

Notes for Unit II
FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

(Note: This is a summary of class lectures on this topic. I am not covering every topic discussed in lecture, nor am I trying to summarize the readings for this unit.)

I. The nature of a free and unfree actions.

A. Causal Analysis

Consider these three sentences:

Causal factors

-----CAUSE-->

Actions

Brown is in a bad mood; Smith makes an unprovoked obscene gesture at Jones; Brown has been taught that it is o.k. to hit people when they make such gestures; etc.

Brown walks across the room and hits Smith.

Smith startles the pigeon; the pigeon has been conditioned to respond to certain stimuli by trying to bite the source of the stimulus; the pigeon has a certain physiological structure, etc.

The pigeon flies across the room and bites/poops on Smith.

Jones throws the eraser with a certain velocity; the eraser has a certain weight and shape; etc. (e.g., the environment in the room and Smith and Jones's positions in the room.)

The eraser flies across the room and hits Smith.

We cannot determine from the above sentences alone whether Brown, Smith or the eraser act freely since the grammatical structure of the three sentences is exactly the same. Our determination of this matter lies in specifying the causes of their actions. In the case of the eraser, we commonly believe that it has no control over its actions. It moves entirely in light of external and internal factors operating upon it. It has no control over these factors or how it responds to them. Hence, the eraser faces no alternatives for its action. At a given time, T, it could only have moved other than it did, if there were a different set of factors acting on it or the same set acted on it in a different manner. Ditto with the pigeon pooping on Smith. Presumably this is a physiological reaction over which the pigeon has no control. The same analysis would seem to apply to the pigeon biting Smith. Even though the pigeon is conscious of its environment, it is commonly the factors that cause it to fly and bite Smith are outside its control. BF Skinner thought that while pigeons could learn to do different behaviors, the behavior was simply a response to how it had been conditioned and not anything over which the pigeon had control. In the case of the eraser and the pigeon, then, to say that their actions are completely causally determined is to say that whatever they do is the result of internal and external factors over which they have no control. Their actions can be completely determined and, thus, known in light of the causal factors that act on them. Once these factors act upon the pigeon and eraser, they must respond in act (or change) in a certain manner. If we can't know what they do with complete certainty, it is only because we do not know all of the factors acting on them.

On the other hand, we might commonly believed that Brown chose to walk over and hit Smith. By that we mean, that Brown need not have walked over and hit Smith. He could have done otherwise. To assume that Brown acted freely is to assume that Brown had alternatives from

which to choose when he decided to walk over and hit Smith. Consequently even though there may be a number of factors-- internal and external-- that act upon Brown, the sum of all those factors do NOT cause Brown to walk over and hit Smith. They 'merely' constrain the set of alternatives that are available to Brown. Rather, his walking over and hitting Smith is due to his choosing to act in this way.

B. Realities correlative with freedom:

Correlativity: **A** and **B** are **correlative** if and only if they are mutually related to one another. That is, they must either occur together or be absent together. One cannot occur without the other.

The following are correlative:

Self-agency: the existence of an "I" or ego who has self-comprehension and the capacity to initiate action.

Freedom: the capacity to choose from different possibilities without being completely constrained by external or internal factors.

Responsibility: This is precisely the acknowledgement and acceptance of freedom. I take responsibility for my actions by saying "I did it." We *hold* others responsible precisely because we believe that they .did something and could have done otherwise.

Praise and blame: we only praise and blame those whom we believe are responsible for their actions so far as they are responsible for their actions.

II. Arguments for whether free choice exists.

Can anyone act with freedom/free choice? Notice that in the above, we assumed that Brown freely chose to walk over and hit Smith. But what justifies this assumption. Can we prove that humans (or any being) have a capacity for free choice. There are three standard positions on this matter.

The principle of determinism or 'universal causation' is that every effect, event, or occurrence in reality, a causes or causes exist.

A. Hard-determinism is a view that the principle of determinism is incompatible with freedom: that is, if there is freedom, there can be no universal causation, and vice versa. Since, for the HD, there is universal causation, there is no freedom/free will.

So, in class, we considered these three events:

Jones walking across the room and hitting Smith.

A pigeon flying across the room and biting/pooping on Smith.

An eraser flying across the room and hitting Smith.

