

Examining responsibility: Free will v/s determinism

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Abstract

This paper examines the bearing the opposing notions of Free Will and Determinism have on the question of responsibility and human agency. In using Sartre as representative of the first and Skinner as representative of the second, this paper tries to analyze the actions of the Hiker in Sartre's being and Nothingness in order to critically examine the two notions as well as to reach a semi-compatibilist position on the question of human responsibility and agency.

Keywords: freedom, free will, behaviorism, sartre, skinner, compatibilism, determinism

Introduction

In the celebrated idea of freedom, it is the antagonistic notion of 'determinism' that stimulates a questioning of "free-will. This is crystallized in philosophy as the 'Problem of Free-Will' (or the problem of free-will versus determinism).

The idea of 'free will' is roughly the belief that the human will is free and thus that it is 'up to us' what we choose to do or how we act. The origins or source of our intentional and voluntary actions are in us and not in something else over which we have no control (the decrees of fate or God, the laws of nature, birth or upbringing... etc.) It is described as the potential (or inward) ability or power of human beings to make voluntary decisions or choices. It introduces the idea that we could have done or acted otherwise if we had *chosen*. It infuses individuals with credit for *ultimate responsibility* for their actions, autonomy, genuine creativity and personal worth or dignity.

The notion of determinism is the belief that it only seems or appears that we 'move ourselves' in a primordial way when in fact our actions are *caused* by forces over which we have no control. These forces could be predestined causes like Fate or God but are construed in modern debates as the descriptive causal laws such as those which the sciences seek to formulate (physical or mechanical, psychological, biological...etc.) or the influence of covert social conditioning and background of individuals. Its core notion is that any action (or 'event' in determinist terminology) is *determined*, and inevitably must occur, if the sufficient conditions (and causes) for the occurrence of an action jointly obtain. Explicit in this belief is the idea that human action and behavior is 'determined' or 'caused' and thus that human action cannot be attributed to a will that is free to choose or the fact that humans make voluntary decisions. It expunges individuals of agency and responsibility for their actions and of genuine desert for their deeds and accomplishments as well as any idea of self-worth. Implicit in these exhaustive dichotomous explanations of human action is the practical problem of ascribing moral and ethical responsibility to individuals for their actions. If man is ultimately free, the individual is ultimately responsible for the

crime they committed; if they're nothing but vehicles of determinism, they couldn't have done otherwise, and the blame falls on things other than the individual. More interestingly, this would also stretch to ascriptions of credit – for ingenuity and creativity. For centuries philosophers have pondered about this problem with the effect that two major camps have been created, the *compatibilists* who believe that the seemingly counter-intuitive notions can be reconciled, and the *incompatibilists* who believe that any such reconciliation is at best inconsistent. Naturally, the latter camp represents extreme or absolute interpretations of both notions (eg. Libertarian Free-Will and Laplacian Determinism) whereas the earlier *compatibilist* camp compromises on these interpretations by prescribing to *soft determinism* and more relaxed versions of *freedom*.

Using Sartre's imaginary situation from *Being and Nothingness*

"I start on a hike with friends. At the end of several hours of walking my fatigue increases and finally becomes very painful. At first I resist and then suddenly I let myself go, I give up, I throw my knapsack down on the side of the road and let myself fall down beside it."^[1]

In addition, the hikers' friends continue to walk till they reach their selected campsite. They're around the same age as our hiker and no fitter than he is. It is safe to assume that they're as tired at him.

We speculate about the reason for his actions. Has something *caused* our hiker to rest or has he freely *chosen* to rest?

The options presented here are answers that may be taken as representative of BF Skinner's 'Radical Behaviouristic Determinism' and Sartre's 'absolute Free Will'.

Actions are Chosen

Sartre believes that in order to explain any action it is important to invoke both objective features of the situation (the hot sun, the steep path etc.) as well the subjective state of the actor (his feeling tired).^[2] We may call both subjective and objective factors the 'causes' of the action. (This 'cause'

¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 584

² Caws, *Sartre*, p. 88.

is not akin to the causes of physical events). Adopting Sartre's terminology we will call the internal cause of the action 'motive' and the external cause-the situation, 'cause'.

However, neither the objective 'cause' nor the subjective 'motive' are sufficient to motivate the hiker's action. "no factual state whatever it may be ...is capable by itself of motivating any act whatsoever"^[3] His endurance in suffering is not enough for it to motivate the action to rest. It is only when he conceives of a different state of affairs do the causes become intolerable and thus a cause for action. For example, so long as the Russian peasants live their situation under the Tsar as *natural*, their hunger is something to be endured but, by conceiving of a different state of affairs, hunger becomes a 'motive' for action, just as their lack of grain becomes a 'cause'. The hiker confers value on cause and motive by conceiving of a different state of affairs. He does this by first withdrawing from his relation to the current state (this is the first nihilation: escaping his relation with the situation) and then effecting a double nihilation by positing an ideal state of affairs as "pure present nothingness" and then positing the actual situation as nothingness in relation to his current state of affairs^[4]. Only now will his tiredness as well as the objective situation take on the role of motive and cause for action. In short, in order for our situation and our subjective states to become reasons for action, we must create a distance between them and ourselves by first conceiving of a different state of affairs as a real possibility and therefore nihilate or transcend the causes.

