

# TONY CHADWICK ESSAY PRIZE 2001 RUNNER UP

## AS FREE AS CAN BE

by Geoff Oliver

The literature concerning free will and determinism suggests that it is desirable that we have a will that is free. For if we do not have a will that is free we cannot do other than we do. If the world we inhabit is deterministic then our decisions and the actions that we take were determined prior to our birth and thus are not really our own - we are mere puppets or, in a different simile, like cogs in some great world machine. Our failings are not to be condemned or our successes praised. The literature also claims that the value of the concept of moral responsibility is dependent on moral agents having a free will. For example; the very first sentence of A J Ayer's essay 'Freedom and Necessity' reads as follows:

When I am said to have done something of my own free will it is implied that I could have acted otherwise; and it is only when it is believed that I could have acted otherwise that I am held to be morally responsible for what I have done.

The belief that the fate of the concept of moral responsibility rests on the thesis of free will being true is enough to persuade many to accept the truth of the thesis. This I view as unfortunate; the problem of free will and determinism is a metaphysical problem and the meaning of 'free will' is not clear. Bearing in mind the difficulty of defining 'free will', I believe that claims concerning the threat that a lack of free will poses to autonomy and moral responsibility should be viewed with some suspicion.

In this essay I shall explore the concepts of determinism and free will and shall argue that the concept of free will is not as crucial for the concepts of autonomy and moral responsibility as is generally supposed. The essay is motivated by the thought that the problem of free will persists not because it is a deep metaphysical problem, but because free will is seen as attractive and supportive of moral theory while determinism is seen as dehumanising, and despite its simplicity, difficult to accept.

At some stage in any discussion about free will it is almost certain that a libertarian, someone that believes they have a will that is free, will claim that their first person experience provides evidence that they have a will that is free. Typically the libertarian will claim that he makes decisions and achieves desired outcomes and that this constitutes direct evidence of the existence of his free will. With almost equal certainty a determinist will make the counter claim that the libertarian's decision is in fact determined by the libertarian's beliefs: beliefs that were determined by prior states of the world, including states that existed prior to the libertarian's birth. The determinist may go on to suggest that the libertarian is suffering from an illusion. The libertarian's claim would appear to rest on the fact that in making a decision, which he takes as being his decision, he feels no constraint and thus believes that he could have decided otherwise.

Before examining the notion of freedom from constraint in depth it will be useful to have a quick look at the determinist's attack on the libertarian.

This attack on the libertarian has the effect of undermining the concept of a person; the libertarian is being robbed of the ownership of the thoughts that he takes to be his own. While it may be true that the libertarian's desires, preferences, beliefs etc. were determined prior to the libertarian's birth, it must also be true that the libertarian came into being prior to his beliefs. A person has properties that the atoms that formed his body did not have - a case where the whole is immensely greater than the sum of its parts. The libertarian's beliefs could not have existed prior to the libertarian. It would appear that the libertarian is causally responsible for his beliefs and thus it is correct to identify him as the owner of such beliefs.

In the following paragraphs I shall examine the notion of freedom from constraint. To do so I shall consider the constraints imposed by being a particular person and those imposed by unavoidable interaction with the contents of the world.

It is generally accepted that a person's character is determined by a combination of his genetic inheritance and the environment of his formative years. These are factors that a person has no control over. It follows that a person cannot determine his own characteristics. The type of person that I am appears to be just a matter of luck. This obviously constitutes a serious constraint on the will of a person. I cannot, for example, choose to be more intelligent.

Another general class of constraints is imposed through interactions with the rest of the world. People often find themselves having to complete tasks that they would otherwise avoid. Perhaps having to work when they would rather be doing something else; perhaps teaching when they would rather be doing research. Even when a person doesn't feel constrained by their interaction with other elements of the world there are usually all sorts of constraints in operation. If I have to travel to Oxford, for example, I have to get into my car, drive in accordance with the Highway Code, respond to the actions of other road users, park in a marked bay, put the correct money in the parking meter, fix the ticket inside the windscreen and so on. One might begin to think that we are never free from constraint, but this would be a mistake. Whilst often the world imposes itself upon us, there are times when we are not constrained by its influences; for example, sitting at my desk thinking about a problem in philosophy (whilst not interrupted). In this situation my mind runs on constrained only by the limits imposed by my brain that I have and the concepts and beliefs that it embodies. Under circumstances such as these we are no longer mere cogs within the world machine, but rather independent machines within the world machine. It would appear that there could be periods within our lives when we are as free as can be. There is of course a fly in the ointment - if this world is deterministic with respect to human behaviour we cannot do other than we do.

