

Coherent Models of the Self and Freedom of the Will

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Wherever progress is stalled on a philosophical problem, a tactic worth trying is to find some shared (and hence largely unexamined) assumption and deny it. The problem of free will is such a problem, ...⁰

Most of Western philosophy's discussion on free will uses naturalism¹ as the primary underlying framework. Thus, at least implicitly, naturalism is assumed to be adequate for examining free will. This paper gives evidence that naturalism has serious limitations in the discussion. Another framework, theism, is presented as a possible alternative.

People commonly recognize human mental needs and capabilities to include: language, imagination, connection with other people, spirituality, memory, sexuality, rationality, meaning, arts (appreciation, creativity, need for), ethics, love and free will. Most individuals in all societies exhibit (usually differently) these needs and capabilities. People consider these areas as inherently essential to being human. If an individual is lacking in even one of these capabilities, she is regarded as abnormal in that area.

A fascinating example is found in very small children. By adult standards they have quite limited mental capabilities. Yet they can learn a language primarily by hearing samples of the language from other humans. They even learn in spite of some samples being erroneous! How do children have this remarkable capability? Presumably the children have this capability "hard-wired" into their brains. The capability to learn new languages actually decreases as we grow older.

Thinkers (e.g., social scientists, philosophers) have attempted to model these capabilities. Full modeling of mental capabilities should answer:

1. What characterizes capabilities functioning within people?
2. How are we able to perform these capabilities?
3. Why do people have these capabilities?

Social scientists use the scientific method in producing some remarkable answers. Noam Chomsky's transformational grammars model much of human languages' characteristics. We presume that mechanisms are hardwired into the human brain that are modeled by Chomsky's framework. Genetics produce the brain mechanisms. The genetics were produced by mutations selected based upon aiding human survival and expansion. The details of the brain's language capabilities are highly speculative. We do not yet precisely know how the complexity of neurons carry out the richness of human language.

Naturalism is the dominant framework for these attempts at modeling. Naturalism's propositions related to this paper:

1. Matter exists eternally and is all there is. Nothing beyond nature (e.g., God, spirits) exists.
2. The cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system.
3. Humans are complex "machines". Personality is an interrelation of chemical and physical properties we do not yet fully understand.
4. History is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without an overarching purpose.²

What about attempting to model what we call "free will"? A key test in the free will debate is over choice. Consider someone needing to choose from amongst several possibilities. (The decision may be benign as in a food menu selection or horrific as in some moral dilemma.) What happens in the individual's making the choice? General consensus is that usually the individual chooses out of whom she is (her character, beliefs, needs, capabilities, predispositions, etc.). But what goes on in forming who she is? The determinist has the individual determined exclusively by her past, heredity and the laws of nature. Thus, her every decision effectively is really predetermined by the past, heredity and the laws of nature.

What is the basis for determinists asserting the above model? We see naturalistic cause and effect as an adequate explanation for most natural phenomena (e.g., billiard balls colliding, photosynthesis). Naturalistic cause and effect is simply generalized to the human brain and mind. David Hume wrote:

... we come to apply this doctrine (cause and effect) to the actions of the will. For as it is evident that these have a regular conjunction with motives and circumstances and characters, and as we always draw inferences from one to the other, we must be obliged to acknowledge in words that necessity, which we have already avowed, in every deliberation of our lives, and in every step of our conduct and behaviour.³

"we must be obliged ..." Why must we be obliged? David Hume didn't give a proof. Nor has anyone else proven this thesis.

Where does free will fit into naturalism's framework? Compatibilists define limited forms of free will that fit within a deterministic framework. An individual's actions are free, if there is no external constraint (e.g., being imprisoned) or internal compulsion (e.g., being an alcoholic). Hume again:

By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*⁴

Libertarians regard these limited forms of free will as inadequate. Libertarians maintain that an individual must have control and ultimately be responsible for at least some of her decisions. Libertarians regard the determinants' view that everything about an individual is ultimately determined by other than the individual as undercutting an individual as ultimately responsible for herself or her actions. Many important human values (e.g., moral praise and blame, self-worth) appear to be lost.

