

Freewill and Determinism: Political, Not Just Metaphysical

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In his article “Autonomy in Neuroethics: Political and not Metaphysical”, Veljko Dubljevic argues that the implications of neuroscience for autonomous decision making are less significant than they seem. Focusing on Gidon Felsen’s and Peter B. Reiner’s recent article “How the Neuroscience of Decision Making Informs Our Conception of Autonomy”, Dubljevic, first applauds the authors for seeking to avoid the metaphysical debate over freewill. On the other hand, though, he argues that they exaggerate the significance of neuroscientific findings. Priming, framing, and anchoring undermine *ideal autonomy* but nonetheless leave *basic autonomy* intact.

In what follows, I draw attention to some of the difficulties associated with viewing autonomy as a matter of degree. I also argue that Dubljevic misidentifies the sense in which his conception of autonomy is separate from metaphysics. Though the justification offered in support of a political conception of autonomy is independent of metaphysical debate, autonomy is not conceptually distinct from freewill. Finally, I suggest that the metaphysical issue of determinism’s truth or falsity may have greater normative significance than Dubljevic thinks, particularly with respect to the weightiness of the choice/circumstance distinction in matters of resource distribution.

Dubljevic’s response to Felsen and Reiner rests on viewing both autonomy and that which threatens it as matters of degree. With respect to the latter, he points out that lower level instances of coercion and compulsion typically pose no threat to autonomy. Even at the higher levels, however, basic autonomy remains intact (even if ideal autonomy doesn’t) so long as the form of coercion or compulsion in question doesn’t threaten an individual’s ability to devise and

carry out a reasonable and rational life plan. By way of example, a powerful compulsion to create art is consistent with basic autonomy since the person who experiences it isn't prevented from pursuing long term goals or from successfully cooperating with others. Heroin addiction, in contrast, hampers one's capacity for both. With respect to neuroscience, then, differences between kinds of compulsion suggest that the influence subconscious processes exert over decision making is consistent with basic autonomy so long as it doesn't compromise one's ability to form and cooperatively pursue a life plan.

Though I'm sympathetic to the goal of rescuing autonomy from neuroethics, there are a few issues I'd like to draw attention to. First, treating autonomy as a matter of degree carries a certain amount of theoretical baggage with it. As useful as doing so may be for Dubljevic's purposes, moral and political philosophers often implicitly treat it as a threshold concept. Consider, for instance, the idea of moral personhood. For some philosophers, the presence or absence of autonomy is what determines whether a being is a member of the moral community.¹ If autonomy is to be thought of as a matter of degree, however, then does that also mean personhood is a matter of degree? Are some individuals less of a person, and thus less worthy of moral consideration than others? Similarly, it's generally accepted that the protection of each person's autonomy is of equal importance. If some people are capable of greater autonomy than others, however, then does that mean the protection of their autonomy matters more (Christman 1988)? I don't think these difficulties are insurmountable, but I do think they should be addressed.

Secondly, Dubljevic draws a distinction between the political concept of autonomy and the metaphysical concept of freewill. It's for this reason, in part, that he thinks neuroscientific

¹ Hence Harry Frankfurt's seminal account of autonomy is also intended as an account of personhood. See his paper "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person."

findings are less threatening than they seem. After all, if the political concept of autonomy both suffices to ground moral and legal responsibility and is independent of the truth or falsity of determinism, then it can be used to insulate responsibility from empirical finding that make a deterministic picture look plausible. Though I think Dubljevic is onto something important, I also there's a bit of confusion which needs clearing up. On the one hand, Dubljevic's right to think that there's a conceptual distinction to be made between what metaphysicians have in mind when discussing freedom and what political philosophers (sometimes) have in mind. The distinction, however, is not between free will and autonomy, but between free will and liberty.² Liberty is simply the absence of interference. A person possesses liberty to the extent that she isn't prevented from doing as she pleases, e.g., isn't confined to a prison cell, constrained by laws, etc.³ In contrast, free will is concerned with what must be true of one's motivational states for the actions which spring from them to be free (Christman 1988).⁴ Though Dubljevic claims autonomy is distinct from freewill, motivational states is precisely what he and other autonomy theorists are talking about. As Neil Levy correctly notes, what Dubljevic offers is really a version of compatibilism (Levy 2013). That said, I think there is a difference between Dubljevic's discussion of autonomy and metaphysical discussions of freewill. The difference, however, lies in the nature and role of the justification offered rather than the concept under discussion. Following John Rawls, Dubljevic thinks that a conception of autonomy can be justified by virtue of its place in our political culture. If a conception of the autonomous citizen is embedded in democratic culture to the extent that it's generally accepted by members of a

² Gidon Felsen and Peter B. Reiner (Dubljevic's primary targets) unfortunately fail to distinguish freewill/autonomy from liberty in their discussion of libertarianism and political philosophy. See page 11 of "How the Neuroscience of Decision Making Informs Our Conception of Autonomy."

³ It's worth noting that my characterization of liberty is specifically a characterization of negative liberty. I leave positive liberty aside for the sake of avoiding unnecessary complexity.

⁴ John Christman calls attention to the distinction between freewill and liberty, though he refers to liberty as "freedom of action". See pages 111-112 of "Constructing the Inner Citadel."

plural society, then he and Rawls would both say it can justifiably be employed for purposes of ascribing responsibility in matters of law and morality (Rawls 1985). Since a justification of this sort doesn't seek to demonstrate truth so much as the permissibility of practical application, it's therefore also independent of metaphysical debate. An independent justification doesn't entail that a different concept is under discussion, however.

The third and final point I'd like to make is that there's reason to think the plausibility or implausibility of determinism has at least some normative significance for politics. Though a politically justified conception of freewill/autonomy may suffice to ground moral and legal responsibility without recourse to metaphysical argument, Samuel Scheffler has pointed out that determinism ostensibly has implications for the significance of the choice/circumstance distinction in matters of distribution (Scheffler 2003; Scheffler 2005). He notes that if determinism is taken to be true, then a person's motivational states must be recognized as the product of her social and biological circumstances. Once this is acknowledged, however, according decisive normative significance to choice (as some but not all luck egalitarians are inclined to) becomes unreasonable.⁵ If the distinction between choice and circumstance is not a sharp one, then why should disadvantages traceable to a person's choices be decisively exempt from compensation, while those traceable to a person's circumstances decisively warrant it? Though the truth of determinism wouldn't erase the significance of choice when deciding who to compensate, it does presumably reduce the weight it should be accorded. The upshot is that neuroscientific findings with implications for determinism also have implications for how resources should be distributed.

⁵ G.A Cohen is a noteworthy example of a luck egalitarian who avoids assigning the choice/ circumstance distinction excessive normative significance. See chapters 6 and 7 of his book *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, especially pages 271-272 and 300-302.

All in all, I think Dubljevic's article serves a useful purpose by drawing attention to the differences between political discussions of autonomy and metaphysical discussions of freewill. As I've argued above, however, I also think he exaggerates the extent to which the two are separable. Freewill and determinism are subjects with political, not just metaphysical significance.

References

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