

THE FREE - WILL DEBATE

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What do we mean by freedom in the context of philosophy? As Richard Taylor puts it, to say that it is in a given instance up to me what I do, is to say that I am in that instance free with respect to what I do on that situation. Thus I am sometimes free to move my fingers this way and that, but not, certainly to bend it backward or into a knot. It means, first there is obstacle or impediment to my activity. Those things that pose obstacles to my motions limit my freedom. "To say that I am free to perform some action thus means at least that there is no obstacle to my doing it, and that nothing constrains me to do otherwise."¹ The problem arises when humans reach a higher stage of self consciousness about how profoundly the world may influence their behavior in ways of which they are unaware. It is at this level their mind oscillates between two options: we are free, we are not free.

Some matters are firmly outside our control. What has already happened at times in the past before our birth, what kinds of universe we live in - these things are in no way up to us. Just as much outside our control are many features of our own self - that we are human and will die, the colour of our eyes, what experience is now leading us to believe about our immediate surroundings, even many of the desires and the feelings that now we are having.

But there are other things that we do control. These are our own present and future actions. Whether we spend the next few hours reading at home or going to the cinema; where to go on holiday this year; whether and how we vote in the next election; whether we stay working in an office or leave to attempt writing as a career - these are things we do control. And control them because they consist in or depend on our own deliberate actions - actions that are up to us, we perform or not. As a normal, mentally healthy adult, how we ourselves act is not something that events in nature or other people just impose on us. Where our own actions are concerned, we can be in charge.

Or so we think. But are we really in charge of our actions? Is how we act truly up to us as things such as the past, the nature of the universe, even many of our

¹ Taylor, *Metaphysics*, p. 44.

own beliefs and feelings are not? The problem of whether we are ever in control of how we act, and what this control involves is what philosophers call the freewill problem.

And what a problem it is. No matter how familiar the idea of being in control of our actions might appear, there is nothing straight forward about it. Whether we have control over how we act, and what this control requires and involves, and whether and why it matters that we have it- this is one of the very oldest and hardest problems in philosophy.

The long history of the freewill problem shows up in its name. Freedom and Will are two words that we in everyday life do not ordinarily much use when talking about our control over, the up-to- us-ness of, our own actions. Nevertheless for the last 2000 years or more Western philosophers have used precisely these terms to discuss this problem of whether we really do have control over how we act. Their choice of these words freedom and will tells act something about why it might matter whether we do have action control- and what this control over how we act might involve.

The controversy between freedom and necessity in the history of philosophy has been seen differently by different philosophers. The issue has been said to be either of the following:

1. Rationalism Vs Voluntarism
2. Mechanism Vs Teleology
3. Empirical Vs *a priori*
4. Heteronomy Vs Autonomy

In the first opposition, rationalism takes reason as a cause. It holds that all actions have rational explanations and in that way actions are caused. Voluntarism opposes the above view and argues for human freedom. In the second opposition mechanism takes the deterministic view whereas teleology favors for freedom of will. The end of an action must be perceived by the agent and action is done freely to fulfill the desired goal. The empirical view with regard to human action holds that all actions can be explained by the observable phenomenon, whereas, *a priori* stand point states that at least some actions have non-empirical *a priori* ground. In the last opposition it is clear that autonomy means autonomy of the will, on the other hand, by heteronomy it is meant that human actions are caused by something other than the agent.

But the most widely accepted view that cuts across all the above is the issue between determinism and indeterminism. Sartre thinks that the problem of freewill would remain unsolved unless the structure of action is explored. Let us quote from Sartre himself - "it is strange that philosophers have been able to argue endlessly about determinism and freewill, to cite examples in favor of one or the other thesis without ever attempting, first to make explicit the structures contained in the very idea of action"². The concepts causality and freedom are deeply connected with each other. If everything that happens has a cause, then we live in a deterministic universe, or in other words determinism is true; and if determinism is true, one may hold, there is no scope for human freedom.

Determinism is the view that everything that happens is determined. In everyday usage, "to be determined" is roughly synonymous with "to be resolved". However, in the context of human freedom, "to be determined" means "to be caused". Determinism then becomes the view that whatever happens has a cause. Indeterminism is the view that is opposed to determinism. Indeterminism does not accept that everything that happens has a cause. Some writers use the term for the view that some future events are in principle unpredictable. The indeterminist is not likely to press his case in the area of inorganic nature; here he will content to let universal causality reign. The determinists who have held that determinism is compatible with moral responsibility generally presupposed a teleological theory of obligation, usually a utilitarian one. They argue that it is right to hold people responsible, praise them, and punish them, and the like, if and only if doing so leads for greatest balance of good over evil. In other words, like all other action, such acts as ascribing responsibility, blaming, and punishing are justified by their results, not by anything in the past. If this view is correct, ascribing responsibility, blaming, and punishing may be justified even if determinism is true (some would add only if determinism is true), for it will not matter that the agent being blamed was not free in the contra-causal sense. All that matters are whether praising or blaming him will or will not have certain result.

