

AJP Book Note: Helen Steward, *A Metaphysics For Freedom*

Steward, Helen, *A Metaphysics For Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. xii + 267, £35.00 (hardback).

In this excellent book, Helen Steward defends *agency incompatibilism*: the idea that agency itself is incompatible with determinism (so the higher forms of freedom more traditionally the focus of debate, which are sufficient for agency, are also incompatible with determinism). The book consists of a sustained argument for this position; first establishing that incompatibilism is correct, and—on that basis—that indeterminism is true. The second half of the book defends the distinctive version of indeterminism on offer: whether philosophical argument could establish it (ch. 5), and whether it provides for the kind of agency that Steward cares about (chs. 6–7). The book is full of detailed and very clear arguments for the various positions Steward takes. She significantly furthers the debate over free will: no mean feat given the voluminous literature.

In this note, I will say something about the argument for indeterminism in the first half. Here's Steward:

1. If universal determinism is true, the future is not open.
2. If there are self-moving animals, the future is open.
3. There are self-moving animals.
4. Therefore, universal determinism is not true. (p. 12)

We need not be detained by premise 1; there is certainly a sense of 'open' on which it is true. (I am less persuaded that this is coextensive with the property of openness we normally care about.)

A *self-moving animal* is a creature which, through its own actions, moves its body (pp. 16–7). And for Steward, to act is to *settle* various matters which are unsettled (chs. 2–3). Essentially, to be a self-moving animal is to settle issues—such as whether and when to move one's leg—rather than having them settled for you by something else.

Settling is a metaphysically loaded notion. For Steward, to settle something requires 'a question that is capable of being resolved in different ways at all times up until a certain moment'. But

surely it is a condition of being truly able to settle something that it has not already been settled in advance of one's potential intervention. If determinism were true, then, I would not be able to settle matters that it is essential for me to be able to settle, if I am to be an agent. And so, if determinism were true, there could not be agents and there could not be actions. (p. 39)

This bold claim is entailed by the premise that agency involves the strong notion of settling what was previously unsettled. Steward claims to find that our ordinary *concept* of agency does involve this commitment to indeterminism (pp. 76ff.). Moreover, Steward thinks, there are self-moving animal agents. And so determinism is false.

I confess doubts about whether there is any such thing as ‘our concept’ of agency: I don’t think my concept is deviant, but I find no commitment in it to settling in Steward’s strong sense (though I do think that when I act, if something else settles the outcome, it must settle it *through* my action rather than not via me at all). Steward offers an intriguing argument, drawing on developmental psychology, that there is a core of the concept of agency which is common to everyone, emerging early in development (enabling us to make the animate/inanimate distinction), and which essentially involves settling (§§4.1–4.3). These issues notwithstanding, the upshot is straightforward: if *anything* falls under the concept of Steward-agency, then her argument is sound and determinism is false.

Steward’s evidence that there are instances of Steward-agency appears to be this: we apply the concept of agency to animals, apparently correctly. Yet as there are many cases in which coherent concepts with apparent correct application come to be revised or replaced in light of further scientific discovery, this evidence is not nearly powerful enough to yield Steward’s conclusion. The concept of a *well-adapted animal*, prior to our acceptance of evolution, involved a certain conception of adaptation as stemming from the intervention of an agent. Finding out that no such agent was required did not undermine the apparent correctness of earlier adaptedness-ascriptions, but did vitiate arguments for the existence of a divine adapter. For all Steward’s sophisticated and ingenious argument, I see no response to the suggestion that the actual property which best deserves to realise Steward-agency might be one that is perfectly consistent with determinism.

Even if physics were to discover that each fundamental constituent of animal bodies is governed by deterministic laws, we would not abandon describing humans and other animals as agents. Accordingly, I do not believe that the property of agenthood that is habitually employed is Steward-agency. Of course, as Steward points out, the task for compatibilists here is to articulate that property of agenthood. But I am more confident in the prospects of this reconciling project than I am in the premises of any philosophical argument, including Steward’s, that it cannot be completed.

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