
Free from the Problem of Freedom

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I am tempted to begin with the easy. Freedom constituted a problem in Europe for complex social and psychological reasons. England and France and Germany were tight little countries weighted down by their past. Their traditions and social hierarchies were expressed in rules that may have seemed to those who lived under them oppressive and irresistible. Even the scientific life of the communities came to express this sense of steely necessity in its search for the inviolable laws of nature. Freedom beckoned as an escape from control; it became a problem because it appeared so desirable, yet so difficult to attain.

On the American frontier, by contrast, life was open and unstructured. Rules and traditions belonged to the sentimental past; in the boundless present, dynamic individuals were free to make their fortune. Instead of presenting a problem, freedom appeared to be a fact. American philosophers shook themselves free of the problem of freedom simply by attending to the American experience: with the power of self-determination vested in each individual, it was always possible to change and do what was surprising and unpredictable. Even Santayana, barely ten years in this country from his native Spain and a junior at Harvard, wrote: “. . . so far from the truth is it that we cannot change our destiny, that in fact we cannot but change it.”¹

This approach to philosophical problems is tempting, even intriguing, but it is too easy. We have no reason to suppose that culture or the raw experience of a people translates into a unique and uniform intellectual life. No doubt there is some connection; it is unlikely, for instance, for pragmatism to have been developed and to have gained widespread acceptance in Germany. But by no means are all American philosophers free of the problem of freedom. Royce, to give but one example, struggled hard and repeatedly with its constituent ideas. And many thinkers from other shores managed to dispose of the problem no less vigorously than their American counterparts. Hume, for example, argued that causation involved no necessity and that freedom was a matter not of the lack of causal determination but of the absence of external constraints.

If the easy approach will not work, is the so-called problem of freedom to be with us forever? As sharp a contemporary thinker as John Searle thinks it an unresolved residue of the conflict between our belief in universal causation and our intuition that even without anything having been different, we could have done something else than we did.² My own view, by contrast, is that while many philosophical problems remain with us and may in the end prove intractable, this at least is one we need not worry about. Philosophers in the American tradition have given us enough excellent reasons to justify ridding ourselves of this problem with good conscience once and for all.

Human freedom is thought to become a problem when it is seen against a background of universal causation. We view the world as a system of events governed by invariant laws. Since in this orderly universe every occurrence has a cause and, in turn, is a cause, the events that are our choices and decisions must themselves be determined. What determines them? If we were self-enclosed monads, nothing external would ever enter our constitution. But, for better or worse, we are parts of this moving world, and small parts of relatively recent origins, at that. The chain of causes thus spreads past the portals of the self in all directions. Not only are the stimuli to which our decisions respond external in their source, the self itself was at one point constituted out of alien elements.

This suggests that whoever we are and whatever we do are due, in the end, not to our own efforts, but to the chains of causes that run through us. Our decisions themselves appear inevitable and beyond our control if we view them as results of long-term developments in the universe. How could we ever do otherwise if all the events in the world had been conspiring to bring about *this* result?

This manner of thoughts seems to rob individuals of all agency and responsibility. What we do ends up as the unavoidable result, destined or frozen into place from the beginning of time, of processes beyond the range of self. Self-determination itself becomes a meaningless charade: if the self is a product of external events, its tendency to follow its own lights and its will to do what is right are also outcomes of the movement of the world.

The more abstractly we conceive this predicament, the more compelling it appears. We end up feeling helpless and passive, if not victimized by the world-machine. Is there any basis for this feeling, given our direct experience of agency and control? On the answer to the question depends not only our adjustment to the nature of reality, but also responsibility for our actions and the rationality of initiative.

I shall try to show that freedom in the sense of self-determination is not under siege from the side of the causal order of the world. My argument consists of two major elements. First, I shall make some comments on the origin and function of our notion of causation. My purpose here is to cast doubt on certain widely held ideas about the nature, scope and force of the causal connection. Next, I shall offer some suggestions for a needed reconception of the self whose self-determination is supposedly under threat from universal causation. Given the limits of time, neither part of my argument is fully developed or conclusively supported. But both find their inspiration in the classics of American philosophy, show promise in dealing with the problem of freedom and are defensible to a significant degree.

How did we come by the idea that portions of the world-flux are causally connected and what basis do we have for holding it? The ground of both the origin and justification of the notion reside in observation and manipulation. Hume was certainly right that there is no concept of causation apart from what we develop in the course of sensory experience. But he overstressed passive observation at the expense of our active involvement in the control of outcomes. In fact, our interest in causal sequences is in large measure practical; noting how things hang together in the world is an invitation to rearrange them. Suc-

cess first at predicting and then at controlling what happens is, moreover, a test of the accuracy of our observations. In many cases, though by no means all, we are in fact unwilling to say that we understand a sequence of events unless we can effectively involve ourselves with it.