² J.P. Sartre: *Being and Nothingness*, P-617.

Thomas Kapitan has rightly stated in “A master Argument for Incompatibilism?”³ that the past twenty-five years have witnessed a vigorous discussion of an argument directed against the compatibilist approach to freedom and responsibility. The argument points to the fact that if determinism is true, then whatever happens is a consequence of past events and laws over which we have no control and which we are unable to prevent. But whatever is a consequence is a consequence of what is beyond our control is not itself under our control. Therefore, if determinism is true, then nothing that happens is under our control, including our own actions and thoughts. Nevertheless, the author himself is a compatibilist.

Some may think that we are involved in a vicious circle and repeating same arguments between the determinists and the indeterminists. But the debate is such. There can be many reasons behind the fact that it remains unsettled. One is that, philosophers have their own definitions of concepts argued from their own stand point. If you have a different definition of freedom or causality then your debate may be considered as a pseudo one. G.E. Moore, for example is sure that we are free. He writes:

It is therefore, quite certain (1) that we often should have acted differently if we had chosen to; (2) that similarly we often should have chosen differently, if we had chosen so to choose; and (3) that it was almost always possible that we should have chosen differently, in the sense that no man could know for certain that we should not so choose. All these three things are facts and all of them are quite consistent with the principle of causality.⁴

Moore writes the above certainly with his own definition of causality. In fact, the philosophers who hold freedom to be consistent with causality would maintain that a human action is caused cannot alter the fact that we could have chosen otherwise. Universal causality leaves some space for freedom in the sense that if something is not caused, it is an accident. Nevertheless, even accidents have causes behind them. But it is always possible for the determinist who denies freedom to maintain that when a choice is made or action is done you were actually destined or predetermined to do that. In our above discussion, we saw that teleologists may find it

³ The Oxford Handbook of Free Will, p127ff

⁴ G.E. Moore, *Ethics* p114-5

hard to make space for freedom if it bases itself on psychology. On the other hand, deontologists argue that had there is no freedom, one cannot be held morally responsible. But this does not provide us with a satisfactory answer because it only shows that without freedom, the institute of morality will fall down. But freedom is not proved. Kant has tried to prove human freedom in his first Critique and Groundwork, but according to some, those are demonstration and not proofs. Even Moore in Ethics ends his chapter on Free Will "with a doubt".⁵ Peter Van Inwagen in his article "Freewill Remains a Mystery" concludes that 'freewill undeniably exists and that there is a strong and unanswered prima facie case for its impossibility'.⁶

The existentialist Philosophers like Sartre rejects the whole debate between determinism and indeterminism on the ground that the traditional approach to freedom has objectified freedom. To objectify something is to think that somehow it perceivable and provable by rational means. Sartre considers human freedom as a postulate of action. Kant also described freewill as a postulate but he would hardly consider human being as an agent like Sartre. Moreover, Kant reduced human being to an observer by universalizing moral laws that has been objected by Existentialists right from Nietzsche. Sartre states that there could be no solution to the problem so far we consider freedom as something objective. It is strange that philosophers did not attempt first to explicit the structure contained in the very concept of action. It is worth mentioning that existentialists take self as an agent rather than a subject. Agent is one who acts. It does not mean that they are introducing a new dimension of existence replacing thought. To consider human beings as thinking subject is only an abstraction but for existentialist, "Man exists as a whole. He can not be pieced together from thought, feeling and will".

Sartre would say that to exist is to be free; it is not that first I exist then I am free. But "freedom" and "existence" are two different words and have different uses. How to conceptualise freedom as distinct from existence? Nikolai Bardayev, the Russian existentialist, may help us in this regard. He explores the following characteristic of freedom. Traditional arguments treated freedom objectively. To

⁵ *Ibid*,p115

⁶ *Handbook of Free Will*,p159

treat something as an object is to believe that it can be perceived, investigated and proved or disproved from outside. But freedom is not to be proved rather it is the postulate of action. To endeavour to understand freedom objectively is to treat like a phenomenon of nature. But freedom must be already there before we can even think of such a world. It implies that freedom has the primacy over being. Any system or any ontological system that recognizes the absolute primacy of being is a system of determinism. In that system freedom is derivable from being. The act of freedom in Bardayeve's sense is pre-rational: it can not be grasped by thought. It has to be known through exercise of freedom. To this Sartre adds, the cause, act and the end rises simultaneously.

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