Libertarians are called upon to come up with a coherent model for their view of free will. Timothy O'Connor proposes agent-causation where

I influence the direction of what is already going on within me. What is going on is a structured, dynamic situation open to some possibilities and not others. So the capacity is also circumscribed by physical and psychological factors at work within the agent while he deliberates. But (and here is the difference from the mechanistic paradigm) having the properties that subserve as *agent-causal capacity* does not suffice to bring about a particular effect (or even the occurrence of some effect or other within a range of possible effects), rather, it *enables* the agent to determine an effect (within the corresponding range). Whether, when, and how such a capacity will be exercised is freely determined by the agent.⁵

Compatibilists assert that whereas we are part of the deterministic universe, then how can we have actions that are not somehow determined? From the perspective of naturalism, the libertarian explanations (e.g., agent-causation) appear incoherent.

Robert Kane is a libertarian who also objects to agent-causation. Kane proposes an extensive model⁶ of free will basically within naturalism's framework. Kane expresses his intention not to use anything not also used by the non-libertarian in the following thesis:

T16 (on UR) ("The Free Agency Principle"): In the attempt to formulate an incompatibilist or libertarian account of free agency that will satisfy the plurality conditions and UR, we shall not appeal to categories or kinds of entities (substances, properties, relations, events, states etc.) that are *not also needed by nonlibertarian* (compatibilist or determinist) *accounts of free agency satisfy the plurality conditions* the only difference allowed between libertarian and nonlibertarian accounts is the difference one might expect -- that some of the events or processes involved in libertarian free agency will be indetermined or undetermined events or processes. But these undetermined events or processes will not otherwise be of categories are ontological that do not also play roles in nonlibertarian accounts of free agency (such as choices, decisions, efforts, practical judgments and the like) the difference being that in nonlibertarian theories these events or processes need not be undetermined. Such differences as there are between libertarian and nonlibertarian theories should flow from this difference alone, and the task will be to make sense of libertarian and freedom satisfying the plurality conditions given this difference.

A typical thesis of Kane that tries to fulfill the Free Agency Principle:

T37 (on FW) (“Self-network”) The feeling that certain events in the brain, such as those corresponding to our efforts and choices, are things we are doing other than things we are merely happening has its basis in the superposition of the synchronized wave patterns (or patterns of oscillations of neural firings) of the self-network upon those neural events. This suggestion, in other words, is that the neural events corresponding to our efforts and choices would be overlaid by the wave patterns unifying the self-network -- so that the wave patterns and the effort or choice events are coupled, causally influencing and interacting with each other. The effort and choice events would occur, so to speak, “within” the self-network whose distinctive patterns of oscillations were superimposed upon them. In turn, the superimposed patterns of oscillations the self-network would be contributing causes to choice, pushing one competing reason-network over the top, so to speak, so that A is chosen for reasons R rather than B for reasons R’ (or vice versa) -- thus supporting the belief that the efforts and choices are our doings, the products of our selves.⁷

This model is challenged by both compatibilists and other libertarians.

But how well does naturalism's framework model all mental capabilities? For example, naturalism's current modeling of our art needs and capabilities is seriously flawed. All societies place high value on beauty and the arts (e.g., sculpture, painting, music, dance, literature ...). Why? Beauty and the arts in such a large magnitude are not essential to the bare essentials of life. Evolutionists give an account of beauty as based on attraction for sexual mating. Some evolutionists suggests the vast importance of beauty is an extension of the beauty associated with sex. But naturalism has no provision for any intrinsic value to art in the wider scope. While possible, this account appears highly implausible to others of us.

Most people place a high value on their lives having meaning. In the naturalistic framework how did this deep need for meaning arise? What about spirituality? Ethics? If naturalism is weak on modeling some mental capabilities, then why should we expect naturalism to be adequate for modeling free will?