The ability of the for-itself to engage in even the most banal of actions rests upon its ability to nihilate the given. To nihilate the given is to separate or distance oneself from it, to negate it^[5]. The for-itself is able to do this because it is itself is the origin of all negation, it is the being that secretes the nothingness, the being by which nothingness comes to the world and thus is able to transcend the world.

Thus we cannot avoid our ultimate responsibility by referring our actions either to causes (as in physical causes) nor to causes and motives as "the for-itself must confer on it its value as cause and motive"^[6]. The force given to cause and motive for motivating action is conferred ultimately by the hiker. We know how they get this force but how is it that he *chooses* them to be intolerable when it seems like they are alien forces intruding upon him without his consent? Remember he said that he *had* to rest.

We can make sense of this experience by postulating an *initial choice* by way of Sartre's concept of Original Project, which then confers on all subsequent causes and motives their value and force. According to Sartre the for-itself is defined by the fact that it exists at a *distance* from itself (in order to perpetually question its being), it is this division within itself which allows it to be a for-itself. If the for-itself were to complete itself it would be an in-itself^[7]. Sartre maintains that the for-itself seeks to be 'in-itself-for-itself'. It wants to be for-

itself (free and capable of choice) while yet being in-itself, so that its choices will be justified, so that they will have being as their justification, as their foundation. This is defined as the problem of being, becoming the 'in-itself-for-itself'. Each of us are faced with the same problem but solve it is different ways in the form of an original choice, of ourselves and our world. It is this choice of ourselves which confers on everything we encounter its force and value for us. It constitutes our original project in terms of which we henceforth interpret the world^[8].

Our hiker and his companions experience their fatigue differently, each in the light of their fundamental project or original choice. The companions who move on are not not-tired but on the contrary, it is, in part, in order to continue experiencing his fatigue that they keep walking. For them, the feeling of tiredness is the instrument by means of which they discover or interpret the world that surrounds them. Their tiredness is for them a means of appropriating the world. The project of appropriating the world is part of the larger project called abandoning oneself to the world, of 'trustingly reassuming it and loving it'. By abandoning ourselves we assert the continuity between ourselves and it, we make ourselves the in-itself^[9]. On the other hand, the hiker, according to Sartre, distrusts his body. His attitude of yielding to the fatigue and letting himself fall expresses initial stiffening against his body and the inanimate. It is within a view of the world in which difficulties can appear "not worth the trouble of being tolerated," it is the apprehension of the world (weather, steepness of path, uselessness of effort etc) as the cause of my ceasing to walk. This possibility to stop takes on its meaning from the possibility of his original or initial choice. He can refuse to stop only by a radical conversion of his initial project-by another choice of himself and of his ends. This modification of initial choice is, according to Sartre, always possible because there is no essential human nature^[10]. Whether the objective situation becomes an obstructing or empowering object for us depends on us, on the choice of our Original Project.

The initial choice may perhaps be akin to Robert Kane's libertarian free-will 'self-forming-actions' or SFAs (that leads to the shaping of 'character') in that they both go into influencing the attitude and thus actions of individuals. Also like Kane's SFAs, Sartre Original Project (only through which significance and meaning is attributed to everything else in the world) is born from indeterminacy. Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness*, "the structure of the choice necessarily implies that it be a choice in the world. A choice which would be a choice in terms of *nothing*, a choice *against nothing*, would be a choice of *nothing* and would be annihilated as choice"^[11]. Thus the choice here seems arbitrary and therefore born from indeterminacy^[12]. However, in ordinary experiences of making a decision between two competing motives, each of which has something to recommend it, so that it is not obvious

³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 562.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Caws, *Sartre*, p. 90.

⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 566.

⁷ Caws, *Sartre*, p. 93-99.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid p. 96

¹⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 597.

¹¹ As quoted in: Caws, *Sartre*, p. 109.

¹² Sartre contends that only the for-itself can make the world meaningful for itself in accordance with his Original Project. This is not to deny that the objective world actually exists, but that it bears only the significance we give to it. What the original choice is based on appears arbitrary or at least foundationless as it rests on essential nothingness.

which to endorse, Sartre maintains, is solved by a process of deliberation by weighing pros and cons of each alternative and it trying to predict the consequences of each in the light of one's own reasons.

