

Free will as private determinism

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This article suggests that our sense of free will is formed when others react to our behavior with surprise, even though our private knowledge tells us our behavior was determined by our preferences. Such surprised reactions, even when our behavior is from our perspective fully determined, lead us to infer that we exercise free will.

I. ROBERT NOZICK ON FREE WILL

In exploring free will, we will take as our starting point Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* (1981, pp. 291–2) [1], which speaks of the problem of free will as a “tension between causal determination and randomness on the one hand, and valuable agenthood on the other”. His eloquent statement of the problem (the reader is advised to consult the original) begins by emphasizing the importance of “human dignity”, while relegating “punishment and responsibility” to the status of a mere “side issue”:

Without free will, we seem diminished, merely the playthings of external forces. How, then, can we maintain an exalted view of ourselves? Determinism seems to undercut human dignity, it seems to undermine our value. Our concern is to formulate a view of how we (sometimes) act so that if we act that way our value is not threatened, our stature is not diminished. The philosophical discussion focusing upon issues of punishment and responsibility, therefore, strikes one as askew, as concerned with a side issue, although admittedly an important one.

After having identified the wrong way to approach the problem (by starting with “punishment and responsibility”) Nozick then points out an obvious problem posed by a belief in determinism:

The task is to formulate a conception of human action that leaves agents valuable; but what is the problem? First, that determinism seems incompatible with such a conception; if our actions stem from causes before our birth, then we are not the originators of our acts and so are less valuable... There is an incompatibility or at least a tension between free will and determinism, raising the question: given that our actions are causally determined, how is free will possible?

Having identified determinism as incompatible with (or, at least, in “tension” with) valuable agents possessing free will, he then casts doubt on “uncaused” randomness as a solution by asserting that each of us must be more than a mere “arena” in which thoughts occur. We must be “valuable originators of action”:

Some would deny what this question accepts as given, and save free will by denying determinism of (some) actions. Yet if an uncaused action is a random happening, then this no more comports with human value than does determinism. Random acts and caused acts alike seem to leave us not as the valuable originators of action but as an arena, a place where things happen, whether through earlier causes or spontaneously.

Nozick goes on to say that free will must be “something more” than mere randomness:

Clearly, if our actions were random, like the time of radioactive decay of uranium 238 emitting an alpha particle, their being thus undetermined would be insufficient to ground human value or provide a basis for responsibility and punishment. Even the denier of determinism therefore needs to produce a positive account of free action. On his view, a free action is an undetermined one with something more. The problem is to produce a coherent account of that something more.

Nozick, having criticized both determinism and pure randomness as being in tension with our sense of our self worth then gives this succinct statement of the core problem in the form of a hurdle we must clear:

Given the tension between causal determination and randomness on the one hand, and valuable agenthood on the other, how is valuable agenthood possible?

He closes by expressing doubt about finding a “fully satisfactory” solution:

The problem is so intractable, so resistant to illuminating solution, that we shall have to approach it from several different directions. No one of the approaches turns out to be fully satisfactory, nor indeed do all together.

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II. PRIVATE DETERMINISM

Nozick applies the word “intractable” to the problem of free will with good reason: If our actions are:

- determined, then they are merely mechanical.
- random, then they are devoid of purpose.

Moreover, any mere blending of randomness with determinism seems to provide no relief. To the extent that our actions are:

- determined, then they are merely mechanical.
- random, then they are devoid of purpose.

How then to resolve Nozick’s “tension between causal determination and randomness on the one hand, and valuable agenthood on the other”?

Introspection provides some insight: We as individuals are capable of knowing more about *our* future actions than others know; and, conversely, others know more about *their* future actions than we know. When asked to name a number between 1 and 1,000 we learn nothing when we reveal our answer, whereas others learn our answer for the first time. From our point of view our actions are deterministic in the limited sense that *we know ahead of time what we will say*. From the perspective of others our choices are indeterministic in the sense that *they do not know ahead of time what we will say*. In this way we see our small pocket of the world as deterministic, even as we find the wider world indeterministic.

So we identify the first property of what will be called *private determinism*:

Property 1: *We come to regard ourselves as freely acting because we are aware in advance things that no one else can know about our future behavior.*

This will be called “private” determinism for the obvious reason that our sense of free will is assumed to arise from our private foreknowledge of our own behavior. This foreknowledge will be regarded as evidence of determinism because we know in advance what we will do, and there is no way to know in advance an event that is random (though, unlike with successful scientific predictions, we appear to *cause* our behavior).

Good evidence that we actually cause the events we imagine is provided by a simple thought experiment: We begin counting from one upwards while waiting for an alarm to sound on the decay of a radioactive atom. When the alarm sounds we are to announce the number we are thinking. No matter when the alarm sounds the number we are thinking will be the number we announce, apparently because it is the thought (of the number) that gives rise to the act (of saying the number). In contrast, in science we cannot keep counting from one upwards while waiting for the results from an external physical experiment and expect the number we are thinking to match the experimental results as they arrive.

III. PRIVATE KNOWLEDGE

Should we find it acceptable to our dignity if our actions are determined in the above way? Yes, because our actions are “determined” only in the limited sense that we know what we are going to do *immediately* before we do it. So our pocket of determinism is bounded in space *and* time, and our actions are not determined from birth, let alone from before birth. As John Passmore points out in *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (1968, pp. 509–519) [2] in his interpretation of Stuart Hampshire’s *Thought and Action* (1959) [3]:

... the leading characteristic of a free agent is that he can tell us in advance — not by inference from his past but directly and immediately — what he is going to do.

