way? . . . And, what sense can there be in condemning ourselves for taking the wrong way . . . unless the right way was open to us as well?” (James, p. 59)

Dualism as an Answer - One class of early suggestions leads to the idea that there is a soul and/or spirit that is the source of our free will and that it is mental, as opposed to physical, and that in some unexplained way it can change the course of the physical. This is the classical dualist position which may have been satisfying when we all believed in a deity and an immortal soul.

Soft Determinism/Compatibilism as an Answer - This has been taken as “acting without external constraint” (James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, p. 40), a form of the solution put forward by David Hume in the 18th century. “. . . my action is free if it is the effect of the determinations of my own will . . . Thus, the differences between our free acts and our other acts . . . is not whether there are causes, but what those causes are. If someone’s action is the effect of his own choice, it is free and he bears moral responsibility for it . . . [in fact] only because our actions are causally related to our motive do the former have any moral quality whatever.” (Mates, p. 61) Mates answers simply, “for the agent’s act to be free, it does not suffice that it result from his own choice; for if he did not choose freely, the chosen course cannot be considered free either.”

Or, as Searle (p. 89) puts it, “There is a standard argument [called compatibilism] according to [which] free will and determinism are perfectly compatible with each other. Of course everything in the world is determined, but some human actions are nonetheless free. To say they are free is not to deny that they are determined; it is just to say they are not constrained. . . . Everything that happened was indeed determined. It’s just that some things were determined by certain sorts of inner psychological causes . . . and not by external forces or psychological compulsions.”

However, Searle replies, “Compatibilism . . . denies the substance of free will while maintaining its verbal shell. . . . The problem about freedom of the will is not about whether or not there are inner psychological causes and inner compulsions. Rather, it is about whether or not the causes of our behavior, whatever they are, are sufficient to *determine* the behavior so that things *have* to happen the way they do.”

We Cannot Prove Cause and Effect - One foundation of determinism is the doctrine of cause and effect: every effect is absolutely linked to a preceding cause. However, Hume argued that this is an axiom, not a basic truth. Cause and effect is the observation of repetitive conjunction of particular events

which induces us to postulate their linkage. From this philosophical point of view, causality is a belief, not a fact.

We Deny Obvious Sense Data in Accepting Determinism - “The appeal of free will [is that] . . . if there is any fact of experience we are all familiar with, it’s the simple fact that our own choices, decisions, reasonings and cogitations seem to make a difference to our actual behavior. There are all sorts of experiences that we have in life where it seems just a fact of our experience that though we did one thing, we feel we know perfectly well that we could have done something else.” (Searle, p 87) He goes on to point out that “The first thing to know about our conception of human freedom is that it is essentially tied to consciousness. . . . The characteristic experience that gives us the conviction of human freedom, and it is an experience from which we are unable to strip away the conviction of freedom, is the experience of engaging in voluntary, intentional human actions.” How this is, he suggest we simply cannot know from our current perspective: “Our conception of physical reality simply does not allow for radical freedom.”

What Are the Meanings of Because - There are numerous meanings of the word ‘because.’ Possibly one problem that leads to this debate is with the concept of causation. “The question before us is simply this: Whether causation, as it is exemplified in . . . [the constant conjunction] between certain events, processes, or states is the basic idea of causation . . . or whether, on the contrary, causation as it is exemplified in the actions of agents is the basic idea of causation . . . It was once generally supposed that the latter [called efficient causation] was the correct view, that events, processes and states were only ‘secondary causes,’ and that a cause in the original and proper sense had to be something, such as a man, having the power to make certain things happen. It is now generally supposed . . . that the causation of events by agents--by men, for example--can be understood only in terms of a causal relationship between certain events, processes or states.” (p. 21) From the point of view of efficient causation, as opposed to simply constant conjunction, an agent has a purpose and does an action to bring about the end of that purpose. And, Taylor suggests, this is as deeply as we can know this. That is, we are the agent that causes the act, and there is not other set of terms in which this can be explained. That is, “the concept of purposeful action is a basic and irreducible one.” (p. 256) Unfortunately, for the debate at hand, he agrees this leaves things in as mysterious a state as they ever were.

Pragmatism - Pragmatism focuses on outcomes more than on possible causes. It asks, what difference does it make? That is, “Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must

follow from one side of the other's being right." Or put in other terms, "to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance." (James, pp. 142-144) In these terms it is better to assume we are free, than to be wrong. Truth is not the issue because, "theories [are] instruments, not answers to enigmas . . . ideas (which themselves are but part of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience . . ." (James, 146-147)

Objectivism/Subjectivism - The free will/determinism debate can be readily recast into the modern poles of objectivism and subjectivism. In those terms we can suggest a stance, similar to the pragmatic one put forward earlier in this century by Dewey, that looks for a synthesis. This is the "experientialist myth" (Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 230) "Within the experientialist myth, understanding emerges from interaction, constant negotiation with the environment and other people. It emerges in the following way: the nature of our bodies and our physical and cultural environment imposes a structure on our experience, in terms of natural dimensions . . . Recurrent experience leads to the formation of categories, which are experiential gestalts with those natural dimensions. Such gestalts define coherence in our experience. We understand our experience directly when we see it as being structured coherently in terms of gestalts that have emerged directly from interaction with and in our environment."

Reframing - Walker Percy implicitly argues for a way out of the debate by suggesting that its terms are too limited. That is, in its own terms the free will/determinism dichotomy cannot be meaningfully analyzed. Instead, we must look from a different perspective. "But may we not also require of anthropology, the science of man, some assessment of that creature himself who makes culture possible? . . . It is high time for social scientists . . . to take seriously the chief article of faith upon which their method is based: that there is a metascientific, metacultural reality, an order of being apart from the scientific and cultural symbols with which it is grasped and expressed." (Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, p. 239-242)

References

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