

Free Will I

Free will is not a single issue, but a cluster of issues in metaphysics, philosophy of mind and ethics. We will hop around these different domains, but the focus will be on the metaphysics. There is a webpage for the course (linked to my faculty homepage) that contains links to readings, copies of the handouts, and anything else that seems relevant:

<https://rjh221.user.srcf.net/courses/freewill/>

It will always be a work in progress, but do let me know if you find dead links etc.

SOME PROBLEMS AROUND THE NOTION OF FREE WILL

First: a general worry that empirical research shows we are more influenced—perhaps by our genes, certainly by our environments—than we think. For instance, in an influential early study it was found that people choosing a pair of tights from a choice of four are more likely to choose the pair on the right of the display, saying that they are of better quality, when in fact they are identical. Probably they scan from left to right, and then choose the one that they last saw. But that is not something we realized we were doing. In that sense then, an apparently free choice looks to be less free than we thought.

Second: findings from neuroscience. Popular worry that all of our choices are just the movements of neurons, and neurons don't have free will, so we don't have free will. That is a worry about levels. Is it a good one? Do the facts that macroscopic objects are made up of subatomic particles, and that subatomic particles have no colour show that nothing has any colour? Perhaps more worrying: various findings suggest there are ways to predict what people will do by scanning their brains. That is not an issue of levels (a synchronic issue) but an issue of causation (a diachronic issue). As they stand those findings are not terribly worrying to someone who believes in free will: the predictions are far from certain. But they point to the third worry.

Third, more generally: we have a picture of the world that is given to us by science according to which we are part of the natural world. But the natural world is governed by deterministic causal laws. So everything we do, along with everything else, is causally necessitated by the conjunction of the laws of nature, and how things stood at an earlier time. This is the thesis of *determinism*. (Distinguish the *metaphysical* thesis of determinism from the *epistemological* claim that we can predict what people will do; also distinguish determinism from the idea of *fatalism*, which says that things will work out the same no matter what you do; and distinguish it from the weaker claim that every event is caused.)

- P1 If determinism is true, then every human action is causally necessitated
- P2 If every action is causally necessitated, no one could have acted otherwise
- P3 One only has free will if one could have acted otherwise
- P4 Determinism is true
- C No one has free will

This argument is clearly *valid* (i.e. the conclusion follows from the premises). So disagreements will focus on whether or not it is *sound* (i.e. whether it is a valid argument with *true premises*) and if it isn't on which premise(s) should be rejected. Note the standard terminology in discussions

of free will. *Hard determinists* accept the soundness of the argument and so embrace its conclusion. *Libertarians* deny its conclusion, and do so by denying P4. (Note that it is not enough just to deny determinism. We have to say what to put in its place if we want to hang on to free will. And it is quite unclear what could play the role. Certainly thinking that events happen randomly, as quantum mechanics is sometimes held to entail, will not do the job.) *Compatibilists* (or *soft determinists*) deny the conclusion and accept P4—they want to hold that determinism and free will are *compatible*—and so standardly want to reject one of the other premises; typically P2 or P3 (or both). But some positions that look like compatibilism turn out, on closer examination, to be arguing for the compatibility of determinism with our normal practices of holding people responsible. So such positions seem to be able to accept the soundness of this argument. They are compatibilists not about freedom and determinism, but about responsibility and determinism (we'll come back to this when we look at Strawson). Note too that the boundary between compatibilism and hard determinism is not absolute. It could be that we need to give up some of our antecedent views about free will if we are to make them compatible with determinism, but not all of them. That position has come to be called *revisionism*.

To get a clearer view of quite what is at issue here we need to step back a little. Why should the conclusion seem so threatening? There are (at least!) two distinct sorts of consideration that make it so. One concerns the phenomenology of freedom, the other concerns our ascriptions of responsibility.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY

It seems as though we are free to choose. Indeed, to say that it seems that way is to understate the point badly. There are few things more sure than that we are free to choose. As Dr. Johnson famously said: 'Sir, we know our will is free, and there's an end on't'. Imagine a trivial example: you are faced with a choice of pudding. You are very partial to each; but you can only have one or the other. You feel your self with the choice between them; you feel as though it is up to you to decide. You lean first towards one, then the other; you might wonder which one you will chose. Finally, you make a choice. It feels as though you could have chosen differently. And, until you act on your decision, it feels as though you could still change your mind. Now imagine some more important cases: you are deciding which university to apply to, which courses to take, which person to spend the rest of your life with.