For the hard determinist, there is no difference in the basic manner of explanting such events:

So, the motion of the eraser is completely determined by the external and internal factors operating it at any given moment. If at a particular time, the eraser flies across the room and hits Smith, that motion and action are completely the product of the external and internal factors operating on the eraser at the time. The eraser itself has no control over what it does or how it moves. It is completely determined by the factors operating on it. Properly, the eraser is acted on; it doesn't

really act in the sense that it initiates and controls its action. The only way in which the eraser could have acted differently than it did at a particular time is if the set of factors acting on it, were different or acted on it differently.

The explanation of the behavior of the pigeon and the human, Jones, is no different. Both are acted on and completely determined by external and internal forces over which they have no control. As Thiroux notes, there are different kinds of hard determinism: Divine predestination (e.g., Calvinism), psychological determinism (e.g., Skinner -- for which see the notes for unit 1); social determinism (e.g., Marx), and various kinds of scientific determinism (e.g., Newtonian physics -- that if one knows the position and velocity of every particle in the universe at any given time, one would know the position and velocity of every particle in the future)

B. Indeterminism: a view that free actions are uncaused. The indeterminist, like the hard-determinist, agrees that the principle of determinism or universal causation is incompatible with freedom. Hence, the indeterminist denies the principle of causation in the case of free actions. Rather, such action must be viewed as spontaneous and uncaused. Note that in denying UC, the indeterminist is only claiming that some events do not have a cause; the indeterminist IS NOT claiming that no events have a cause. For the indeterminist, then, reality must be sharply divided between the domain of caused events and free events.

C. Soft-determinism: The soft-determinist or compatibilist accepts the principle of UC: every effect has a cause (or causes). But the SD argues that in the case of free choice, self-agency is one of the causal factors: an I who acts and chooses from possibilities. If Jones freely walks across the room and hits Smith, there may be all sorts of internal and external factors that operate on Jones, but none of them together cause Jones to walk across the room and hit Smith. At most, they constrain the possibilities open to Jones – but Jones’s walking across the room and hitting Smith requires something that Jones does from self-agency (an “I” who acts).

So, we have this basic comparison and contrast between these three positions:

HD and I: UC and freedom are mutually incompatible. Both disagree with SD which holds that UC and freedom are mutually compatible. HD and SD accept UC but disagree as to whether freedom exists. SD and I accept freedom but disagree as to whether UC exists.

HD will object that if freedom exists even as self-agency, For self-agency evidently is causing free actions independently of the chain of other causes in reality. For example, the HD would say that my raising of my arm is explained through a complex bio-chemical, physiological process that is completely causally determined. How then can I choose to raise my arm. This would require that my self-agency (will) can intervene in this causal process and yet not be part of the chain of other causes. Effectively, the HD says that if freedom exists, it would have to be uncaused. But that means that reality becomes fundamentally unintelligible at some point: as spontaneous, free actions can never be accounted for in some rational manner.

The SD rejects I since if my free actions are uncaused by me, it’s hard to see how I can be held responsible for them since I didn’t cause them. But both the SD and I, in accepting freedom, have to admit that there is some indeterminacy in reality. The argument is that this is simply a consequence of accepting the reality of free choice.

D. Thiroux looks at various difficulties with each of these positions. Note, however, that hard-determinist theories are not empirical theories.(see below for the discussion of Skinner.) As we

discussed in class, we simply cannot determine whether something acts freely by empirical observation. That is, the hard-determinist can never completely rule out the possibility of free action since no hard determinist can ever actually specify all of the factors operating on human beings at a given time. It is impossible by observation to rule out the possibility that individuals make a choice, since such a choice would be the result of some inner self-consciousness and self-agency that cannot be observed. But the same problem arises for the soft-determinist and the indeterminist. We have a powerful experience of acting freely: that what we do is up to us and that we could have acted otherwise. But by experience we cannot rule out the possibility that what appears to be a freely chosen act on our part ultimately is not a product of other factors over which we have no control. The problem of whether or not we (or any being) is free is properly a philosophical and not a scientific or other kind of empirical problem,

Note, however, that if there is freedom, then it seems that whether self-agency is the cause of a free action or whether free actions are entirely uncaused, then the dimension or aspect of us that is free would have to be immaterial or we would have to hold to some theory of indeterminacy in events in the material world. Most philosophers who have held to freedom (whether it is limited to humans or not), have rooted freedom in some immaterial aspect of us, whether a self, soul, spirit, consciousness etc. But then both of these views have to account for how an immaterial aspect on us can act on material aspects of us and on material entities in the world. For example, if I freely choose to raise my hand, then that choice -- whether caused or not-- has to in some sense cause my hand to go up. But my hand is a material, organic being the non-automatic motions of which can be traced back to the brain. How does an immaterial soul, self, or spirit interact with the brain?

