



The Free Will Debate

Michael Langford

Michael exposes some fallacies of denying free will – in doing so he anticipates some of the debate that will take place in August at our Beyond the Brain meeting on this topic. See also my review of Alfred Mele’s book in the Review Section.

Those who attack the idea of free will nearly always do so from one of two standpoints. The first is theological – if there is a God who is omnipotent then he determines everything that happens, including our thoughts and actions. This view I shall not discuss here, except to say that while it accords with the writings of Calvin – at least in many of his statements – and also with the view of some, but not all Muslim thinkers (who regard omnipotence as having this implication), it does not accurately describe mainstream Christianity (or Buddhism or many other faith systems). Aquinas, for example, claims that it makes no sense to speak of God doing either what is not morally good (and for Aquinas, the ‘good’ is a reflection of God’s character, not a simple reference to his will) or what is logically impossible (which would include *making* me good, because then it would not be me, but an automaton). According to this mainstream view, if God knows the future in detail (and not all Christians think that he does) he does so not because – like Calvin – he determines it, but because he sees things from an atemporal perspective.

The second ground is much more relevant for most people, and only became prominent after an appreciation of the physical sciences began to take hold of the popular imagination. Here it is assumed that all events, including mental ones, have purely ‘naturalistic’ causes. This view – sometimes called ‘scientific determinism’ – gets its first major voice in Hobbes, in the 1600s, and is now regarded by many as being a necessary response to recent discoveries concerning how the mind is linked to the brain. This way of seeing things is often accepted because of a simple fallacy that I shall now expose.

In Sam Harris’s best selling *Free Will* he writes: “Either our wills are determined by prior causes and we are not responsible for them, or they are the product of chance and we are not responsible for them.” (p. 5) In addition to the fact that the word ‘cause’ is notoriously problematic and hard to define, this is a classical example of dogmatism, because someone who believes in free will simply denies Harris’s assertion – which is more like the statement of a conclusion than the framing of an argument. It is a case of what some philosophers call a ‘bogus dichotomy’. [Cf. in physics, someone might say: “either you accept the wave theory of light, or the particle theory” when we know that both theories are models that only work in limited domains, and the truth is that neither tell the whole truth.] Let me explain the free will response more fully.

Emergence

In theories of ‘emergence’ – which are now found in many areas of physics, biology and social sciences – when certain levels of complexity arise the phenomena that ‘emerge’ can be explained *up to a point* in terms of the steps that led to them, but having arisen they need new categories of language to describe the novel situation that is found. One obvious example is the emergence of life from the primeval sludge, that is ‘life’ in the sense of what Aristotle thinks of as an organism – that differs from any pile of bits and pieces, however complicated that pile is – in that the *inter-relationship* of the

parts is *constitutive* of what an organism is. Self-reproducing organisms cannot be ‘reduced’ to the bits that make them up even if a history of their emergence can be constructed. This is why – in his somewhat archaic way of describing things – Aristotle thought that every vegetable had a ‘soul’ [*psyche*]. Similarly, on an emergence view of consciousness, once there is the kind of awareness that emerges in the biological world with the likes of us (and very likely with other animals, for there is no necessity to limit this claim to the human world), then new categories of language are needed to describe the nature of the emerging phenomenon. These (at least for humans) include self-consciousness, creativity, the capacity to love, a sense of shame or guilt, responsibility and free will. These six concepts are all inter-related and simply cannot be adequately described in terms of the earlier levels of being, even though the steps by which they emerge can often be described, for example, by Darwinian theory. [Of course, babies and demented people, and some others, may not exhibit some or all of these factors, or only exhibit them to a minimal degree, but we are considering the *typical* human person.]

The fallacy of the Harris argument (or rather assertion) can now be exposed. Any question based upon it (e.g. “What is free will, if not a way of describing physically caused neurological events or chance?”) is systematically question-begging, because the question is so framed that it reflects the underlying assumption of materialistic reductionism and rules out – *a priori* – a response in terms of emerging phenomena. It is a classic example of what the French call *une question mal posée*. [A crude example is “Have you stopped beating your dog yet?” when you have no dog, but many questions are so framed that it is not so obvious that in trying to respond to them at all one is being sucked into a series of assumptions that should be resisted. For example, if someone asks “Who made God?” the theist should not try to ‘answer’ but to point out that if the concept of ‘God’ is properly understood, the question does not arise (whether or not there is a God); it is *une question mal posée*.]

Describing free will

So how should a believer in free will describe what they think it is? First, they can try to show what it is *not* (a *via negativa*) It is not, for example, the same as mechanical or instinctive reaction (although many human actions may be). Second, when they try to describe what it is (a *via positiva*) they cannot, consistently, use the language of naturalistic causation without begging the very issue in question; they have instead to use the language of phenomenology whereby one takes seriously *internal* descriptions of what it feels like to think and hope and puzzle. If a hard-line determinist demands an account in naturalistic terms, it has to be pointed out that this demand itself begs all the questions at issue!

Apart from exposing the question-begging nature of the typical determinist argument there are at least three considerations that support the free will position.

First, there is something odd about the determinists' position when they have to believe, if they are consistent, that they are totally determined or conditioned to believe in determinism; whereas believers in free will can reasonably hold that they have freely come to their belief. This is not a *disproof* of determinism, as is sometimes argued (I don't know how one finally proves or disproves anything in areas of metaphysics),* but it does provide a kind of worrisome challenge to the determinist.

Second, and consequent to this, the principal ground for belief in free will is not religion or ethics, but simply the precondition of any coherent scientific rationality. If my recognition of a valid or good argument (in mathematics and science respectively) is itself a particular kind of neurological activity, then how does one know that this is sound unless this is because of some 'higher order' neurological activity. But this quickly leads to an infinite regress (Plato's 'third man' argument) because one can only 'know' that this higher order points to validity or soundness because of some still higher neurological activity, and so on.

Third, while it is possible to live as a moral and social agent with the belief that at least some of our actions carry genuine responsibility,** it is very hard to live without this belief. Since the argument against belief in free will relies on the kind of fallacious or question-begging assumptions that underlie contemporary 'scientism', why go for this stultifying philosophy? Perhaps, some people do so in order to avoid the rather frightening sense of responsibility and challenge that goes with belief in free will.

PS. As members of the network are well aware, the rejection of 'scientism' is not the rejection of 'science' but the rejection of the assumption that the methods that work so well in the hard sciences, like chemistry and physics, are appropriate for all the other intellectual disciplines. Not only do ethics and metaphysics use rational methods that are different from those of the hard sciences, so do disciplines like history, politics, musicology and theology.

* The word 'proof' has a fairly clear meaning in at least three different fields, mathematics, science and law (with interesting differences in each case). In other areas, including,

for example, historical and metaphysical theories, argument has a large part to play, but rather than 'proof' we are likely to discuss the rationality in terms of factors such as plausibility, coherence, consistency and fruitfulness.

** The term 'responsibility' can be, and often is, given a kind of meaning within a deterministic philosophy – for example it can be seen, along with other moral terms, as a kind of social tool that pressures people to behave in ways that are useful for society. (Here, see the writings of Barbara Wotton.) However, for most people it is a lot more than this; it is part of an inter-related set of ethical concepts that form part of our inner way of thinking and feeling.



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