In this way I regard others as free to act, with just myself as a private pocket of determinism. In addition, my self-worth—and sense of free will—is bolstered by my being aware that I know more about my small pocket of the universe than all others combined.

Moreover, not only am I uniquely knowledgeable about what I am going to *do*, I am also uniquely knowledgeable about what I have *thought*. Others therefore have to rely on me to truthfully convey information about my prior motives, just as I have to rely on others to truthfully convey this same information about themselves to me. We are not, therefore, just unique private pockets of *determinism*, we are also unique private pockets of *history*. We know many things about our past that no one else can know. Of course, if my secret past drives my future behavior it should come as no surprise that my behavior is often unpredictable to others.

So we identify this second property of private determinism:

Property 2: *We come to regard ourselves as freely acting because we know things that no one else can know (except by being told by us) about our past thoughts.*

IV. ORIGINATORS OF ACTION

Moreover, I come to regard myself as freely acting because others inform me that I act unpredictably, and because I see others acting unpredictably as well. Were I alone in the universe I would never get the equivalent sense of existing as a free individual. In the absence of the claims of others that I am unpredictable and therefore free (and my observing unpredictable and therefore free behavior in others) I would always tend to see my behavior as determined by my preferences. I ultimately come to see myself as unpredictable (and therefore free) because I see others act unpredictably in the course of fulfilling *their* needs which leads me to draw the obvious

inference that I am similarly unpredictable (and therefore free) when fulfilling *my* needs. I think: If they are free despite following internal motivations then so am I. And if my actions are determined by the past it is *my* (private) past, not *the* (public) past, that plays this role, where my private past is part of what defines *me*. In this way I come to view my preferences and ensuing actions as the exercise of free will.

So we identify this third property of private determinism:

Property 3: *Our sense of free will is formed when others react to our behavior with surprise even though our private knowledge tells us our behavior was determined by our preferences. Such surprised reactions, even when our behavior is (from our perspective) fully determined, lead us to infer that we exercise free will.*

On the surface it is plausible to dismiss free will simply on grounds that our actions are determined by our personal preferences, which are in turn determined by our personal circumstances, and so on. And of course this leads us to suspect that we lack the dignity rightly required by Nozick. But in fact we retain our dignity in the face of the above argument by virtue of our preferences being *private*. We would only lose our dignity if our preferences were as well known to others as they are to ourselves, because then our behavior would be predictable to others, and we would rightly be regarded by others as lacking free will. *In this way we see that our dignity ultimately derives from the privacy of our preferences, where we learn about this privacy only from our interactions with others.* And if we do not exactly see ourselves as “originators of action”, we can at least see ourselves as the origin of the private preferences that determine our public actions.

In practice I may first serially consult my senses (*sight, hearing, taste, and so forth*). Only then do I identify from among competing preferences my main preference (*inexplicably, I crave turnips*). And only then do I take action (*I eat a turnip*). Although these steps may seem to be forced, their private character makes them correspond to the exercise of free will. Of course, at times I may be tempted to see myself as merely an “arena” in which actions occur that are determined by random preferences; *but it is unlikely that others will see me that way.* To others my unpredictable actions will seem to make me a true “originator of action”.

Does this then resolve Nozick’s “tension between causal determination and randomness on the one hand, and valuable agenthood on the other”? Possibly. By providing a solution to Nozick’s problem that is neither deterministic nor random—because this varies with perspective—private determinism appears to neatly sidestep Nozick’s dilemma.

V. PUNISHMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY

We are now ready to address the issue of “punishment and responsibility”, properly postponed as a “side issue”

by Nozick earlier.

Imagine a serial bully who goes on a rampage: The police never know who he is going to assault next. From their point of view his behavior is entirely (and disturbingly) random. Simply put, they see random beatings. Ultimately he is caught and confined to a cell. Thereafter his behavior becomes predictable from the point of view of the authorities. From the bully’s perspective, however, the area over which he asserts free will shrinks to insignificance: He is moved from cell to cell against his will, so that even his *own* behavior becomes to him random.

This punishment is justified from the perspective of society because he has interfered with the free will of his victims. He imposed his will beyond his own area of local control into the corresponding areas of others. And because his behavior was “determined” only in the limited sense that he was aware of his own motivations and anticipated his own actions (something no one else was able to do) this form of determinism in no way undermines the ethics of imposing restrictions on his free will. That is to say, he cannot plead *external compulsion* as an extenuating circumstance because his behavior was not “causally determined” by external force (which would have made his behavior predictable). His behavior was “determined” only in the limited sense that he understood his own motivations and foresaw his own actions, *even as others did not.*

So we identify this fourth property of private determinism:

Property 4: *Private determinism is an unusual form of determinism in that it amplifies guilt rather than conferring innocence.*

VI. INCAPACITY VERSUS DETERMINISM

One issue remains to be clarified and that is the distinction between incapacity and determinism. When we face an imminent calamity we usually ask: Can I prevent this disaster? And when we are powerless to prevent a disaster we may be led to think our entire future is determined. But clearly *physical incapacity* (powerlessness in the face of a overwhelming external event) must not be mistaken for *philosophical determinism* (a preordained outcome governing all events large and small alike). Capable people who mistake physical incapacity for philosophical determinism run the risk of failing to act solely because they believe all outcomes are predetermined. People who make this mistake would be predictable to others and so would not be seen by others as originators of action.

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- [1] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1981).
- [2] John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy, 2nd ed.* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, 1968).
- [3] Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1959).