These considerations are based on a certain phenomenology: we have an experience that things feel a certain way. Experiences aren't themselves propositions, so they can't directly be consistent or inconsistent with the conclusion of an argument. But we do think that experiences reveal the world to be a certain way. In just the way that our visual experience tells us that, for instance, we are looking at a red cube, so our experience of acting tells us that we have free will. But what exactly does it tell us? It might be thought to tell us (in increasing order of strength):

- (i) that we really do make choices, and that these are determiners of how we act;
- (ii) that we could have acted otherwise;
- (iii) that our choices are not caused by anything outside of us.

Clearly the second and third of these claims are in tension with some of the premises of the earlier argument. Quite how worrying this is depends on which of these possibilities we take to be revealed by our experience.

RESPONSIBILITY

What sorts of things do we ascribe responsibility to? They need to be an agent with a will that they can exercise. Unless we are badly anthropomorphizing, we don't blame a car that has broken down. Nor do we blame someone for not helping when we find that they were locked in a room, unable to come to our aid. Moreover they need to have the right kind of control over their will; we don't blame a dog, or a small child for eating some cakes that we have left out in the same way that we would blame a roommate for doing the same thing.

But, again, if this conclusion is right, then the consequences for our ordinary moral practice seem to be devastating. Since, as we have seen, we only blame people, feel resentment towards them, etc., if we think that their actions are freely performed, then if no action is freely performed, we should give up on these attitudes. This is indeed the conclusion that some people have drawn, for instance psychologists like B. F. Skinner. But that seems to many an abhorrent option.

A FIRST ARGUMENT FOR COMPATIBILISM: HOBBS' SOLUTION

A FREE-MAN, *is he, that, in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to doe, is not hindred to doe that he has a will to ...* from the use of the word *Free-will*, no Liberty can be inferred of the will, desire or inclination, but the Liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop in doing what he has the will, desire or inclination to doe. (*Leviathan*, Ch XXI)

How could we use these considerations to refute the argument that is given above, viz:

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One response would be to simply deny P3; free actions are those that stem from our desires, there is no need for it to be true that we could have done otherwise. But don't we want to preserve the idea that we could have done otherwise? How might this be done? A first try might be: to say that I *could* have acted otherwise is to say that I *would* have acted otherwise *if I had desired to do otherwise*. This is to embrace what is sometimes called the conditional analysis of freedom. (G. E. Moore gives a closely related analysis: I would have acted otherwise if I had *chosen* to do otherwise.)

Compare wind-vanes: a wind-vane is free in so far as it points the way the wind is blowing. It isn't free to point to the East whilst the wind is blowing from the North; its freedom consists in the fact that if the wind had been blowing from the East, it would have pointed to the East.

Now P3 is properly understood as :

- P3* One only has free will if one could have acted otherwise (i.e. if one would have acted otherwise if one had desired to act otherwise).

But then P2 is straightforwardly false; our actions could be causally necessitated whilst it is true that we could have done otherwise, since we would have done otherwise if we had desired otherwise, in which case our actions would have been necessitated to have been different. (Similarly, the movements of the wind-vane are causally necessitated; but it could have pointed in a different direction, since the wind could have been blowing from a different direction, in which case it would have been causally necessitated to have pointed in that direction.)

PROBLEMS

First: doesn't the account put the weight back onto my desires. For what if my desires were not themselves free? Then we wouldn't think that in acting on them I was acting freely even if it were true that had I desired otherwise I would have acted otherwise. We might try reworking the argument by substituting 'choose' or somesuch for 'desire'. But parallel problems will arise: what if I couldn't have chosen otherwise? And now the worry is that if we try to give another conditional account of what it is to desire, or choose, or whatever, freely, we will be in a regress. Hobbes just rejects this worry; he says that free will concerns only our actions, not our wills, desires or inclinations. But many have thought that this is just to miss the point.

Second: is it even true that 'I could have done otherwise' means the same as 'I would have done otherwise if I had desired to do so'? Is it true that 'I could have shot him' means the same as 'I would have shot him if I'd wanted to'? In general, statements of possibility are not normally best understood as counterfactuals (what would have been if ...).