In Robert Kane's version of Free Will, the indeterminacy comes from the inner will when it is motivated to do two things at the same time. He says, "Imagine that two crossing (recurrent) neural networks are involved, each influencing the other, and representing [one's] conflicting motivations. ... The input of one of these neural networks consists in the [the person's] reasons for acting [in one way] while the input of the other [motivates action towards something else]. The two networks are connected so that the indeterministic noise which is an obstacle to [one's] making one of the choices is coming from [one's] desire to make the other, and vice versa – the indeterminism thus arising from a tension-creating conflict in the will, In these circumstances, when either of the pathways "wins" (i.e. reaches an activation threshold, which amounts to choice)" [13] the conflict is resolved by overcoming the indeterministic noise in the will and we do say one did it and are responsible for it. The action here is not 'accidental' or 'inadvertant' because it will "be willed by the agents either way when they are made, and done for reasons either way--reasons that the agents then and there endorse" [14] at the time the decision is taken.

Thus according to early Sartre as well as Kane's Libertarian Free Will we are absolutely free in our actions because we choose our own Original Project (Sartre) and form our own characters by choosing to do otherwise in some act.(Kane) by using our own individual reasons. In the first case we are ultimately responsible because we can always choose to change our initial projects and in the second we are ultimately responsible because by choosing to act otherwise with respect to earlier struggles and *some* acts (SFAs) in our past life histories by which we formed our present characters [15].

Actions are caused

Radical Behaviourism started by B.F. Skinner in the twentieth century is an offshoot of behaviouristic psychology that posits human behavior as essentially learnt. It is a form of determinism as it submits the proposal that behavior and action can be predicted by reference to an individual's phylogeny and ontogeny. It decries the notion of internal mental phenomena like will, desire, jealousy etc. as irrelevant in explaining human behavior. Instead it turns towards the inward physiology and environmental history of individuals or "the bodily conditions we feel and thus the actions we perform [as] *collateral products* of our genetic and environmental histories [16]. Skinner's thesis is that external factors consisting of present stimulation and the history of reinforcement (in particular, the frequency, arrangement, and withholding of reinforcing stimuli) are of overwhelming importance in prediction of behavior [17]. To illustrate, suppose that a father runs into a burning house to save his sleeping child. According

to this school, the fathers' action is determined by the discriminative stimulus of the fire, together with his relevant reinforcement history, e.g., his having been reinforced in the past for behavior that has reduced danger to his children. Its key notions are that of *reinforcement* and closely tied with it, the notion of *Operant conditioning*. 'Operant Conditioning' is a method of associative learning that occurs through rewards and punishments for behavior. Through operant conditioning, an association is made between a behavior and a consequence for that behavior. "the behavior is followed by a consequence, and the nature of the consequence modifies the organisms tendency to repeat the behavior in the future [18]. What is important here is that the relevant consequences from the environment (social or natural) act as reinforcers and influence an individual to act in similar ways in procuring similar ends. This may be explained with a quote from Skinner:

"When a bit of behavior has the kind of consequence called reinforcing, it is more likely to occur again. A positive reinforcer strengthens any behavior that produces it. A glass of water is positively reinforcing when we are thirsty, and if we then drink a glass of water we are more likely to do so again on similar occasions. A negative reinforcer strengthens any behavior that reduces or terminates it: when we take off a shoe that is pinching, the reduction in pressure is negatively reinforcing, and we are more likely to do so again when a shoe pinches [19].

According to Skinner, "operant conditioning shapes behavior as a sculptor shapes a lump of clay [20]. Skinner explicated his notion in his book of fiction *Walden Two* in which the main character (Frazier) and his team use this 'science of behaviour' to behaviourally engineer a whole community of people. What is frightening in this book is the insightful observation that this 'behavioral technology' is already in use in the actual world "...its members and techniques are as old as the hills. Look at their frightful misuse in the hands of the Nazi's! Or practical politics? Or advertising and salesmanship? Bring them all together and you have a sort of rule-of-thumb technology of vast power...the science is there for the asking. But its techniques and methods are in the wrong hands [21]. He goes on to say "I deny that freedom exists at all....perhaps we can never prove that man isn't free; it's an assumption. But the increasing success of a science of behavior makes it more and more plausible [22]. Another place where his opponents "sense of freedom' is debunked is when his opponent claims his freedom in the free choice of holding or dropping a match box. When Frazier predicts that the opponent will hold on to it, he drops it just then. Frazier thus proves his point that the sense of feeling free is not only the absence of the objectionable control of force (the opponent was not threatened with punishment) but the fact that he had to disprove Frazier was control enough to determine his action. By explaining the 'reinforcement theory' and categorizing the things that can happen to us into those we like and want to

¹³ Kane, 'Responsibility, Luck and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism,' p. 222.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Kane, 'Some Neglected Pathways in the Free Will Labyrinth' p. 408.

