

Free Will

By L. R. B. Mann

(Based on a seminar 27-7- 2010 at TANSA, Laidlaw College, Auckland, New Zealand)

My closest friend through formative education in high school and then at Victoria University College, Thomas J. Richards, shifted into Arts early in our second year as undergraduates, to major in philosophy. During tramps in the Orongorongos & Tararuas he used to convey to me enthusiastically main questions he had been eagerly absorbing from the then professor of philosophy at Vic, Hughes (who was an Anglican priest, though I believe few knew this). I would quickly suggest resolutions of these alleged difficulties. Tom would reply “you’re wasted in science – come into philosophy”. My reaction was that he hadn’t indicated to me anything like a life’s work in it (whereas I was sure science held for me more than a life’s work). I still feel the same, and so it is as an amateur that I discuss this subject of Free Will.

Tom Richards proceeded to Oxford, where he scored very high marks from Ryle, Ayer etc. He was then appointed at a young age Senior Lecturer in philosophy at Auckland, whence he soon departed for a new university in Melbourne. I visited him three decades later, when he told me “I got out of academic philosophy because I realised I was surrounded by people who just wanted to be arguing – so long as it wasn’t about anything important”. I replied “that’s what I tried to tell you when you were going into it”. (He had moved in the late 1980s into “artificial intelligence” – arguably, out of the frying pan into the fire.)

One topic Tom alerted me to was free will. He was impressed with Prof Hughes’ statement, introducing this topic, that he could, if he wished, not eat his bacon & eggs one morning but instead hurl them against the wall of his Karori dining room. I characterised this as an example of what is meant by free will, but no more than a contribution to its definition and an assertion of its existence, rather than a conclusive argument. My initial reaction to the so-called issue of free will was essentially that of Dr Johnson – though at the time I wot not of his wording “we know our will is free and there’s an end of it.” I had nothing more to do with the topic until much more recently.

Then I came upon prominent scientists asserting that free will does not exist – a philosophical position called ‘determinism’. The Robb Lecturers, prestigious annual visitors to the University of Auckland, have included at least two overt determinists: Oxford physiologist Colin Blakemore and M. I. T. (now Harvard) psychologist Stephen Pinker. Blakemore says the brain is “the machine that runs our lives ... it is responsible for everything we do, every belief, intention and action. Physically, all we can do is move our muscles, but to do this we need nerve impulses from the brain. In the same way, moral and ethical choices are just functions of the brain, just as picking up a cup of tea and drinking it is.” Pinker says we are computers programed for the obdurate delusion that we have free will. The fad of materialism exemplified by Dawkins appears to entail determinism, though many of

its advocates tend not to emphasize that implication; but it is evident that, if evolution is no more than the outworking of physics & chemistry, mere mechanism is all there is, and free will, or even the consciousness needed for it, remain unpredicted, unexplained, and impliedly non-existent. Challenges to Dawkins & similar militant atheists L. Wolpert, S. Weinberg, P. Atkins etc rarely touch on their advocacy (explicit or implicit) of determinism. (You may well wonder why they bother to exhort you to believe in their ideas, since they appear to believe that you lack any means to change your beliefs in response to reason.) I try to expose the depauperate epistemology of the militant atheists because in their attempts at explaining organisms they ignore all but two of the categories of cause; they tend to deny the Efficient Cause, and the Final Cause, attacking therefore the 'good and perfect will' behind the universe. It seems safe to infer that their main motive is atheism, and their main line of argumentation is based on the axiom that the scientific method is the only way of knowledge.

The famous point due to theist Descartes is correctly ranked as fundamental: I cannot doubt that there exists an 'I' doing the doubting. Proving thus one's own existence does not, however, get one very far. Yes, I can claim with all due modesty, and total certainty, that I exist; so what? Descartes achieved conclusiveness at the price of usefulness.

The vastly more important building block which I contend epistemology should lay immediately on top of Descartes' foundation is free will.

I suspect ordinary people (to the extent they're aware of the issue at all) dismiss the suggestion that our free will is illusory by saying something like Dr Johnson's "we intuit our free will, and that's an end on't". Wm Temple put it in a somewhat more sophisticated way: if everything is determined by everything else, nothing can get started. In the Documentary Channel TV series 'Brain Story', Berkeley philosophy prof John Searle is shown vigorously insisting on freewill: "it's no use saying to the waiter 'I can't choose from this menu – I'm a determinist; *que sera sera*'. The refusal to choose is itself a choice". That assertion is similar to the earlier quotes from Prof Hughes, Dr Johnson and Wm Temple; it amounts to little more than a new partial definition of free will, but does exemplify the common-sense reaction of ordinary people when confronted by determinism.

Let us now sketch more detailed reasoning in support of free will.

A main source of documents, and of original thought, is provided by Bob Doyle, Harvard astronomer (on secondment to their Philosophy Dept), who has assembled <<http://www.informationphilosopher.com/>> a valuable compendium of documents & links on free will, determinism, etc. Start there if my discussion stimulates a desire for further delving.

The more directly proven category within free will is choice of my own mental images, e.g. I can choose to imagine a banana or a cube. My power to do so is a more certain fact than anything from science; it is a given of my mental world. Perhaps the most forceful expression of this fact is in Viktor Frankl's moving book 'Man's Search for Meaning' describing Auschwitz: even during sustained torture, he could (rarely, but that is a secondary point) achieve joy in imagining his wife.