It is important to mark that neither observing nor manipulating yields any valid hint of necessity. Passive perception may give us the misleading sense that events follow on one another ineluctably. But this feeling is the result of noticing that the natural sequence does not require our aid. The legitimate observation that some event will occur whether we do anything about it or not (*viz.* whether or not we aid it) may then be replaced with the stronger and for the most part incorrect idea that it will occur no matter what we do.

Actually, nothing gives us a better feel for the contingency of things than our own activity. The fact that we can intervene in the natural course of events displays that they are by no means unchangeable. And since our own actions are parts of the world-process, the uncertainty of their success demonstrates beyond all reasonable doubt the groping precariousness of existence. It is not, of course, that anyone would wish to deny the obvious regularity of nature. But this uniformity may itself be easily overstated. In the flush of enthusiasm over our prosperous theorizing, we tend to suppose that what we have observed to hold in this small corner of the world occurs in an invariant way also everywhere else. Moreover, the meagreness of the evidence does not prevent us from forming the opinion that cosmic stretches of time must exhibit the same patterns or laws as we have noted in the last few hundred years.

We have evidence of modest regularity in the portions of the world-process open to our inquiry. Is the best way to think of this orderliness as the obedience of nature to iron laws of necessity or as the habits it, for a time, adopts? In answering this question, philosophers have been hampered by a commendatory use of the word "law." In this sense, law is the inner essence of a type of process, the objective pattern all sequences of a certain sort display. If we look at things in this objectivistic way, it will of course appear impossible for a given process to fail to embody its type. But such necessity is due to an illusion grounded in definitions: the process must show its proper pattern precisely because whatever pattern it happens to show is what determines its type. Forms or sorts can in this way come to seem magical powers that command or compel the obedience of the flux.

In reality, however, calling it "law" is just a way of adding dignity to the currently favored view. What patterns the world exhibits or what formulas account for this behavior is a matter of conjecture. Even if by chance or good fortune, we hit upon the formula which happens to explain a part or the totality-to-date of the world process, we would never be able to affirm with assurance that we found the secret of the universe. Since there is no intrinsic difference between form and form, we would have to build a case on the basis of external evidence, and such proofs are always open to doubt and later refutation. Moreover, even our super-theory would hold true only contingently and therefore, possibly, only *pro tem*; nothing could compel the moving flux to cleave to its prior form instead of abandoning it little by little or all at once.

Talk of laws that hold necessarily or that require a necessary connection between successive phases of the flux appears to me, for these reasons, mis-

leading and unfortunate. It is much better to think of the regularities of the world as habits it adopts. As in the case of humans, repetitions are not embraced in a conscious or voluntary way; we fall into habits, or routine by its own weight pulls us down. The notion of habit captures not only the iterative, customary side of processes, but also the freedom agents burdened with them have to change. Using it to think about the orderly patterns of the world calls attention, in this way, to the radical contingency and the consequent possibility of new departures that the world at large and human beings in it share. This continuity does not imply that the world-process is free in the way in which we are; the difference is centered in the fact that we are organically structured selves, while the universe is not.

What is the sort of necessity that the connection of cause and effect supposedly displays? It cannot be logical necessity in any ordinary signification. Hume was correct in pointing out that the opposite of any matter of fact is conceivable without contradiction: it is always at least logically possible for the cause to occur and the effect to fail to follow. His devastating criticism engendered a variety of attempts, by seekers after certainty, to give an account of natural necessity. But even the most sophisticated among these fall short of showing that there is anything in the world that is, in any non-trivial sense of the word, necessary.

Kant, for example, sought to explain necessary causal connectedness as a condition without which human experience itself would be impossible. If he had simply meant, as he clearly did not, that our consciousness could not have arisen without a cause, he would not have strayed very far from the truth. But he wanted to affirm, instead, that there can be no finite consciousness any of whose objects fails to be in necessary relations of succession to others. Given the ease with which we can articulate the possibility of lyrical or confused forms of awareness, this appears to be a totally gratuitous assertion, made only more interesting, not more plausible, by Kant's elaborate transcendental machinery.