¹⁶ As quoted in: Audi, 'B.F. Skinner on Freedom, Dignity, and the Explanation of Behaviour', p. 165.

¹⁷ Chomsky, 'A Review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*' p. 142-143.

¹⁸ Attributed to Skinner: <http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/skinner.html> (retrieved on 15.10.2011)

¹⁹ As quoted in: Audi, 'B.F. Skinner on Freedom, Dignity, and the Explanation of Behaviour,' p. 178.

²⁰As quoted in: Staddon, 'Scientific Imperialism and Behaviorist Epistemology,' p.234.

²¹ Skinner, *Walden Two*, p. 241.

²² Ibid.

happen, for which we take steps to make them happen again; those that we don't like and we take steps for them to not happen again; and those to which we are indifferent, Frazier shows how if it is in his power to create situations a person likes or remove those he doesn't he can control the persons behavior [23]. The upshot of this story is that all our actions and our behaviours, even the things we like or dislike, are conditioned and hence determined in accordance with the reinforcers of our past or by our biological inheritance.

Coming back to our example of the hiker, his behavior had to happen given the external stimulus of weather, the steep path etc. and his relevant reinforcing history that showed him that when one is tired, resting seems the natural thing to do. He couldn't have done otherwise because his current physiological condition, the external stimuli and his history of relevant reinforcers wouldn't have allowed him to. Thus, according to Skinner, "environmental history is still in control; the genetic endowment of the species plus the contingencies to which the individual has been exposed still determine what he will perceive". (Skinner, 1974, p. 82) [24],

Determinism asserts that free will is an illusion based on ignorance of the factors determining behavior. In fact, Skinner not only rejected the concept of free will; he deemed talk of "freedom," and of "human dignity" which it implies, to be a cause of war and other mayhem (Skinner 1957) [25]. Conventional free will requires the potential to act otherwise than the environmental or genetic forces would dictate. The determinism of scientific psychology leaves no room for free will.

Conclusion

Both the humanistic psychology of Sartre and the scientific psychology of Skinner adopt radically extreme positions on 'freedom' which imply radical ways of ascribing responsibility. One says that we are *ultimately responsible* for all our actions while the other, by leaving no room for doing otherwise denies any free choice. It thus negates the question of responsibility. It says we are wrong to attribute any credit or worth to the individual who performs the action it does, thus recognizing our everyday experience and common sense belief of free choice as one born from our ignorance of the true determining factors of behavior.

While both exploit fundamental aspects of how we behave they fail to convince me to challenge my sense of the relative choices I make in my everyday life. While I agree with Sartre that my attitude and thus the interpretation of myself and the world are not constant but perpetually questioned *by me* and therefore changing, there are circumstances in some persons lives that make them act in ways they probably wouldn't want to. This makes me agree with Skinner that a lot of my actions are conditioned by my environmental history and the reinforcers I am influenced by. However, these conditions are largely from society which in accordance with my reasons and exposure to other forms-of-life I am able to question. In my view *free choice* in order to be a responsible choice must be *voluntary, intentional and rational* (and not an irrational

indeterminism which is often a criticism faced by patrons of extreme Free Will) in the sense that we do use our own reasons (whether right or wrong) to justify our actions to ourselves in the least.

This makes me agree with the mesh theory of semi-compatibilism which is more inclined towards Freedom than Determinism. It insists that the freedom required for responsibility is the function of a connection between the agents' choices or actions and their reasons or motives for acting. I would prescribe to the hierarchical theories of motivation proposed by various philosophers particularly Harry Frankfurt in his essay 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of Person' in which he proposes that humans "have the capacity for reflective evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second order desires,"²⁶ where second order desires or wants are those to have or not to have various first-order desires. Free Will and responsibility require that we assess our first-order desires (even when there is a conflict between them) and form second-order volitions about which first-order desires should move us to action. Our "wills" (first-order desires) are free according to Frankfurt when they conform to the second-order volitions, so that we have the *will* (first-order desires) we *want* (second-order volitions) to have. In this sense we can 'identify' with our will²⁷ which according to Frankfurt is the definition of a *person* as opposed to a 'wanton' human being who doesn't care which of his first-order desires dominate him. The hiker sat down to rest in accordance with his freely chosen want to not tolerate the given circumstances of heat, fatigue, sunburn etc. His Original Project seems to give rise to an interpretation of himself (his body, his existence) and his current situatedness as one he chooses to reject.

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²³Ibid., p. 241-245

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²⁵ Morf, 'Sartre, Skinner, and the Compatibilist Freedom to be authentically', p.31.

²⁶ Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' p. 7.

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