

Excerpt from: Ansgar Beckermann: Free Will in a Natural Order of the World

The Determinism and Freedom Philosophy Website

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There is some convergence between philosophy in the English language and German philosophy. Is this a matter of the latter approximating more to the former? Well, if so, the result is not a significant loss of independence in the German philosophy -- you might say there is no significant loss of character. Professor Beckermann of the University of Bielefeld is an astute student of the ongoing inquiry into determinism and freedom in American and British philosophy. He poses essential questions in it in a way whose generality and clarity is enviable. He is not overcome by those philosophers who do not persist with the doctrines of either compatibilism or incompatibilism about determinism and freedom. With a little help from the British empiricist Locke, he sees advantage and sense in the former. He shows that a long battle is not over.

1.

It often happens that philosophical problems arise through noticing that our thoughts about the world cannot be quite right; and in most of these cases this is so because we have discovered that two (or more) statements we used to regard as true cannot both (or all) be true if taken together. The problem of free will is a case in point. On the one hand, we are absolutely sure that there are at least some cases where we make decisions, and that in making them we are free and hence responsible for these decisions. We cannot imagine what it would be like to live in a community in which there is no such thing as responsibility. On the other hand, the results arrived at in the natural sciences seem to show that freedom as we intuitively understand it does not exist. Freedom appears to be impossible in a world where everything runs its ordinary course and no irregularities happen. But why is that so? Why does our natural way of looking at the world fail to fit the scientific way of looking at it?

Let's try to take a first step towards giving an answer to this question by looking at a simple example. I am lying in bed; the alarm clock starts ringing. I

really ought to get up, for in an hour from now a meeting of the faculty board will be opened. But it's been a late night, and it would be nice to lie in. Suppose I decide to stay in bed. Under what conditions can this be said to be a free decision for which I can be held responsible? In my view, basically the following three conditions need to be satisfied:

Condition 1 There must be a choice between different alternatives; I must be able to act this way or that way, I must be able to decide this way or that way. (could have done or chosen otherwise condition)

Condition 2 The choice that is made must depend on me. (authorship condition)

Condition 3 My choice must not be subject to any kind of constraint. My choice must itself be free. (control condition)

The first part of the free will problem lies in the fact that each of these conditions seems to be compatible with neither determinism nor indeterminism. The first half of this claim becomes clear immediately if determinism is understood to amount to the thesis that all events have a sufficient cause in other events. For if this is true how can the three conditions just mentioned be fulfilled?

(1) How is it possible for me to decide differently if my decision is determined by other events?

(2) If a decision has been caused by another event, how could it be due to me? Perhaps one might reply that it nonetheless originates in myself if I was the initiator of that other event. But determinism says that the other event too had a cause etc. At some point the causal chain will then lead back to causes belonging to a time before my birth and consequently certainly not due to myself.

(3) How can my choice have been free if, according to determinism, it was caused by other events?

Incompatibility with indeterminism arises if the latter is understood as meaning that the decision taken by me has not been caused by other events but is purely accidental. If the decision taken is a matter of pure chance, then it seems quite clear that it does not originate in myself either, for otherwise it would not be accidental.

Roderick Chisholm has argued that with regard to free action this dilemma can

be dissolved only by a bold assumption. We must assume that it is neither the case that every event involved in a free action is caused by some other event nor that the action is something that is not caused at all. Instead we have to suppose that at least one of the events involved in the action is caused – not by another event, but by the agent himself. This assumption, however, is based on an extremely problematic idea. After all, if this so-called agent causation is to be understood as an alternative to natural event causation, a person will have to be regarded as a being which stands outside the normal context of nature and at the same time as capable of intervening in that context from the outside. What is even worse, it seems to me that in everyday life most people, at least implicitly, endorse this highly problematic assumption. For this reason it is not surprising that scientists in particular are unhappy about the ordinary conception of free will.

In his paper “Explaining Voluntary Action: The Role of Mental Content” Wolfgang Prinz goes so far as to speak of three “unreasonable metaphysical demands” connected with the idea of free will. In his eyes, the first of these demands consists in assuming that there is an insurmountable gulf between the mental and the physical, and that the mental leads a Cartesian kind of life of its own beyond the physical world. The second demand rests on the first one and consists in supposing that the mental is capable, not only of leading an extra-physical kind of life of its own, but also of causally intervening in the physical realm. “When a person decides to switch off the radio, he or she will finally stand up and activate the corresponding switch. We understand this action as a direct causal consequence of the intention – just like we see the movement of a billiard ball as the direct causal consequence of its being struck by the cue” (160). Finally, the third metaphysical demand consists in the assumption of a “principled local indeterminism”:

