

FOR A CLASS AT C.O.C. -- INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

Do I Have Free Will?

What better way to follow up a paper on skepticism than one pertaining to existentialism and free will, whether one truly had a choice in this endeavor is in question. I feel as if I was determined by my professor – environment – to do this task. Following up a paper based in epistemology with one grounded in metaphysics makes logical sense – a chain of historical events determining this topic. It is truly fascinating how much the idea of skepticism correlates to free will. Then again one could be a skeptic of anything. To truly marinate in this concept, you must skim over William James indeterminism, and get your toes wet with W.T. Stace's presentations of soft and hard determinism. Some delectable thought experiments are included in this treatment, as well as Hospers' contribution to our topic of determinism. Donald C. Abel in his book, *Fifty Readings in Philosophy*, asks us to imagine for a moment that you are walking along and come to a fork in the road. One street is called Divinity Avenue, the other Oxford Street. Assuming you must walk down one of them, there is a confrontation of choice. Continuing he says,

Now, I ask you seriously to suppose that this ambiguity of my choice is real; and then to make the impossible hypothesis that the choice is made twice over, and each time falls on a different street. In other words, imagine that I first walk through Divinity Avenue, and then imagine that the powers governing the universe annihilate ten minutes of time with all that it contained, and set me back at the door of this hall just as I was before the choice was made. Imagine then that, everything else being the same, I now make a

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different choice and traverse Oxford Street. You, as passive spectators, look on and see the two alternative universes; one of them with me walking through Divinity Avenue in it, the other with the same me walking through Oxford Street. Now, if you are determinists, you believe one of these universes eternally impossible, because of the intrinsic irrationality or accidentality somewhere involved in it. However, looking outwardly at these universes, can you say which is the impossible and accidental one, and which the rational and necessary one? (Abel 296)

An interesting thought, although completely impossible. Some would argue that two entities would exist making their own decision to walk down opposing roads. Therefore, existing separately never truly knowing if they could go back in time to make the other choice. All under the assumption people can make their own choices.

To really journey along this avenue, we take a look at soft determinism or more commonly known as indeterminism. The philosopher who dealt with this was William James. William James, an American philosopher born and raised in New York, brought new meaning to the word pragmatism. "Although the term pragmatism was introduced by Pierce in 1878," it was closely "associated with James who popularized it" (MacGregor, cf. Pragmatism). Pragmatism is very similar to utilitarianism. Utilitarianism has more to do with ethics and a mass of people, while on the other hand pragmatism is defined as "beliefs [that] are true if they prove useful to us in the practice of our lives" (Campbell-Jack, McGrath, and Evans 366). James, considered by many the founder of pragmatism (366), used it to defend his roots in Christianity. If all of time

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was already predetermined one would need to be pragmatic to be an indeterminist, most convenient. Yes, it would be convenient to have the ability to make decisions and be able to change our destiny. It is nice to think that I make my own decisions and choices culminating in responsibility. I consider myself and my actions noble and good (Beckwith and Koukl 52-53).

The idea is almost pragmatic. In a materialist worldview, there can be no freedom of will. One blogger summed up a lecture given by Stephen Hawking and recounted by apologist Ravi Zacharias that was entitled *Determinism – Is Man a Slave or the Master of His Fate* (Zacharias, 2004, 118,119), saying: “do we have the ability to make choices [in regards to God creating parameters to act freely], or do we simply follow a chemical reaction induced by millions of mutational collisions of free atoms?” (Giorgio 2007)

Although his view can be considered pragmatic, is nature all there is, it does not make it any less or more true-false. Indeterminism (in contrast to determinism) is the idea that there is more than one possible outcome in the future. Indeterminism has a little slack in its rope of fate after being dowsed in a sea of possibilities, unlike determinism’s tightrope of life. One way James tries to prove his soft determinism is judgment of regrets. The idea of going back in time and change events, due to regret is proof that there is more than one possible future assuming it isn't all an illusion. Often regrets are of bad decisions or mistakes. In fact, “[c]alling a thing bad means, if it means anything at all that the thing ought not to be, that something else ought to be in its stead” (Abel 298). Determinism makes such regrets foolish and useless. With indeterminism moral value has solidity and personal responsibilities of actions are possible.

