

Free Will I

Free will presents a problem for both philosophy of mind and for ethics. Indeed, it presents such a serious problem exactly because its repercussions have such ethical importance, and stretch right to our very conception of ourselves.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY

First: it seems as though we are free to choose. Imagine a trivial example: you are faced with a choice of puddings. You are very partial to both; 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 even wonder which one you will chose. Finally, you make a choice. It feels as though you could have chosen differently. 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.

Any reason for denying these claims would already prove very revisionary of our ordinary picture of ourselves. Indeed our certainty of this can be so great that we might think that any argument that threatens it must be wrong; as Dr. Johnson famously said: 'Sir, we know our will is free, and there's an end on't'. But it would not just affect this. It would also affect our ascriptions of responsibility, the way we apportion blame and praise, resentment and gratitude, etc. 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 anthropomorphising, 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 flatmate for doing the same thing. And more than that, they need to have got the desire in the right way; we don't blame someone for doing that which they were induced to do under hypnosis; we don't blame someone for doing what they are forced to do as a result of a compulsion (e.g the kleptomaniac). It seems then that we are to blame for that which we freely do as a result of desires that we autonomously form. So there seem to be at least two aspects of free will that are essential to our practice of ascribing blame and responsibility: freedom to form our desires in the right sorts of ways, and freedom to act upon them.

THE PROBLEM

Firstly: there are set of specific reasons for thinking that we are neither so free in forming our desires, nor in acting on them, as we might think. Consider the correlation between people's tastes and choices, and their social class and upbringing. (One of the best predictors of how an individual will vote is how their parents voted.) It doesn't matter whether this is nature or nurture, the upshot is still the same. Consider the effectiveness of advertizing. More particularly, there is a wealth of psychological literature showing that we are less free in our choices than we might think. Men choosing a shirt will consistently choose one from the right of a display of identical shirts; but then, when challenged say that they chose it because it was of better quality. (The same findings apply to women!) Findings from split brain patients give some evidence that we habitually confabulate about our true motives. But such considerations seem to undermine both our freedom to form our desires, and our freedom to act upon them.

Secondly, and 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 deterministically caused by what went before. This is the thesis of determinism.

- 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

But 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.

What are the other options? We might deny determinism. We might deny that determinism is incompatible with free will (i.e. deny P2 or P3); or we might hold that, even if determinism is incompatible with free will, this won't affect our practice of ascribing responsibility.

DENYING P4: DETERMINISM IS FALSE

Quantum mechanics does provide some reason for thinking that determinism is false. But this doesn't seem to help, since i) indeterminacies appear to be only important at the microscopic level; at the macroscopic level it is as though determinism were true; and ii) in so far as quantum mechanics rejects determinism it seems to replace it with randomness. But that doesn't help, since it seems that a free action is one that is neither random nor determined. (Exercise: rewrite the above argument working from the premise that every action is either determined or random.)

(Note that determinism isn't the doctrine that if we knew the starting state and the relevant laws we could predict what would happen. That is an *epistemological* doctrine: a doctrine about what we can know. It could be impossible, for reasons connected with chaos theory, to ever predict what is going to happen. But that wouldn't show determinism to be false. Determinism is an ontological thesis.)

A FIRST ARGUMENT FOR COMPATIBILISM: DENYING P2

An action is free in so far as *if I had chosen (or desired) to do otherwise*, I would have done otherwise.

Compare windvanes: a windvane 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. Then 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 decided (or 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. (The movements of the windvane are causally necessitated, but it could have pointed in a different direction .)

The real problem with this approach is that it seems to only deal with one of the senses in which, in attributing responsibility, we require freedom. Certainly we think that the kleptomaniac is not free, since, even if they chose or desired not to steal, they still would. But we also want to think that we are not free in so far as we cannot freely chose what to desire.

READINGS

A. J. Ayer, 'Freedom and Necessity' in Watson, *Free Will* and in Feinberg. A very clear presentation of a compatibilist position.

David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §7