

DO WE CHOOSE TO DO WHAT WE DO?

FREEDOM, DETERMINISM, THE TASTE FOR HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE PREFERENCE FOR CHOCOLATE ICE-CREAM

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate generally in what sense, if any, we choose to perform our actions and, in particular, to present a theory about the nature of homosexuality as a specific behaviour and to compare it with other behaviours to determine whether it is a choice, a predisposition or a caused and inevitable condition.

I shall be drawing heavily on the work of the American philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, but I must say that I have no idea whether Dennett will agree with my conclusions. My purpose is to draw out what I think are some interesting implications from his work *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*.¹

Dennett's theory is that the truth of determinism does not impinge upon our status as free and responsible agents in any way that is worth caring about. Let us begin by defining our terms. John Hospers, the libertarian philosopher and former candidate for the presidency of the United States, says:

Determinism is simply the belief that everything that happens is caused, including human decisions and choices; and the conclusion often drawn is that if this is so, no one is ever free, because what a person does and thinks and feels is the inevitable result of prior causal factors.²

I have no idea whether determinism is true, but as a good Popperian I accept it as a bold conjecture and one that in my opinion has not been successfully and comprehensively refuted, even though legions of philosophers have attempted to do so. The truth of determinism has been of particular worry to libertarian philosophers mainly because if we are not free and responsible agents, as it is usually assumed that determinism implies, then what is the point in raving on about freedom all the time if it is just a delusion? If determinism is true and all our actions, thoughts and feelings are caused, beyond our control, shouldn't we embrace a system of planned control to bring about desired behaviour, or abandon our belief in individual responsibility and excuse every feckless or atrocious action by people because they cannot help it?

COULD WE HAVE DONE OTHERWISE?

It is instructive to note Ayn Rand's horror of determinism. She says:

Dictatorship and determinism are reciprocally reinforcing corollaries: if one seeks to enslave men, one has to destroy their reliance on the validity of their own judgments and choices — if one believes that reason and volition are impotent, one has to accept the rule of force.³

Also Tibor Machan, in a very incoherent attack on determinism in a piece called "Freedom and the Human Brain", says:

Determinism suffers the embarrassment of obliging its defenders to imply that it is false in the very process of defending it. This is because the defender of determinism believes that his opponent should change his mind, which implies that his opponent is free to do this. If ought implies can ... then to argue that someone ought to change his mind is to assume that he is free to do so or refuse to do so.⁴

This particular argument against determinism is especially feeble. When you are engaged in an argument with someone you do not assume that the other person is free to change their mind or not, rather you are applying a causal factor — the strength of your argument — to force a change of mind in the other person. If this were not the case, if people were free in some way to believe what they liked, then you may as well bribe them to change their mind rather than go to the bother of devising arguments and employing



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the rigours of logic. I suppose this is what one means when one talks of the “force of argument”.

It seems clear to me that determinists have got the better of Machan here and that our actions, thoughts and feelings are caused. If my mother died in an horrific accident I couldn't just decide for myself whether I would feel sad or not, I would be caused to feel sad. Martin Luther, in his opposition to the Catholic church, said: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” And here we get to the real crux of the matter. *Could we have done otherwise?* This seems to be the real test of our free will. Presented with a huge selection of possible choices at any decision point we can make only one choice, but we console ourselves with the belief that we are responsible for that choice — or can hold others responsible for their choices — because we “could have done otherwise”. Although on further reflection many of us have been tempted to modify this principle somewhat after realising that the demands it places on us are perhaps more onerous than we find congenial. Too fearful of the horrors of accepting what seems to be implied by a hard determinist position — that we are just deluded puppets moved about by various external forces, bereft of freedom and dignity and fit only for slavery — and also balking at the pressure of being consistently responsible for our choices, an increasingly popular get out clause is the modern cant that we are free and responsible when we make choices with generally favourable consequences, but that we are mere puppets riding on a tide of inevitability when we don't want to face up to the unfavourable consequences of choices that turned out bad.

There are whole hosts of people claiming to be addicted to all manner of things, drugs, smoking, alcohol, sex, shopping, plastic surgery, work, keep-fit; or people who excuse their appalling crimes with reference to their poor treatment by their parents, sex abuse, the nature of the capitalist system, their mental illnesses or whatever. Increasingly popular is the fashion for finding genes to excuse various behaviours such as gambling, aggressiveness, homosexuality, eating cream cakes ...