"The idea of free will encourages us to accept local pockets of indeterminism in an otherwise deterministically conceived worldview. Naturally, we have grown accustomed to being presented with such pockets here and there from another field, namely, from quantum mechanics and chaos theory. However, unlike these cases, this indeterminism does not just concern an absence of determination or determinableness, but something completely different and more radical: nothing less than the replacement of usual causal determination through another, causally inexplicable form of determination. This is based on the assumption of a subject who is conceived as autonomous, who is personally free, that is, non-determined. This explains why the rather quaint attempts to relate free will to the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics or the indeterminacy of chaotic systems are doomed to failure. They are based on the

misunderstanding that free will is nothing other than the absence of determination or determinableness. In truth, the unreasonable demand goes much further: The idea of free will requires us to see each subject as an independent, autonomous source of action determination." (161)

If one looks at the exact wording of this passage, it becomes clear that the problematic assumption of a "local indeterminism" is not Prinz's primary concern. He seems to feel that the basic demand lies in the idea that subjects might count as self-sufficient, autonomous sources of action determination. He too is alarmed by the notion that subjects stand outside the natural order of things and are capable of intervening in this order from an outside position. As regards this judgment, there are many philosophers who share his view. Analytic philosophy in particular has always had a basic tendency that is strongly characterized by naturalism. At any rate, in logical empiricism as well as in authors like Wittgenstein and Ryle their anti-Cartesianism sticks out a mile. Thus, as far as this question is concerned, a great many philosophers don't quarrel with scientists. On the contrary, regarding this point they would unreservedly opt for the scientific camp.

However, scientists like Prinz, Roth and Singer also seem to believe that the idea of free will is inseparably tied to a Cartesian or quasi-Cartesian notion of a person. And this is anything but self-evident. To be sure, at first glance it seems that this conclusion naturally follows from the previous considerations. For these had shown that it at any rate looks as if free will were incompatible with determinism in the usual sense as well as with indeterminacy in the sense of being accidental. But to show that this is not the last word is a problem which, in the eyes of many philosophers, is by no means impossible to solve.

2.

The question, thus, is: Can there be such a thing as freedom of the will only if persons are conceived as non-natural beings that are capable of intervening in the order of nature? Or does the concept of free will make sense even if human beings are conceived as belonging to our natural world – as biological beings, differing from other kinds of biological being only in respect of their peculiar cognitive abilities? And, of course: Can there be such a thing as free will if in nature everything that happens is above board in the sense that all natural events either have sufficient natural causes or do not have sufficient causes at all? ...

4.

...[At this point, the author has argued that it IS possible that a being, constrained by the laws of nature/physics, is still able to be described as being able to 'make a decision'. Now the work is to show that 'being able to make a decision' is equal to 'having free will' – SPR]...

The crucial question, however, has not been answered yet – the question whether a *decision*, thus understood, can be a free one. For now we are again confronted by our (alleged) initial dilemma: either the decision – which, as we now presuppose, is a natural process – is causally determined by other natural events, and in that case it cannot be free; or it is accidental, and in that case it may possibly be free. But can somebody be held responsible for something that has happened purely accidentally?

5.

But isn't there perhaps a reading of condition 3 which is even compatible with determinism? As regards this question, I myself favour a solution that starts from a question about the kind of situation in which we really say that a decision has been made under coercion or compulsion, a solution that does not from the very outset assume that causation itself generally amounts to a kind of coercion or compulsion.

The example of a drug addict is the paradigmatic case of a human being whose decisions are subject to compulsion. In a sense, a drug addict can do what he wants to do. In his actions he is free; he is able to take drugs whenever he wants to take drugs (this, at any rate, is what we shall assume). He is not subject to any external kind of force. Internally, however, he is controlled by a form of compulsion. It is in his decisions that he is not free. His will leads a life of its own, as it were. Even if he wants to decide differently, his desire to take drugs will prevail. A drug addict is, so to speak, at the mercy of this type of desire. What is wrong with him? In what way does he differ from a human being who is able to make free decisions?

What in my opinion may help us at this point are certain considerations put forward by John Locke in chapter 21 ("Of Power") of the second book of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Locke's first answer to the question what determines a man's will is that the will is naturally determined by "the most pressing uneasiness" (sec. 40). This, however, is not the full story. For, as Locke says, human beings are not simply driven by what they feel to be the

most pressing uneasiness; in most cases they have the capacity to pause before acting and to reflect on what they ought to do in this situation, what would from a moral point of view be the right thing to do or what would best promote their well-considered self-interest.

