



THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF FREE WILL

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SMALL CAVEATS

- This talk will cover a lot of philosophical territory. It is not meant to be exhaustive, and nearly every point and argument I will make would present an opportunity for much further debate and discussion.
- Instead, the goal of the talk is to present some other options for how to understand and respond to a pressing matter of philosophy that has relevance to our lives – both in how we understand ourselves and in how that understanding informs our attitudes about life choices.
- My plan is not to talk about the TV show 'Rick and Morty' directly or to give a philosophical analysis of its text, but, as context, much of the content of this talk was inspired by conversations with students here at BC that were in reaction to ideas presented in the show.

DESPAIR

- Despair is a human phenomenon that goes beyond the limits of philosophical and rational reflection – it is more nuanced than a mere perspective or theory. However, despair often has a philosophical structure to it:
- Condition 1) Despair itself implies a model or standard for meaning
- Condition 2) Despair also involves a belief that reality is not “cooperative” with that standard for meaning
 - Causes for despair are numerous but can be usefully categorized and understood by the standards of meaning that provoke them:
 - The loss of a loved one is a cause for despair only under a commitment that the life of that person is something of value.
 - The prospect of human ignorance is a cause for despair only under a commitment that knowledge is valuable.
 - Deep injustices in a society are a cause for despair only under a commitment that justice is valuable.
 - Etc

PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSES TO DESPAIR

- So, there are 2 possible philosophical responses to despair:
- 1) Accept the belief in reality but deny the standard of meaning.
 - Many forms of despair are defeasible by a demonstration that there are deeper or more legitimate standards of value than the one that is generating the despair. (Ex: If I despair over a breakup with a romantic partner, I might come to recognize that a relationship with them is not the end all and be all of life.)
 - This can be difficult to demonstrate at times, and we may struggle to accept or integrate a change in how we value our lives. But this strategy presents a lot of (creative) opportunities for a response.
- 2) Accept the normative standard of meaning but deny that the world is hostile to that value.
 - This strategy can be harder to motivate generally, but it is particularly difficult in the case of despair around free will...

THE THREAT TO FREE WILL

- First, the belief about reality (Condition 2): all events are necessarily causally determined by the laws of nature applied to previous states of affairs. This includes all of our actions, behaviors, and (ostensible) choices. <The Thesis of Determinism>
- Next, the standard of meaning (Condition 1): it would be better to be a being that enjoys the power to be freely self-determining; beings with this power are the kinds of beings that can be subject to moral responsibility (and all the meaning that attaches to that), since how they act is determined by what course of action they choose to follow
- If the Thesis of Determinism is true, then it follows that we do not have the power to act otherwise than how we have been determined to act by the laws of nature. Without this power, we cannot be said to be “free” <Incompatibilism>

WHY FREEDOM MATTERS

- Things that are not free cannot be blamed or praised for their behavior (except in a tongue-in-cheek manner <compatibilism>)
 - Boulder example
- It is true that not all meaning is lost – circumstances can still be good/bad; they can be tragic or cause for celebration.
- To some this might seem attractive since it allows one to be free of the weight of moral responsibility, but I would argue this is not a true boon.
 - Frankl: “It is the prerogative of man to become guilty”; without it we would be “victims of our circumstances” instead
 - The loss of relational spaces (relational gestures “mean something” if they are freely chosen as opposed to being forced); relationships are reduced to power interactions ex: how love is changed if freedom is taken from it; ex: interactions with addicts
 - Dehumanization; lack of dignity
 - Being morally blameworthy isn’t itself a fatal condition for meaning and value – it isn’t the “end of the story”
 - There’s something ironic in the way we might consider the loss of our freedom (not being self-determining) as something that will make us more free (no longer subject to moral responsibilities)

LET'S ASSUME THE WORST

- We are not free: all of our actions are not our own and are ultimately the product of a universe that we did not choose, subject to laws that we did not create.
- We certainly seem to think about our lives and ourselves in terms of moral responsibilities and accountability, in terms of the role of our choices as opposed to external conditions (we think of ourselves as people and not as boulders), etc. What sense must we make of the space of reasons, choices, values, intentions and meaning that we seem to participate with?
<Practical Reason>
- A common answer: It's all an illusion.
 - We might think or feel like we are in control of our lives, but this is not happening in the way we imagine; we do not consider the options and then decide between them as if they were true options for us.
 - So, even the compatibilist option (where we'll just call an action "free" if it was determined by causal forces within a person's body/brain as opposed to external forces) commits us to understanding our experience of the space of practical reason as illusory.