The notion, developed later, of the physically necessary does not fare much better than Kant's ideas. According to this notion, an effect is physically necessary on condition that relevant natural laws obtain, the cause occurs and there are no contravening causes. The problem here is the utter conditionality of the necessity. We have reason to suppose that the relevant laws of nature are themselves contingent, and their contingency means that they can cease to hold at any given moment. This makes the supposed necessity of the effect vacuous. To say that it occurs necessarily is to affirm that given its usual antecedent and the absence of contravening conditions, it *will* happen if nature's adherence to this sequence has not lapsed. And this comes to no more than the uninspiring claim that the event will happen unless it simply won't.

Let me now summarize the argument so far. I have tried to adduce some reasons for maintaining that the world-process is contingent to the core, that the regularity of nature is best viewed as a collection of orderly habits and that there is no clear sense of the word in which we can say that the connection between cause and effect is necessary. I want to stress that even if these arguments are totally successful, they do not establish the reality of human freedom. A contingent world is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition of self-

determination, for it is compatible with there being no selves at all. Without individuals capable of self-determination, freedom is not even a possibility.

Atomistic thinking has made an important contribution to the supposed difficulties besetting human freedom. It has led many to view causal processes as operating independently of their context. The movements of atoms, for example, was to have been influenced only by other atoms directly impinging on them, and the rules of these interactions were to be uniform whether the events they governed occurred in outer space or in the recesses of the brain. Since the very nature of organisms is that, in them, there is an adaptation of parts to each other and to the whole, this manner of thought preempted the possibility of viewing the world or any part of it in organic terms. It is not difficult to see that if selves consist solely of the unmodified causal chains that descend upon them from the world at large, they must lack both the agency and the instruments necessary for self-determination.

Some empiricists attempted to imitate the success of Newtonian physics by supposing that the inner person was constructed out of atomic psychological elements. Not only did such conceptions fail to match the facts of experience, they were also unable to account for unified thought and integrated action. To understand the nature and possibility of freedom, we must think of the human self as an organic center of activity. We are clearly not warehouses for the storage and periodic release of vestiges of the past. Whether these remnants are impulses or ideas, they cannot in any significant sense be ours if they merely inhabit the space of the self without being intimately related to it and transformed by the relationship.

The human body offers a convenient analogy. In its origin, it is dependent on external forces. It must appropriate portions of the environment for continued life. But what it takes in loses its form and turns into an organic element in the larger whole. Fish and chips are not stored in the body in their own crisp-fried being; broken into their constituents, they assume the form of the body, become parts of its cells and are used in pursuit of its purposes. Throughout all this use of energy and exchange of material, the body remains an active and unified center, influenced by the world but shaping its own responses and, when needed, taking fresh initiatives.

The intimate connection between them suggests that the self may itself be just such an organic center. It lives on the materials provided by nature and culture. But in taking them in, it takes them up into its own structure and converts them into nutrients for life. External causal forces are, in this way, modified when they pass through its doors; like foreign troops entering a sovereign nation, they must lay down their arms. They are, in brief, transformed no less than a flying bird, caught in an odd perspective, is changed in being converted into bold image.

It is this disarming and reorganizing power of the self that grounds self-determination. Under normal circumstances, the self appropriates or rejects whatever wanders in. When it acts, therefore, its central integrative power is the source of its deeds. We can see, then, that freedom is not an exceptional condition or peak-experience of persons; it is the normal operation of relatively healthy and unconstrained individuals. This is the metaphysical justification of

political liberty: if central authority leaves us alone to do whatever we will, we are free in both of these pivotal senses of the word.

We may lose self-determination for internal no less than external reasons. The power of the alien force that bears down on us may be too great to resist: the stimulus may awake action without first being integrated. Overwhelming external constraint and needless passion are examples of this form of unfreedom. Alternatively, the integrative power of the self may be faulty and result in the ineffective or unintelligent reorganization of its materials. Early childhood and the compulsions of some form of mental illness fall in this category. Without these special problems, however, freedom is threatened by causation as little as food represents danger to the hungry man.

If we follow the lead of such American philosophers as Santayana and Dewey, we can free ourselves of the problem of freedom. We can accomplish this, however, only by critical attention to the claims made on behalf of causal necessity and a reconceptualization of the nature of the self. What we need most of all throughout these inquiries is closer attention to the facts of experience than philosophers like to pay. Some, though by no means all, of the problems we face are due to our penchant for over-generalization. If we could heed the call of American philosophy to limit theory in order to make room for facts, our thought would be more modest but also more useful and more accurate.

¹ George Santayana, *Physical Order and Moral Liberty*, John and Shirley Lachs, eds. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), 5.

² John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1984).