

## **Futility**

*Isaac Martin*

The real goal of considering freedom, fate and choice, is to create an acceptable concept of personhood. The creation of such a concept is extremely complex and consequently, has been the subject of hot debate. I shall argue for the best possible account of personhood. I shall accomplish this by analyzing the phenomena of free will and then incorporating social concepts derived from Haugeland's freewheeling account of Heidegger. Finally, I propose that not only is there no viable concept of free will for us to work with, but also that its competitor, determinism, also falls short of something we can rationally accept.

Before considering free will, it is useful to define it. Free will is the ability of a person to initiate or otherwise direct a causal chain through his or her own "will". That is to say, a person has control over their actions in a way that transcends the physical universe. Free will is the idea that a person can take any course of action physically possible<sup>1</sup>, given their circumstances and resources. Though causal determination affects inanimate objects, it has no influence over the person. The idea of free will suggests a person can rise above any causal determinate and take the course of action they so choose<sup>2</sup>.

With free will defined, it can now be said that the discussion will never give us very much by way of resolution. Certainly there is some worth in the discussion itself as it is through discussion that we find the weakness in any argument. The problem with any argument concerning free will though is that we cannot verify an integral premise to the argument. The free will proponent often points to

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<sup>1</sup> For instance a person could choose to blink, but they could not choose to morph into a chicken.

<sup>2</sup> Again, in accordance with physical possibility and given their circumstances and resources.

control over one's actions as proof that one has free will. Though the observation is often accepted in this manner, many argue that the observation is really a fabrication of the mind rather than *bona fide* verifiable evidence. The determinist claims that we don't have this control over choice, which the free will proponent is asserting. The problem is that this determinist claim can no more be verified than the claim it is trying to discount. As such, any account of free will is doomed to be futile, because these assertions are so integral to the arguments, yet cannot possibly be verified. By way of example I shall consider the incompatibilist concepts of free will and determinism. I shall also consider the compatibilist position.

Taylor (1992) presents one of the better accounts of free will in his account of "agent causation." This particular argument suggests that from time to time we, as humans, take actions. It also asserts that we are the ultimate source of these actions. This gives rise to the term "agent," a sort of "being" capable of initiating causal chains. This agent can best be thought of from a dualist perspective. That is to say, the agent exists "outside" or "apart from" the body like a soul. The agent is capable, somehow, of influencing the body and vice versa. Taylor's argument is problematic for several reasons, but not least of all because it is circular. Taylor's justification for his assertion (that we are the source of at least some of our actions) is that we deliberate. To Taylor, the act of deliberation is what constitutes control over ones actions. When pressed, Taylor must justify his assertion that we as humans deliberate. He suggests that since we have control over our actions, we must deliberate. He is in effect saying that we know actions are occasionally up to us because we deliberate and we know that we deliberate because actions are occasionally up to us. It is important to note that though it serves poorly as an argument (because of its circularity), it is still a valuable observation to make. Humans often perceive the phenomena of choice and it could rationally be accepted as self-evident that humans seem to have some control over their actions. The value of Taylor's argument, therefore, rests in pointing out the existence of genuine control as self-evident. This is not a viable way to prove its existence because, as previously

mentioned we have no way to examine ourselves and establish that our choices are generally free.

Hard determinism takes the opposite approach. It suggests that choice is no more than an illusion. Our lives are written, but not yet played out. Various philosophers have suggested differing views on determinism, one of which was Hume. Hume (1748) made an observation about free will that he suggested supports determinism. His objection was that free will accounts like Taylor's "agent causation" make choice appear random. If an agent can initiate a causal chain then that means there was no prior causal determination for the action. Consequently, the agent is initiating an action for no discernable reason, because no cause is preceding the effect of this action. If there is no discernable reason for an action, then the action is said to be random. Hume is suggesting Taylor makes free will look like a muscle spasm. There is no clear reason for it, it just happens. If we don't want to look at our choices as a sequence of muscle spasms, we need some form of causal determination for our actions that is somehow authentic to us. This commits us to hard determinism.

Though it is not the intention of the argument, the garden of forking paths is an excellent way to envision hard determinism. Originally proposed by Borges, the garden was intended as an account of compatibilism. Compatibilism is a view that tries to incorporate determinism and free will into a singular theory. The garden of forking paths proposes a tree of possible events. For every choice there were other choices you could have conceivably made. The reason you take any particular path (choice) is quantifiable. That is to say, you are pushed towards that path by extenuating circumstances, social norms, and the like. When you take a path, you are not really choosing it, you are being forced toward it. Originally, taking any particular path was construed as making a choice. This is problematic because the theory admits that at any fork there was only one choice we could have made. We have no control over our actions. As such, we have effectively rejected the concept of choice that free will tries to defend. This is why the theory works much better as an explanation of determinism than a defense of compatibilism. This is also the same reason that

compatibilism, in general, is an unacceptable position. As Tony Garcia said,

“Compatibilism’s defense of free-will is like propping Bernie up in a chair; he’s dead, but he’s still there.”

This quote accentuates how badly compatibilism fails in its attempt to reconcile free will and determinism. The quote describes propping up a dead friend in a chair to alleviate the pain of his absence. Indeed, if one does not look too hard they may mistake the dead body propped up in the chair as their friend “Bernie”. Similarly, if one did not look too hard at compatibilism we might smile happily noticing our friend free will was still around. Unfortunately, such an act does not really bring “Bernie” back. It is a situation created by a person that does not wish to face the reality of death. In this case, it is the death of an idea.