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Things now can be dubbed good or bad, crime and evildoers can exist. There is a stinging critique, however, that Dr. Geisler notes in his *Encyclopedia of Apologetics*:

Pragmatism is unjustified. The most serious internal criticism against pragmatism is that, pragmatically, it doesn't work. We would have to have infinite knowledge of all possible consequences to each alternative action or philosophy. We can never be sure how things will turn out. Only a theistic God could be an effective pragmatist, and he is not one.

One of James's Harvard colleagues, Josiah Royce, penetrated to the root problem of this pragmatic view of truth when he asked James if he would take the witness stand in court and swear "to tell the expedient, the whole expedient, and nothing but the expedient, so help him future experience." (Geisler 378)

W.T. Stace, an English philosopher, tries to define terms in this free will dichotomy. In doing so he will split the horns and offer a third option to this problem. Stace agrees and defends the fact that "If there is no free will there can be no morality" (Abel 302). He leads with showing how two similar situations are on opposites ends of the spectrum. For instance, Gandhi chose to starve himself; in contrast, a man lost in the desert has little say whether he starves or not. According to Stace Gandhi's situation is considered a "free act." What defines a free act is making a decision based on desires or wants without physical limitations. In contradistinction, an unfree act is caused by physical force or limitations. What ties them both together though is "both sets of actions have causes" (Abel 306). This mixed idea throws a deterministic spin on free actions. Aristotle pondered such thoughts and agreed there are borderline situations

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where free will is in question. It is thought that moral responsibility requires determinism. "If there were no determinism of human beings at all, their actions would be completely unpredictable and capricious, and therefore irresponsible" (Stumpf and Abel 330). A good way this is shown is through the *chicken sandwich thought experiment*.

How so? Hard compatibilists argue the only choices that are free are those caused by one's character, beliefs, and desires. If a choice, say to raise one's hand to vote, is not caused by a prior event, then it is completely uncaused and utterly random or fortuitous. How can a completely random event (the raising of one's hand) over which one has no control be a *free* choice? (Moreland and Craig 269) In one thought experiment, like in the case of Gandhi, some ponder the idea of actions according to desires. The *chicken sandwich thought experiment* does just that. Imagine for a moment you are across the way from a close friend that is fond of chicken sandwiches. Imagine that said friend has been craving a chicken sandwich for some time now. In fact, he desires one so much so that he decides to order a chicken sandwich. While eating the sandwich it occurs to you. Was his desire a result of his environment? Genetics? Was he bound to eat the sandwich? Is it merely defined as a free act even though it is not? The co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, Francis Crick, and philosopher Daniel Dennett would both agree that we have an undeniable feeling that our will is free and that this undeniable feeling only *appears* to be free (Goetz 451) .

Determinism is the powerhouse viewpoint of conflicting theories. One could easily argue that you can fall under this notion or that. The weight of the coherent evidence is that people can

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actualize choices or not (Nash 191-92). Determinism, in short, is the absence of will and freedom of choice. "[T]here... [is]... nothing a man could do to shape his character and even the degree of willpower available to him in shaping his habits and disciplining himself to overcome the influence of his early environment is a factor over which he has no control" (Stumpf and Abel 305). John Hospers is an enthusiastic determinist who would agree with this in full. According to determinism everything is *predestined*. In the case of the Oxford Street experiment there would only be one option and choice, all other ideas and regrets are illusions, throwing out all logic and thought. Professor Roy Clouser notes that any theory or truth statement would have to include freedom of choice and the ability to distinguish between it and falsehood:

The need for any theory to allow that humans have genuine freedom to recognize the truth... if all thought, belief, feeling, and choice are determined (i.e., forced on humans by outside conditions) then so is the determinists' acceptance of the theory of determinism forced on them by those same conditions. In that case they could never claim to know their theory is true since the theory making that claim would be self-referentially incoherent. In other words, the theory requires that no belief is ever a free judgment made on the basis of experience or reason but is always a compulsion over which the believer has no control. (174)

J.R. Lucas further backs this notion up in his book, *The Freedom of the Will*.