As far as I am aware both determinists and libertarians would accept the above assessment. This means that both the libertarian and the determinist are claiming that the world we inhabit is a world in which their thesis is true. Neither side is claiming the world to be any different, with

respect to freedom from constraint, from what we take it to be. It follows that any argument based on first person experience is unlikely to move either a libertarian or a determinist.

Before continuing with the main theme I shall briefly discuss the issue of persons and moral responsibility. If a person commits an act that is morally wrong, and it is true that a significant contributory, perhaps overwhelming, cause was the inheritance of defective genes or an unfortunate upbringing, the degree to which that person can be held to be morally responsible is marginal; and this would be so even if it was true that, in some sense, the agent could have done otherwise. This issue is discussed in the essay by Thomas Nagel entitled 'Moral Luck'.

The fact that both the libertarian and the determinist are claiming this world as their own suggests that the two theses are compatible; however, the essay by Peter Van Inwagen entitled 'The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism' provides a compelling argument for believing that they are incompatible. Thus there is a motivation to attempt to describe the relation between beliefs and actions in libertarian and deterministic worlds under the restriction that the experience of living in either be the same as living in this world.

When a person makes a conscious decision in a deterministic world he acts accordingly. His acting as he does is determined by his current beliefs or preferences. When action is not guided by a belief or preference the action taken is still determined. This is true even if the choice is made by tossing a coin.

It is more difficult to provide a satisfactory description of the relation between belief and action in a libertarian world. In a libertarian world when a person holds an action-guiding belief or preference he will act accordingly. It is difficult to make sense of the idea that he could have acted otherwise, for if he did act otherwise one would either doubt that he held the relevant beliefs or doubt that he acted freely. This difficulty in making sense of this aspect of free will is a serious problem for the concept. However let us grant that a person in the libertarian world can act otherwise, but also recognise that where action-guiding beliefs are held, persons in both the libertarian and deterministic world behave identically.

Where a person in the libertarian world acts without the benefit of a guiding belief or a preference, there is no difficulty in accepting that he could have acted otherwise.

Thus the two worlds are only different in situations where beliefs or a lack of a preference fail to initiate a specific action.

I want to finish by describing a means by which a person living in this world could simulate life in a libertarian world - assuming that this world is deterministic only for the point of this exercise. It is generally believed that the physical processes that govern human behaviour are deterministic; however, there are processes in this world that are believed to be indeterministic (radioactive decay for example). If a person in a deterministic world (deterministic with respect to human behaviour) used an indeterministic process to make choices when they had no reason

to act in a specific way then they would be simulating the life of a person in a libertarian world. Such a course of action would break the deterministic chains that are supposed to bind the determinist to his past and determine his future.

To summarise: We bear no responsibility for our fundamental character. With respect to moral responsibility this is a problem for both determinists and libertarians. It is difficult to satisfactorily describe a libertarian world. When the issues are fudged and a description is developed it turns out that the libertarian and determinist worlds are only different in situations where a person does not hold an action-guiding belief. There appear to be circumstances under which a person in a deterministic world can, with respect to their evolving mental states, be considered to be independent of the evolving states of the rest of the universe. The fact that a person in a world such as ours, considered to be deterministic with respect to human behaviour, could use an indeterministic process to free himself from the chains that are supposed to bind him to his past and determine his future, suggests that such chains are not of great importance. It is of minor importance that the decision to use such an indeterministic process would of course be determined.

If my characterisations of the deterministic and libertarian worlds are at all accurate then there is little reason for preferring existence in a libertarian world.

### **Bibliography**

Gary Watson (editor). *Free Will*, Oxford University Press, 1982.