There is also no shortage of doctors, psychologists, sociologists and biologists to provide the necessary academic credibility for all these excuses. Dennett aptly calls all this: “Diminished responsibility and the spectre of creeping exculpation”.⁵ Many people who are interested in a free society look on all of these goings on with horror and thus try to force us into a fully anti-determinist position, claiming that social deprivation, addictions, genes etc. have no effect on our choices, all of them emanating entirely from our own individual free volition. I think that this is as mistaken as those who have an interest in an highly coerced society encouraging the undermining of freedom and responsibility in order to enslave us to their will. This is why Rand so detested behavioural psychologists such as B. F. Skinner, who seemed to want to keep us all in boxes and move us about with electric shocks and bells until we really were slaving puppets bereft of freedom and dignity.

HOLDING PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR BEHAVIOUR

Although that last remark was an exaggeration of Skinner for comic effect, it is these fears that determinism conjures up in the mind that Dennett has identified as the “problem” in the free will problem, and which stop us coming to a clear comprehension of the apparent dichotomy between free will and determinism. The bogeymen of philosophical determin-

ism are, according to Dennett:

- (1) The invisible jailer — what makes us so sure we are not in a prison?
- (2) The nefarious neurosurgeon — how do we know our brains are not being controlled by him pushing buttons on a master console?
- (3) The cosmic child whose dolls we are — Nozick writes that “Without free will, we seem diminished, merely the playthings of external forces”, how undignified to be a mere plaything, a toy! or
- (4) The malevolent mind-reader who can foresee all our moves and thoughts.⁶

The point of all these characters is to make it seem that freedom is an illusion. But Dennett's point is that we can have free will and responsibility even if determinism is true. Throughout *Elbow Room* Dennett claims that the free will problem is just a “family of anxieties” about the implications of determinism, that in fact determinism doesn't imply that we are puppets, or irresponsible, or mindless, or without dignity. Dennett quotes Laplace:

Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it — an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis — it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes.⁷

... and points out:

This is dreadful, because if all of one's deeds are determined by events in the past over which one certainly has no control, one never really controls any of one's deeds. One is controlled by the past or by current events caused by events in the past.⁸

But is this lack of control really a worry with which we should concern ourselves? As Nozick states:

No one has ever announced that because determinism is true thermostats do not control temperature.⁹

We are, then, in this respect, like the thermostat. Our actions, thoughts and feelings are inevitable but they are still our actions, thoughts and feelings. We are not controllees being manipulated by a controller, but individuals responding to the situation we are in. And as the thermostat is responsible for the temperature, we are responsible for our behaviours. In fact holding people responsible for their behaviour, making them pay the full cost and reap the full benefit of their decisions, seems to me to be a powerful determining cause to minimise poor decisions and maximise good decisions. Just as in economic life, if I invest well I might keep the rewards, and if badly pay the costs. What are incentives if not, in some part, determining causes of behaviour. As libertarians we have long held this to be the case regarding the economy and the free market and indeed in the social sphere as well. A libertarian system of laws combined with the principle of holding people responsible for their own decisions will generate immense wealth and prosperity and the fullest satisfaction of tastes and preferences, as people's behaviour is directed towards that which is most efficient and productive.

Some things are clearly not within our control in the sense that we do not decide about them — breathing for example

— but our choices about our behaviour are and should be. Our choices do admit of deliberation and the extent to which we deliberate and the extent of the knowledge we have when we do deliberate are all variable, but complete personal responsibility will also bring about the optimum amount of deliberation in each case. Sometimes risk is necessary, sometimes extreme caution, but the fact of their being inevitable is irrelevant. What more would we as libertarians want? Susan Wolf in her essay “The Importance of Free Will”, addresses what may be a concern to this view that even if determinism is true then we are rational and fully justified in holding people responsible for their actions on the grounds that doing so provides practical incentives to preferred decision making and behavioural outcomes. She says:

The fact that we don't have to change (in the light of the truth of determinism) our values is of little solace if it may be the case that we are, now and forever, incapable of realising our values. The fact that we don't have to think that our lives are meaningless is of little comfort if, for all that, our lives may actually be meaningless.

She concludes that:

The pessimist will only give up his pessimism if the possibility of this state of affairs is directly refuted. In other words, for the pessimist, who asks for a justification of the fact that we treat ourselves as free and responsible beings, only one kind of justification will do — a justification, in particular, which relies on the fact that we are free and responsible beings.¹⁰

It is in *Elbow Room* that Dennett establishes that, in spite of determinism, we actually are.