Determinism, therefore, cannot be true, because if it was, we should not take the determinists' arguments as being really arguments, but as being only conditioned reflexes.

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Their statements should not be regarded as really claiming to be true, but only as seeking to cause us to respond in some way desired by them. (115)

Criminal masterminds not only have no control over any of their actions, but *evildoers* can be identified beforehand (Giorgio 2011). The movie *Minority Report* depicts this incredibly well, as does philosopher Mortimer J. Adler in his book, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*:

...what merit would attach to moral virtue if the acts that form such habitual tendencies and dispositions were not acts of free choice on the part of individual who was in the process of acquiring moral virtue? (154)

This viewpoint that choices are chemical reactions “induced by millions of mutational collisions of free atoms” (Giorgio 2007) would make life meaningless in its ultimate sense. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch word it well in their book, *Meaning*, when they explain that this materialist worldview has most inhibited the opposing view, design:

Intellectual assent to the reduction of the world to its atomic elements acting blindly in terms of equilibrations of forces,¹ an assent that has gradually come to prevail since the birth of modern science, has made any sort of teleological view² of the cosmos seem unscientific and woolgathering to us. (162)

¹ ...[a] system that is in equilibrium shows no tendency to alter over time. (*The American Heritage Science Dictionary*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005, cf., equilibrium)

² ...[teleology] focuses on the evidence of harmony, order, and design in the universe, and argues that its design gives evidence of an intelligent purpose (the Greek word *telos* means “end” or “goal” or “purpose”). Since the universe appears to be designed with a purpose, there must be an intelligent and purposeful God who created it to function this way. (Grudem 143)

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C.S.Lewis put it best in *God in the Dock*, why should one listen to a collection of accidental accumulations trying to give an accurate account or recollection of other accidental accumulations is *really* woolgathering (Lewis 52-53). Another past philosopher mentions the same:

Reasoning implies the power to control one's thoughts, to resist the processes of association, to suspend judgment until the transparent order of reason has been readied. It implies freedom, therefore. In a mind which is controlled by its states, instead of controlling them, there is no reasoning, but only a succession of one state upon another. There is no deduction from grounds, but only production by causes. No belief has any logical advantage over any other, for logic is no longer possible. (Bowne 105)

In closing, after soaking myself in this subject, I have come to a few conclusions. I have decided that you either believe that there is free will (i.e., choices, decisions - either good or bad) or there is no such thing. Unfortunately, *if* there is no such thing, you can't believe it... ironically. As humorous as that may be one must come to a conclusion even if the idea be illusory. Williams disapproved strongly of the enlightenment evidentialism of his day and makes a great point that "while it is perfectly rational for the scientist to hold up his or her scientific beliefs to the demand for evidence, the universal demand for evidence is simply not tenable." He further goes on to point out "In certain cases one is forced to make a decision in the absence of adequate evidence" (Campbell-Jack, McGrath, and Evans 366). In regards to the use of this in more modern times, Apologist Ravi Zacharias makes the point well, that, the atheist is

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apparently able to rise above nature and nature's laws in order to have a grand narrative that they say is true:

Isn't it interesting that such determinism is the curse and the cause of religious belief but atheists are able to break outside the box of determinism and think for themselves? Apparently they are not bound by the same restrictions that bind the rest of us. After years in the academy I have learned a trade secret: If you know enough about a subject, you can confuse anybody by a selective use of the facts. The inescapable fact for the atheist is that life is the random product of time plus matter plus chance. (Zacharias, 2008 38)

I couldn't have said it better, literally.

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