"There being in us a great many uneasinesses always solliciting, and ready to determine the will, it is natural, as I have said, that the greatest, and most pressing should determine the will to the next action; and so it does for the most part, but not always. For the mind having in most cases, as is evident in Experience, a power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires, and so all, one after another, is at liberty to consider the objects of them; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty Man has; [...] we have a power to suspend the prosecution of this or that desire, as every one daily may Experiment in himself. This seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that, which is (as I think improperly) call'd Free will. For during this suspension of any desire, before the will be determined to action, and the action (which follows that determination) done, we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil of what we are going to do; and when, upon due Examination, we have judg'd, we have done our duty, all that we can, or ought to do, in pursuit of our happiness; and 'tis not a fault, but a perfection of our nature to desire, will, and act according to the last result of a fair Examination." (Essay concerning Human Understanding, bk. ii, ch. 21, sec. 47).

According to Locke, then, free will rests on being able to pause before acting and to consider what ought to be done in the situation concerned, and what reasons favour one alternative rather than another. Thus one might say that a decision is free if it has come about in such a way that it could have been influenced by the actor's deliberations, his weighing up of various reasons. In more recent times, this point has been expressed by Fischer and Ravizza (1998) as follows: a decision is free if it rests on a process which is accessible to reasons.

As a matter of fact, this definition fits the case of our drug addict perfectly. For what he complains about is that, even though he has grasped that this addiction will ruin his health, he cannot help choosing drugs. What our drug addict lacks is the ability to choose what, according to his own considerations, appears right. He may have the ability to reflect and to grasp that what he does will harm himself and may possibly be immoral. But that remains without influence on his decisions. These decisions are determined by circumstances that cannot be influenced by considerations of that type. Consequently, my thesis is the

following: Our decisions are free if, and only if, they rest on processes that can be influenced by rational arguments and considerations.

But is that really possible if decision processes too are natural processes? Can there be natural processes that respond to arguments and rational considerations? To this question I want to reply by mentioning the following point. Let's have another look at the case mentioned near the beginning of this paper. On a certain morning I am lying in bed, pondering the question whether I should get up and attend the board meeting of my faculty or may lie in for a little while. I am just on the brink of deciding in favour of lying in, but at that very moment the telephone rings. A colleague is calling, and in a state of agitation she says: "Really, you absolutely must come. There will be an important vote today, and your vote may be the decisive one." There can be no doubt that this call may have an effect on my decision. Why else would my colleague ring me up? It is obvious that my decision may be influenced by my colleague's words. And that means that my decision can evidently be influenced by the reasons she brings forward. Thus, there are only two alternatives: either it is the case that not all decisions rest on natural processes or there are natural processes that can be influenced by considerations and arguments. Faced by this choice, I don't hesitate for a moment to regard the second alternative as the more plausible one.

6.

In the previous section I have tried to sketch a solution of the free will problem which is couched in such a way that the point of the question whether or not a certain decision is free is not whether it was caused but only how it was caused. The decision is free if it arises from processes that are amenable to reasons and arguments. Are there any arguments against this conception, i.e. arguments meant to show that this solution does not do justice to our three above-mentioned conditions, after all?

Surely the best-known argument of this type is the consequence argument devised by Peter van Inwagen. The essential point of the argument is this: if determinism is true, every single decision of mine logically follows from prior events and the valid laws of nature. These prior events in turn logically follow from ulterior events and the valid laws of nature, and so on. Thus, if determinism is true, all my decisions logically follow from events preceding my birth together with the valid laws of nature. But I have no power over events belonging to a time before my birth, nor over the valid laws of nature. Ergo, I have no power over my decisions. Consequently, these decisions are not

subject to my control.

Evidently, van Inwagen's starting point is the following principle:

(C) I am able to control an event E only if I am also able to control those events (or at least a decisive part of those events) that are responsible for E's coming about.

What comes to the fore in this principle is a certain notion of ultimate authorship which, in the eyes of many incompatibilists, seems to constitute the crucial feature of freedom. What decisions I take depends on my desires and preferences and, in the last analysis, on my character – that is, on the sort of human being I am. That is not something that van Inwagen would want to deny. But he would, presumably, add that my decisions can only be free if my desires and preferences originate in myself rather than in circumstances that I can exert no influence on. For similar reasons Robert Kane rejects deterministic solutions of the free will problem. Kane's argument starts from what he calls the problem of "covert non-constraining control".