THE ACT WAS THEIRS AND NOT SOME OTHER AGENT'S

To return for a moment to the idea that when we make a choice we could have done otherwise, Dennett states that:

... whatever “could have done otherwise” actually means, it is not what we are interested in when we care about whether some act was freely and responsibly performed.

The “could have done otherwise” proviso is delightfully exposed as a fallacy by Harry Frankfurt thus:

Jones hates Smith and decides, in full possession of his faculties, to murder him. Meanwhile Black, the nefarious neurosurgeon, who also wants Smith dead, has implanted something in Jones' brain so that just in case Jones changes his mind (and chickens out), Black, by pushing his special button, can put Jones back on the murderous track. In the event Black doesn't have to intervene; Jones does the deed all on his own.¹¹

The point is that we would want to hold Jones responsible for his action even though he couldn't have done otherwise. The point of this is that it

... draws attention to the importance, for responsibility, of the actual causal chain of deliberation and choice running through the agent — whatever may be happening elsewhere.¹²

This sort of argument has become so popular in philosophical debate at the moment that many other philosophers have employed variations on the same theme, they have become known as Frankfurt style arguments. One of my fa-

vorites is presented by William Rowe¹³ about a man based at the fork and points on a railway track which splits into two, A and B, the points are set to track A and a runaway train is charging down the oncoming line. However, a dog is tied to track B and the train will miss it unless the man switches the points. He does so and the dog is killed. Clearly the man is responsible for the dog's death, but not because he could have done otherwise, because, you guessed it, a mad scientist will activate the electrodes he has secretly planted in his brain if and only if the man does not switch the points. The variations of this sort of thing are endless and involve all sorts of scenarios about people being locked in rooms they don't know are locked when they decide not to save drowning babies, or diverting missiles targeted on cities etc. But the point of all of them is to demonstrate that what we care about when we hold people responsible is not that they had alternative possibilities open to them when they so acted, but that the act was theirs and not some other agent's. And my acts are, under normal circumstances and despite them being inevitable, my acts.

When Luther said “Here I stand, I can do no other” he meant that it was his conscience that made it impossible for him to recant. Luther was not trying to duck responsibility. From the writings on this issue that I have read, the defenders of the “could have done otherwise” basis of responsibility such as Peter Van Inwagen and Joel Feinberg, have been thoroughly refuted by Frankfurt, Dennett, Rowe, Wolf et al.

THE LEOPOLD AND LOEB DEFENCE

For those who do want to duck responsibility though the prize for the most flagrant appeal to determinism as an excuse for appalling behaviour must go to Clarence Darrow, the defence attorney for the two notorious murderers Leopold and Loeb, who in 1924 kidnapped, tortured and murdered a fourteen year old boy, Bobby Franks, in order to demonstrate their contempt for traditional morality. In his summation to the jury he said:

Nature is strong and she is pitiless. She works in her own mysterious way, and we are victims. We have not much to do with it ourselves. Nature takes this job in hand, and we play our parts. ...

What had this boy to do with it? He was not his own father; he was not his own mother; he was not his own grandparents. All of this was handed to him. He did not surround himself with governesses and wealth. He did not make himself. And yet he is compelled to pay.

...

To believe that any boy is responsible for himself or his early training is an absurdity. ... If his failing came from his heredity, I do not know where or how. None of us are bred perfect and pure; and the colour of our hair, the colour of our eyes, our stature, the weight and fineness of our brain, and everything about us could, with full knowledge, be traced with absolute certainty to somewhere. If we had the pedigree it could be traced just the same in a boy as it could in a dog. ...

If it did not come that way, then ... if he had been understood, if he had been trained as he should have been it would not have happened.

If there is responsibility anywhere, it is back of him; somewhere in the infinite number of his ancestors, or in his surroundings, or in both. And I submit, Your Hon-

our, that under every principle of ... right, and of law, he should not be made responsible for the acts of someone else.¹⁴

In the light of this argument the jury spared the lives of the murderers. I will leave the reader to reflect on the horrors that would ensue if we could all exculpate ourselves on the basis of this argument. However what is worse is the suggestion that we wouldn't be inclined to erroneous behaviour if we were all 'properly trained'. This is where determinism traditionally opens the door to dictatorship. One wonders, though, how this training is to be effective if we are never justified in applying sanctions to poor behaviour. Our would-be behavioural trainers, such as Skinner, seem to overlook this objection to their own 'negative reinforcers' in their rush to tear down the fabric of traditional morality.