On the other hand, if the hard-determinism is correct then our own experience of freedom and our ordinary understanding of personal and social reality is a delusion: e.g., our judicial system is founded on the belief that people act freely.

As I suggested in class, at some point it may not be possible to resolve these three positions in terms of argumentation. Rather, at some point those who argue for freedom ultimately rely on the veracity (truthfulness) of our own lived experience of freedom. However, it should be noted that this experience is by no means universal throughout human history (as I suggested in class). The hard-determinist in the long run is willing to deny the veracity of this experience in favor of theoretical considerations-- the principle of universal causation--that rule out free actions.

E. Aquinas's arguments for freedom (from the reading selection) beg the question perhaps because they already assume that humans are free. Aquinas argued that if we were not free, the exhortations, counsels, commands, etc. would be in vain. In light of this, Aquinas wants to distinguish between the rational actions of humans that are free actions of the will and the non-rational actions of non-humans that are not free. But the hard-determinist would say that Aquinas is assuming exactly what he wants to prove-- namely, that we have a will since if we didn't various actions in which we engage would be in vain (e.g., exhortations). The hard-determinist would say that Aquinas is simply assuming the veracity of our experience of freedom.

F. B.F. Skinner's psychological determinism: Skinner is a modern psychological determinist who denies that humans are free because he denies the existence of human self-agency (an inner self). Thus, Skinner views people as complex bio-physical organisms whose behaviors are completely determined responses to external stimuli; people have no control over the environment or their behavioral responses to the environment.

Skinner adopts this view because of an adherence to an empirical methodology and a view called scientism. A Skinnerian argument for rejecting freedom:

Only physical science gives us a knowledge of what is real, (scientism).

What is scientifically provable (real) is quantifiable, measurable and publicly observable.

We can be free only if we have an inner self (an which acts).

Such a self is not quantifiable, measurable or publicly observable.

Therefore, there is no human self and humans are not free. A critique of Skinner:

Skinner's scientism is questionable for it cannot be established through the scientific method. It is an ontological and epistemological judgment that is meta-scientific in character. The fact that an inner self cannot be discovered through scientific methodology does not imply that such a self does not exist. Here we must remember that we employ a variety of different methods to investigate different kinds of phenomena and deal with different kinds of questions.

Thus a method is rather like a net which is cast into a lake. Different nets are needed for different purposes; the construction of a net will dictate the kinds of things caught. Thus if one were to use a net with grids of one-foot square one cannot infer that there are no smaller objects on the bottom of the lake since none are brought up when the net is cast. Similarly, if one want to know whether there is a law in Wisconsin which prohibits right turns on red lights, one will not conduct a public opinion survey. Now the scientific method investigates empirical phenomena and these only so far as they can be quantified, etc. Since the method can only catch such phenomena, one cannot infer from the scientific method that, say, non-empirical phenomena do not exist.

Notes from class: Tuesday February 6

What does it mean to say that X causes Y to do Z

The cause of Y doing Z is the set of factors X in virtue of which Y does Z and not something else. In this case the set of factors X determine Y to do Z; that is, they cause Y to do Z and not something else.

The principle of universal causality is that every event has a cause. Principle of universal determinism – every thing that happens is determined by the factors that cause it to happen. The principle of universal causality seems to entail universal determinism give what it means to say that things/events are caused.

Newton 's physics: everything thing that happens can be explained in terms of the motion of atoms in space. If one knew the position and velocity (speed and direction) of every atom in the universe at a given moment, then one could know with certainty the position and velocity of every atom in the universe at any previous moment or at any subsequent moment.

We have an experience of making choices or of selection from 'live' options. But in light of the principle of universal causation, how can we explain this experience. How do we know that there are not other factors of which we are not aware that our determining us to act in a particular way? In other words, how do we know that our experience of making choices is veridical (truthful) and not a deception????