Theism provides an alternative framework for modeling mental needs and capabilities. Theism’s propositions related to this paper:

1. God is infinite and personal, transcendent and imminent, omniscient, sovereign and good.
2. God created the cosmos ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system.
3. God created mankind in the image of God.
4. Mankind was created good, but through the Fall the image of God became defaced, though not so ruined as not to be capable of restoration.

5. History is linear, a meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God's purposes for mankind.⁸

People having been made by God after God's image means positive human capabilities (above) are finite derivations of God's infinite capabilities. For example, we have language capabilities because we have been made after the image of a God who communicates. [Negative human characteristics (e.g., malice, greed) are a result of God's image twisted by the Fall.]

Another example, God placed beautiful trees in the Garden of Eden⁹. Why did God place beautiful trees in the Garden of Eden? Because God has a sense of beauty. Why do we appreciate the beauty in trees? Because God made us after His image, we have a sense of beauty. Beauty has value to God and thus beauty has value to people.

What about "free will"? Theists have put forward the traditional libertarian reasons of human significance, morality, etc. In addition, theists put forward the need for human free will for people to genuinely love, worship and obey God. This standard theist approach has free will as a totally optional choice on God's part. God could have chosen to make people after His image without free will with no harm other than a loss of some capabilities.

Theist commitment to free will goes beyond this standard approach to the very depths of who God is. God's revealed to Moses His name as "I AM WHO I AM"¹⁰. In the culture of that time names were more than mere labels for identification. Names expressed the core nature of the one named. "I AM WHO I AM" initially appears quite cryptic. Deeper evaluation leads to understanding "I AM WHO I AM" as including God's assertion that who He is is determined by Himself and by no one else. From this follows that God does what he chooses to do. God is asserting that He alone is absolutely, infinitely self determined.

Human free will is the finite derivation of God's infinite self determination. In order for God to fully have people after God's image, free will had to be included.

Humans' identity as individual persons exists by our having been made after God's image. While agent-causation doesn't appear to fit with naturalism, agent-causation easily fits with theism's establishing of human identity.

Free will as been highly problematic within the theistic religions. Humanity was sent along its calamitous route by a free will decision of the First Parents¹¹. Free will decisions have been instrumental in most of the horrors of human history. Some lay the blame of much of evil on free will and try to obliterate individual free will¹².

The orthodox theistic viewpoint of this paper strongly rejects any attempts to obliterate individual free will. God made us to fully represent the image of God. Attempts to diminish proper human free will

effectively diminishes people expressing the image of God. People are to have a robust free will choosing to follow God's way by the power God provides to us.

Objection: *If theism were adopted, then aren't we in danger of losing results from science?*

No. Modern science came about in the context of Judeo-Christian theism. Modern naturalism developed later. There are no difficulties for science from theism. The religious establishment has presented temporary impediments (e.g., Galileo's case, Scope's trial) to science. The scientific establishment has been known to impede scientific advancements. Thus, all the wonderful results from science applies equally well within theism as in naturalism.

The underlying assumption that naturalism is the only meaningful framework for working with the free will debate has been challenged in this paper. Theism has been presented as an alternative framework for examining the free will controversy. Naturalism has not been refuted, nor has theism been proven in this paper. Only that we should examine more closely the underlying frameworks used in trying to understand what we call "free will".

Endnotes

⁰ Daniel Dennett, "I could not have done otherwise - so what?" *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXI, 10 (Oct, 1984), p. 553

¹ For this paper only the common, strong version of naturalism is considered. Milder versions of naturalism (e.g., nonreductionistic materialism) aren't considered for simplicity's sake.

² James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), pp. 60-66

³ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sec. Viii, pt. 1.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Timothy O'Connor, *The Agent as Cause*, Free Will, p 201

⁶ Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1998)

⁷ *ibid*, p 140

⁸ Sire, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-40

⁹ Genesis 2:9

¹⁰ Exodus 3:14

¹¹ Genesis 3

¹² The cults are a tragic example. Individuals are taught (or brainwashed) into yielding their wills to the leaders' wills. But the leaders are also fallible and we sometimes have horrendous results (e.g., Jonestown).