REVIEW ARTICLE:

Free Choice: A Self-Referential Argument by J. M. Boyle, Jr.,
G. Grisez, and O. Tollefsen

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BOYLE, J. M., JR., G. GRISEZ, O. TOLLEFSEN. *Free Choice: A Self-Referential Argument.* Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976. xi + 207 pp. $15.95—An important contribution both to the philosophical literature concerned with the problem of free choice and to the growing field of investigation dealing with self-referential argumentation. The authors have attempted to weave these two areas of interest together, in the hope of advancing philosophical knowledge in both. The book's approach to the problem of free choice by means of self-referential argumentation will (or should) constitute a milestone for future efforts which have this double, or either special, focus.

For the benefit of readers who have not experienced the dizzying heights of the philosophical kingdom of self-reference, a few introductory comments are in order. Self-referential argumentation has a long history inspired by a pair of questions: Are there genuinely self-referential statements or propositions and, if so, can their properties be used to advantage in the context of philosophical argument? As is to be expected, responses that have been offered to both questions have received the exacting scrutiny of learned suspicion. We are now in a period of growing interest and perhaps comparative liberalism regarding self-reference: Russell and Whitehead's prohibition against self-referential statements has been buffered by the development of consistent formal systems which sanction certain forms of self-refer-

ence. And a number of distinct varieties of self-reference have been studied and claimed as genuine and legitimate.

Those varieties that interest the philosopher have, of course, been those which appear to be of promise in philosophical argumentation. These forms of self-reference are generally used *negatively*, as evidence that an idea or claim is to be rejected because it is "self-falsifying" or "self-undermining." Philosophically important varieties of self-referential inconsistency may conveniently be divided in two: *Pragmatical self-referential inconsistencies* (also termed "performative," as is done by the authors) are identified when it is observed that an expression, statement, or proposition conflicts with the manner in which it is used. E.g., "I don't speak any English," spoken in English, comprises a statement which conflicts with what it is used to assert, and thereby is self-falsifying. *Metalogical self-referential inconsistencies* arise when an idea, expression, statement, or proposition rules out one or more of the preconditions which must be satisfied in order for it to be able to refer to whatever is in view, e.g., "All of life, involving both our waking states as well as our consciousness in dreams, is really nothing more than a dream." The statement entails a denial of what must be presupposed—here, reference to discernibly distinct states—in claiming specifically that the dreaming-waking distinction which we normally make is illusory because dreamed; the statement is thereby self-undermining. (Another illustration may be had in Strawson's argument against skepticism (in *Individuals*): the argument may be interpreted to rely upon the metalogically self-undermining character of the skeptic's position.)

In short, pragmatical self-referential inconsistencies falsify themselves, hence are *false*; metalogical self-referential inconsistencies undermine themselves, self-destruct on the level of meaning, and hence are *meaningless*. The distinction between the two varieties parallels that between descriptions of fact and transcendental analyses.

The *Free Choice* book proceeds wholly by means of *pragmatically* self-referential argumentation, yet the metalogical variety is relevant to the work, as we shall see shortly. The central argument proceeds essentially and in much simplified form as follows:

The opponent of free choice, in arguing that there is no free choice, in fact relies upon certain tenets of rationality, which the authors call "norms." In particular, in arguing in favor of the no free choice conclusion, the opponent of free choice is forced to appeal (at least implicitly) to the prescriptive tenets of rationality to which he adheres and which he seeks to convince others that they, too, must accept. In making this appeal and in seeking to convince others by his rational argumentation, the opponent of free choice in fact must assume the free choice of others to accept (or reject) his conclusion. For otherwise his argument is pointless. Hence, the opponent of free choice is caught in a pragmatically self-falsifying claim.

The alternative, as we noted, is that his argument is pointless: But if it is pointless to affirm that there is no free choice, then no one could rationally oppose the claim that there is.

In short, the rejection of free choice is self-falsifying, or else, if

pointless, proponents of free choice are left alone on a battlefield with no rational opposition. To buttress their positive conclusion supporting the existence of free choice, the authors further contend that there is a common experience of free choice, although this phenomenon, by itself, is not claimed as justification for the conclusion.

Although the self-referential argument Boyle, Grisez, and Tollefsen have produced is admirable, it is, ironically, itself self-referentially inconsistent. (There are numerous other problems with the book's argumentation, but this is the most damaging and certainly the most interesting one.) The concept of free choice they propose, and the reference they make to a common experience of free choice (to which the concept refers), are *metalogically* self-referentially inconsistent. (Interestingly enough, so is the antithetical concept of, e.g., determinism.)

Although the full argument cannot be included here, it serves to show that the central concept of free choice rules out certain referential preconditions without which the authors (or anyone else) *could not* refer to acts of the kind they wish to. (The argument is given elsewhere: *Diss. Abs. Internatl.*, No. 79-05; cf. also *Methodology and Science* 9 [1976]: 85–92, and *Dialectica* 29 [1975]: 173–88.)

If the reviewer is correct in this judgment, the paradox-engendering character of the *Free Choice* book is reminiscent of Frege's *Grundgesetze*: too late to be recalled, and perversely vulnerable through a conflict with its own standards. But whether the book should be recalled because of an ironical failure or remembered because of a dramatic demonstration, it surely deserves to be recognized for the fine attempt it involves. —S.J.B.