HOMOSEXUALITY IS A CHOICE

So far I have given the best summary I can manage of Dennett's case for the irrelevance of determinism to our understanding of what we find important about free will and responsibility. What I want to do now is argue that all of our behaviour, when it is uncoerced and open to deliberation and decision prior to action, is a choice for which we should be held responsible. In particular I want to argue that homosexuality is a choice in exactly the same way as deciding to eat chocolate ice-cream, only that in most cases it is a socially less trivial choice.

For too long those with an interest in liberating homosexuals from state imposed oppression have used arguments along the lines that we cannot do otherwise, or that it is in some way part of our intrinsic nature, or our behaviour is inevitable or a result of a gene or our social backgrounds. The whole thrust of all of these arguments is to deny the responsibility of the homosexual for his homosexual behaviour. It is a prime example of the "spectre of creeping exculpation".

The argument takes the form of a plea: "Don't punish us, we can't help what we do." But as I have demonstrated, not being able to help what we do is simply not relevant to it being a free and responsible act. The fact that these arguments may have been effective, up to a point, in liberating homosexuals doesn't detract from the fact that they are false; and there is always a danger in relying on false arguments — they can be successfully refuted.

When I am confronted by a choice of vanilla or chocolate ice-cream, and can only make one choice at that instant, it may be inevitable, given the causal preconditions, that I choose the chocolate. If I do this habitually, I may well be referred to, in some circumstances, as a "chocolate ice-cream eater", just as if I climb mountains sufficiently frequently I may be called a mountaineer. Similarly if I choose to have sexual relations with persons of the same gender sufficiently often, or say that I would, I may, among other things, be referred to as a homosexual. All of these choices at decision points may well be inevitable, but they are only inevitable given the situation I find myself in. There is nothing intrinsic in my nature about them. All choices are dependent on availability, feasibility, opportunity and a whole set of other variable factors. It may be that in the future a new flavour of ice-cream is invented that I always prefer to chocolate, in which case I would cease to be a "chocolate ice-cream eater", and similarly in the future a race of aliens may arrive on earth, of particularly agreeable dispositions, that I may prefer to have sexual relations with, thus ceasing to be an

homosexual. If I were stranded on a desert island populated only by women, I may substitute them for my previous choice of men, men no longer being available. In the same way men imprisoned in gaol often substitute other men for women for the purposes of sex.

All the internal motivating factors are irrelevant to the choices being made, and as Austrian economic theory has shown us, the only way we can know what people want and value is through revealed preference. When I am selecting someone to have sex with, I look around at the people who are available to me and may reciprocate on any particular occasion and then select in such a way as to maximise my expected utility.¹⁵ Genes, upbringing, social conditioning or whatever may be causal inputs but are all irrelevant to the freedom of the choice.

My own view regarding the liberation of homosexuals is to see it as a particular instance of the broader case for full libertarianism. But in particular, as I have done elsewhere, I will refute any case presented in favour of such oppression. It is no more the business of the state to punish the choice to have homosexual sex than it is to punish the choice to eat chocolate ice-cream.

Given the causal conditions and situation, I am happy to say that I am a homosexual not by nature, but by choice. "I can do no other." Or in the words of Gloria Gaynor: "I am what I am."

NOTES

1. Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984.
2. John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, Third edition, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 224.
3. "Ayn Rand Letter", in *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, Harry Binswanger, ed., Meridian Press, New York, 1986, p. 122.
4. "Freedom and the Human Brain", in Tibor Machan, *Individuals and their Rights*, Open Court, La Salle Illinois, 1989, p. 16.
5. *Elbow Room*, p. 156.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10, and in Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 291.
7. Quoted in *Elbow Room*, p. 50.
8. *Elbow Room*, p. 50.
9. Quoted in *Elbow Room*, p. 50, from *Philosophical Explanations*, p. 315.
10. Susan Wolf, "The Importance of Free Will", in *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*, Fischer and Ravizza, eds., Cornell, Ithaca New York, 1993, pp. 117-118
11. *Elbow Room*, p. 132. See also, "What We Are Morally Responsible For", Harry Frankfurt in *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*, p. 286.
12. *Elbow Room*, p. 132.
13. William Rowe, "Causing and Being Responsible for What is Inevitable", in *Perspectives in Moral Responsibility*, p. 310.
14. Quoted in Victor Grassian, *Moral Reasoning*, Victor Grassian, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs New Jersey, 1992, p. 166.
15. Followed by "Would you like a drink?" this could be used as a chat-up line, but experience leads me to recommend that a complimentary remark about their aftershave is more likely to result in success.

FURTHER READING

As well as the above mentioned books see also:

B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1988.

Daniel Dennett, *Brainstorms*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1981.

Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986.