EXPLAINING THE ILLUSION

- Why would it be fair to say that the space of practical reason is illusory under determinism?
 - The logic of practical reason searches for considerations that would recommend a course of action as more justified or appropriate than its alternatives as a way of informing a choice.
 - But if there is no choice, such considerations are irrelevant. If my choices are causally determined, I am unable to be responsive to these rational considerations.
 - Another way to put this is that the factors that influence informed choices are only applicable to something that can make choices. Ex: I can't argue with the boulder about the normative consequences if my friend is crushed.
 - So, if determinism is true, then the space of practical reason treats us as if we are something that we are not.
- Possible reply: it isn't fair to say that such rational reflections are irrelevant if they are seen as part of the causal nexus that determines our actions.
 - If rational considerations are just viewed as another cog in the deterministic machine that controls our behavior, then I argue that a new concern emerges for how reason will be seen as illusory:
 - Reason when reduced to a psychological (causal) process loses all authority for justification.

UNDERMINING REASON'S AUTHORITY

- I have no reason to think that the conclusions I come to when I think about what is ideal, good, or moral to do are any more justified than any other option if I don't think of reason itself as a free process.
 - Consider the phenomenon of bias (def: arational or irrational forces that influence belief-formation)
 - Bias conditions belief in a way that is rationally arbitrary. Causal forces that condition my belief are able to operate regardless of whether they are justified.
 - Ex: just because a belief has no justification or evidence behind it doesn't mean people won't ever believe it!
 - If I am going to treat the judgments that reason concludes as actually justified, I must commit to the idea that reason would recommend these same judgments no matter what causal circumstances it was operating under.
 - (small caveat that we hold the rational considerations being weighed constant under these shifting circumstances)
 - Thus, if the operation of reason is subject to conditional causal circumstances (i.e. my thinking is determined), then I have no basis for faith in thinking these beliefs hold any authority over alternatives.

NOT JUST A PROBLEM FOR PRACTICAL REASON

- If the authority of our practical judgments of good/bad, right/wrong, etc are undermined by determinism, our reasoning concerning descriptive judgments of the world is undermined as well.
- Our ability to weigh evidence and observations and construct theoretical models of the causal framework of reality equally depends on an assumption that rationality is free to entertain the options and evidence as described previously. In short, the rational study of the world is an attempt to inform our choices of what to believe.
- If my study of the world rationally (biology, neuroscience, physics etc) leads me to conclude that there are causal forces determining my will, then the very skepticism of freedom this engenders results in a position that undermines the basis from which I was led to that skepticism in the first place.
 - Example with bias: If I judge my own thinking to be biased (which I can do!), then I am skeptical about the thinking being accused, but I still treat the judgment that I am biased with authority.
 - In other words, without the presupposition of freedom, I would never be in a position from which to seriously (i.e. rationally) entertain the considerations that lead me to doubt my freedom!
- Now, a belief can still be true even with the threat of rational bias. Let's say that we are determined into thinking that we are determined (treating the empirical basis for skepticism of freedom as a causal inevitability of our biology). So, this still leaves open that we could actually be determined and without freedom, but my argument here allows us to say that there is no rationally justifiable reason for endorsing the premise of determinism.
- I can't deny the possibility of determinism, but I can undermine it as a justified belief since it defeats its own basis of justification.

SO WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

- One answer is this: it is not within the power of reason to undermine its authority in total.
- The authority of individual claims/arguments may be undermined, but not a global (wholesale) rejection of reason itself.
 - Nagel: such a rejection “leaves me with no one to be”
- So, we are in a position to claim that the denial of rational freedom is not rationally assertible since it would entail such a global rejection.
- Therefore, it is not possible for us to avoid the rational presupposition of freedom.
- This is NOT a proof that we are actually free! All it means is that freedom is not a thought “we can get outside of”.

ON THE OTHER HAND...