With the garden of forking paths in mind, we have an idea of determinism’s structure. The argument can be structured in multiple ways, but one example follows:

- P1. When a person takes action, they always do so using their thought process. Even a gut instinctual reaction draws in some minute way upon the persons thought process.
- P2. This thought process is comprised of previous causal determinates that acted upon the person or that the person observed. In other words, the thought process is comprised of a persons past experience.
- C1. Any action a person takes is based, to some extent, on previous experience.
- P3. Persons cannot have full control over causal determinates external to themselves.
- C2. Since previous experience is equivalent to external causal determinates and a person’s actions are based on previous experience, a person’s actions are based on previous external causal determinates.
- C3. The classic idea of control over our actions, the idea that free will defends, is an illusion.

The result of this structure leaves us with a world in which no person can initiate a causal chain of events. Any action a person takes is merely a link in a causal chain, stemming from the effects that influenced that person’s action. As such, determinism rejects an integral premise of

free will (that humans have control over their actions) and gives us a clear idea of just how a person's choices are made.

In his free-wheeling account of Heidegger, Haugeland (1982) effectively incorporates the spirit of determinism into an argument concerning how persons are molded by social norms. Haugeland does this by presenting Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*. The main idea behind *Dasein* is that persons actions are in accordance with social norms. Haugeland suggests that anything we humans do is in response to social norms we have learned or perhaps created<sup>3</sup>. *Dasein* is so far reaching that humans would not function without it. For instance, we learn to interpret color, sound, touch and the like from these norms. From there we get things like pleasure, language, style, and fashion. The list goes on to near infinity.

In an effort to better understand *Dasein*, one must understand what Haugeland terms the "referral nexus of significance." This nexus is the world we understand as objects. Our understanding of a screwdriver, a chair and even pants stems from our participation in the referral nexus of significance. All Haugeland is trying to say is that objects do not intrinsically have the functions that we ascribe to them. For instance, a screwdriver would not be a screwdriver unless there were screws to be driven. The nexus is conceptual in nature and stems directly from the *Dasein* (i.e. social norms). The nexus is very effective in accomplishing its task, namely to illustrate that it is our own social norms being projected outward that create what we perceive as the world around us.

The referral nexus is no more than an example of how drastically our social norms affect us. The real key to understanding Haugeland as a determinist lies in understanding just how integral our social norms are. Haugeland claims our social norms affect not only the way we perceive the world, but our actions in that world. These social norms are created and maintained by persons, but it is important to note they do not occur randomly. No norm is created or maintained out of thin air, it is built upon other

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that social norms are not created in a way that supports free will. The creation of a social norm is influenced by other social norms that preceded it.

norms that preceded it. This point of view supports determinism by defining person's actions as a manifestation of social norms. These social norms, being originally external to the person, effectively conform to and support the determinist argument structure outlined above. One of the bigger problems that the determinist argument creates is that of infinite regress.

The problem of infinite regress arises from theories that assert that every cause has an effect. Basically, the problem is that if every cause has an effect, it is logically impossible for there to be any beginning. This is difficult for us to conceive of, as we are mortal and linear beings. Our perception of time is pulled from a very brief experience and we are further limited in that we cannot perceive areas of time outside of the present. To overcome this problem when dealing with determinism it is necessary to look at the universe in a way that is very different to our traditional understanding (class notes) The modern physicist will suggest that the dimension of time began with the Big Bang. In this sense, time is not a separate measurement tool but an actual dimension of the universe. It is therefore one of four dimension that we can easily perceive. Apart from these, there are almost certainly other dimensions wrapped into the manifold of space. Infinite regress is not really a problem when we are considering whether or not a person has free will, because current physical theory supports the idea of a singular beginning. This could lead to a lengthy discussion concerning the nature of time, possible previous universes, *et cetera*, but these concerns are not really relevant to the issue at hand. As far as determinism is concerned, the regress continues through time until the Big Bang. We are not concerned with other dimension, but only the ones that we know persons inhabit.

If infinite regression is no longer a problem, then determinism becomes that much stronger. More importantly, *Dasein* becomes that much stronger. It is in *Dasein* that we can finally understand Haugeland's determinist nature. Since everything we do is a result of social norms and social norms themselves follow from social norms that precede them in a non-random way, Haugeland has effectively described a determined world. This would not be the case if a person has some control over social

norms, even if that control was limited to keeping those norms similar to ones that preceded them. This, however, is not the case. Haugeland asserts persons have no control over the way norms are maintained or created, but that the way norms are maintained and created is based on other related norms. As such, Haugeland's theory would fail to defend free will (and actually support determinism) in much the same way that compatibilism does. Namely, that the idea free will proponents are defending (control) is being given up. Without it, all you have is determinism.

It is in control that we find the real issue at hand. When someone claims we have free will, they often mean we have control over our actions. When someone claims determinism is true, they are saying we do not have control over our actions. They are saying that our actions are determined from events, social norms, *et cetera*, that precede them. It is important, then, to use control as the focus for any meaningful discussion of free will. On the one hand we have free will proponents claiming control exists, on the other hand we have determinists claiming it doesn't. The only way to resolve this age-old argument once and for all is to formulate a test for whether or not control exists. If it does, determinism would have no leg to stand on. If it didn't, free will would crumble. As discussed previously, there is no way to actually test for control because we would have to leave our closed system to do it. The best a determinist can do is look at what we perceive as control and call it an illusion. The best a free will proponent can do is use the perception of control as a basic premise. The issue cannot be resolved without a test that cannot be accomplished and as such, is futile.

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