If our freedom is limited, that is, if we are subject to coercion or compulsion, we are usually able to notice this. If I am tied to a chair or if someone holds a gun to my head, I know full well that I am no longer free in my actions and decisions. And as regards most cases of inner constraints, things are not really different. An addict, a phobic or a person with a disposition towards compulsive behaviour will notice that there is something which escapes his control. His will is not his will. He feels guided by an external force, and he can neither act nor choose the way he would like to. But over and above these cases of a felt or perceived lack of freedom, there are other kinds of cases where we are not aware of our lack of freedom. Suppose I am under hypnosis, and upon being given the order to crawl under the table, I obey and may later even invent reasons why I have performed this action. In this sort of case I do not have the impression of lacking freedom. I do not even notice that someone has employed subtle means of manipulation to deprive me of my freedom...

...What becomes manifest at this point is the following: If freedom presupposes that we ourselves choose the desires that our decisions rest on, there will be only two options. Either this sort of choice depends on decision principles which, in their turn, would have to be chosen, and so on and so forth. Or a first choice is made by a being that has no prior kind of desires or decision principles and whose choice can therefore only be one made for no reason whatsoever. It stands to reason that neither of these alternatives is acceptable. In the former case we end up with an infinite regress. In the latter case the question arises why we should count as responsible for actions and decisions

that ultimately rest on a blind choice. All this seems to show that the idea of ultimate authorship in respect of desires and preferences really is an incoherent one.

7.

If we review the considerations mentioned so far, what comes to light is a certain basic pattern informing the free-will debate – a pattern which has quite frequently been described in the recent literature. On the one hand, incompatibilists see a close connection between freedom and origination. According to this view, actions and decisions are free only if they rest on motives and preferences originating not from circumstances beyond my control, but ultimately created by myself. Compatibilists, on the other hand, emphasize the connection between freedom and voluntariness (cf. Honderich 2002). According to compatibilism, what is free are those actions and decisions that are performed or taken because I want to perform or take them, without being subject to inner or outer constraints. In my view, these fundamental intuitions have a lot to do with the starting point of our reflections. For freedom in the sense of origination is possible only if we really stand outside the framework of nature and are capable of external interventions. Freedom in the sense of voluntariness, however, is possible even if we are an integral part of an out-and-out natural world.

Thus, if we want to answer the question whether freedom of the will can exist only if persons are conceived as extra-natural creatures, it is of the greatest importance that the idea of origination really is not a coherent idea at all. Of course, on some occasions it is possible for us to detach ourselves from certain circumstances directly influencing our lives. We are quite able to forgo another glass of red wine, even if our hostess urges us to have one. We are also able to refrain from lying in, even if we are tired and should like to sleep a little longer. The following point, however, seems to be self-evident: in those cases where we do manage to detach ourselves in this way from our direct desires and needs, this only happens because we have further desires and the ability to reflect on our direct desires and curb them in relevant cases. What are these further desires due to, and what does this ability rest on? I think that neither of these desires nor of this ability to reflect and forgo the satisfaction of direct needs can it be claimed that ultimately they exclusively originate from ourselves. After all, it is much more plausible to assume that both are to some extent products of our biological make-up and to a perhaps even larger extent products of our upbringing. But that is by no means a reason to complain. We may be glad to have higher-order desires, and we may also be glad to be able to

reflect and exercise self-control, even if we ourselves are not the ultimate originators of those desires and this ability (cf. Pereboom 2002, 481 ff.). As I have pointed out before, it does not really make sense to assume that we ourselves are the ultimate originators of all our desires.

Thus, as biological beings forming an integral part of the natural world we cannot help being born with a considerable number of natural desires – desires for food, shelter, affection, etc. And it seems utterly nonsensical to me to claim that by endowing us with those desires nature manages to manipulate us or to deprive us of our freedom. Actually, nature provides us with an additional specific capacity which is central to our freedom – the capacity to become aware of our desires and to reflect on them. This capacity, however, needs to be developed. Instruction and training may help us to refrain from complying only with the most appealing short-term desires. We learn that it may make sense to postpone short-term goals for the sake of achieving certain longer-term goals. And we also learn that there are moral standards by which our actions and decisions will be judged. If everything goes well, a decision-making mechanism will develop in us which takes account of all these aspects in an appropriate way – a decision-making mechanism that is amenable both to prudential considerations and moral arguments. We are free if this mechanism is sufficiently well developed and if our decisions really rest on this mechanism. On the other hand, we lack freedom in the case of decisions which depend on desires that cannot be “tamed” by this mechanism.

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