- Tempering this result that we cannot abandon our view of ourselves (rationally) as free, we also cannot deny how our agency lives (for us) within a causal structure.
- If it is granted that we can't deny our freedom entirely, how can we still make sense of the (apparent) observation that there are conditional degrees of agency and empowerment? That the world of causality in (especially) psychology conditions the ability one has of being self-determining?
- If we found the basis for a presumption of freedom through the operation of reason itself, this can also serve as a guide for judgments about which conditions lead to increased agency and empowerment in a causal world. Being informed is one of those variables.
- In fact, to be at all effective in our efforts of practical reasoning to justified decisions, we must recognize such causal connections in the world. Without them, we have (almost) nothing to use as a basis for an informed choice.
 - Ex: how am I supposed to decide whether it would be good to drink the contents of my coffee cup without an understanding of its causal powers over me?

HOPE AS (FORCED) CHOICE

- A familiar perspective that would combine the awareness of causality coupled with the necessity of treating oneself as free would be the “playing the hand you’re dealt” model:
 - ALL circumstances have the presumption of basic agency – “there is always some choice”.
 - But it is also fair to acknowledge that some circumstances have a greater or more restricted space of conditioned agency.
 - Ex: Frankl again
 - Ex: I have an old (philosopher) friend who can talk me through all the decisions they have made or have to make rationally, but they are afflicted with a paralyzing anxiety that makes something like even going to the grocery store impossible. Those conditions limit what choices are viable for them, but this doesn’t stop them from considering what response to those conditions would be ideal. My friend retains this recognition of freedom in the face of limiting circumstances. Contrast this with someone who does not need to face such anxieties in considering options for choice. Note: I think it is worth asking who might actually be more empowered?!
- So, I offer this as a definition of the possibility of HOPE: hope in this context is best understood as an attitude aimed at choice (in contrast to a definition that makes it into a predictive belief of future conditions which may or may not happen.)
- Under this definition, my arguments up to this point entail that hope is a condition of existence that we are unable to escape (and not because this is some sort of contingent psychological fact about us!).

ANOTHER OPTION: “OPTIMISTIC NIHILISM”

- Everything I've said up to this point might still allow for another attempt at resisting the despair around freedom: that the answer to this riddle is to see all choice as arbitrary, so that the only constraint on freedom is to “do as thou wilt”.
- This opens a bigger “can of worms” around the question “what does it mean to rationally will a choice?” but I want to at least indicate in brief how I would want to address such a question.
- Taking seriously the space of freedom that is presupposed in practical reason means taking seriously the basis on which we make our choices. As I have remarked, the basis of that presupposition is the idea that reason generates non-arbitrary judgments. Another way to put this is that just as we are “forced” into respecting our ability to reason as a free activity, we are also “forced” into exploring the space of non-arbitrary considerations on practical reasoning.
- As soon as I consider any choice to pursue a goal (such as “why not try to just be as happy as possible?”), I am immediately pulled into the question of “why this and not some other choice?”.
- This question also is something we are unable to avoid. To simply cite my desires, whims, or any other causal circumstance as the basis for dismissing alternative choices undercuts the possibility of reason being the determining basis, and thus undercuts freedom. If happiness matters, it matters not because we merely are compelled to desire it. Endorsing desires directly is rationally disempowering in the same way as attempting to “own” the perspective that I am a fully deterministic being.
- To rationally will something requires the possibility that I could fail to meet its demands! (Frankl)

THE RETURN TO DESPAIR

- My comments in this talk do NOT defeat all forms of despair (including especially despair about unempowered circumstances, or about what goals our agency should be directed toward), but, if my arguments are effective, they do remove one barrier that would immediately prevent us from addressing other threats.
- My problem with despair about freedom has not been that I think we can prove that we are in fact free (or that determinism makes some kind of false claim). My problem has been with the despairing part: an attempt to abandon a world we are actually unable to abandon – the world of principled choice, and all the meaning that it supports.

PS

- Following Kant, I would also argue that the assumption of the Law of Determinism is itself one of these “rational presumptions”, like the necessary commitment to free will.
- Thus, just as my arguments about freedom do not justify the belief that we really are free, neither does the necessity of thinking about the world in terms of laws of cause and effect prove that everything is truly determined.

RELATED READINGS

- Kant!
- Frankl 'The Will to Meaning'
- Boethius 'The Consolation of Philosophy'
- Nagel 'The Last Word'