I flag in passing the claim – mentioned to me by psychologist Michael Corballis – of a small minority that they cannot imagine any images. I assume they can at will imagine analogous concepts. My working hypothesis is that those individuals are, most if not all, lying. But I have to leave for future research this category of people.

I furthermore believe I can choose some actions. This is perhaps a less certain belief than choice of mental images, but nevertheless also more certain than any scientific knowledge. (Indeed, much science relies on the {usually unstated} assumption that the experimenter can choose to do this or that.)

My belief that I can either burp or refrain (when I pay attention to it) is more confident than any scientific knowledge of the world outside myself. If anyone contends, in the extreme sceptic posture characteristic of Hume, that I am deluded in my belief that I wield this choice, then I might as well pretend that Hume (& or anything else external to myself) is a delusion. Why should ultra-sceptics be permitted real status from which position they then try to tell me that my own mental experience is false?! Even if the determinist lines of philosophy generated truth, what sort of life could be based on it? As I enter a strange room, I don't gingerly test the carpet to check whether a sound floor is under it. More importantly, I cannot imagine living as if other humans are mere automata with a deceptive appearance of free will. I disbelieve that it can be done.

In case anyone may think this is all mere abstract theorising, let me point out that the principle of legal responsibility requires free will, but there exists a movement to deny free will, for the purpose of abolishing criminal responsibility! Professor of Law Warren J. Brookbanks celebrated his promotion to that rank by his inaugural lecture (19-9-2007) counterattacking a very recent materialist sect, pompously terming itself "cognitive neuroscience", propounding determinism – as against free will, criminal responsibility, judgements mad/bad, etc. – aspects of 'folk psychology' which have always featured in W. J.'s main fields of criminal law and mental illness law but are now declared by "cognitive neuroscience" to be illusory.

W. J. Brookbanks cites as the lead science for this new reductionist materialism some 1983 measurements by one Benjamin Libet. The key factoid from this operative is detection of EEG signals corresponding to a (mental) decision 0.3 s before the decision is evident to the mind which is being EEG'd. It is a bold attempt to use the king-hit logic "if A precedes B, B cannot be a cause of A" – in the form "if a specific physical change in the brain precedes the conscious mental decision, the conscious thought cannot be a cause of the decision".

Could this be true? I admit the logical possibility that certain automatic brain processes which form part of a particular decision process precede awareness of that decision. But that does not imply automatism. Let me try an analogy. I gather the bulk 'commodity' computers at Google Inc are incessantly prowling to form far more lists of associated terms than are being demanded within a given period (let us say, 0.3 s), which helps to explain how fast such lists are obtainable when you stipulate a set of keywords. The evocation of over 100,000 URLs by keywords 'L. R. B. Mann' (found in what Google states to be 0.14 s but taking as much as 3 s to say so) after my clicking the 'search' button, is not evidence that the compuprowling at Google Inc in Silicon Gulch caused any decision by me or anyone else. A rather generalised prior preparation of responses which can be actuated by request is not evidence that the prior existence of those computer routines is a cause of my

decision. It may be a formal cause. It is least of all a final cause or an efficient cause. But then, those latter categories are denied altogether by leading atheists – an issue I'll return to.

The latest extension of the Libet line, depicted in Prof Susan Greenfield's Documentary channel TV series 'Brain Story', takes the subconscious EEG buildup back to 2000 ms – yes, count 'em, 2 whole s (a period within which I can change my mind – make a new decision – several times!). In that same TV series, Prof M Gazzaniga, of Dartmouth College, is shown 'explaining the illusion of free will' with the true but misleading statement that much of our behaviour is automated, and subconsciously-controlled. That this red herring could be transmitted without comment is a hint of how far adrift we are from informed public discussion of science or philosophy. Such is pop TV.

Temple contended (e.g. in 'Nature, Man and God') that epistemology should, to be fruitful, take relationship as far more fundamental than has been fashionable since Descartes. According to Temple, surer knowledge than anything from science is the fact that one's life has meaning only in relation to other beings, and the proper way to live is accordingly to have faith in relationships – with family & friends, and with one's Maker. He did not try to demolish Descartes' Fact from its bedrock position, but did deplore the excessive importance accorded to it. It's solid, but not, in itself, much use; and those who treat it as somehow very powerful and attempt to build on it in individualistic ways tend to go along sterile paths. That has indeed been the sad fate of many philosophers.

'Chomsky's fact', innate ability to learn language, finds a counterpart in the fact of inborn morality – not this or that particular moral code, but the general awareness that the society in which one is growing up has a code, and especially that one is under a general duty, more fundamental in ontogeny than anything learned, to conform. That belief of course presumes that one has free will; only thus can it be true, or even meaningful, to say that one ought to choose to do this rather than that. I try to teach children to do right, in the belief that they, like me, can choose. And of course systems of criminal & civil justice make similar assumptions.

Your determinist will then say this belief is a delusion, a predetermined state of mind. I reply that its status is surer than anything in the science which gave rise to the determinist mind-set in e.g. Laplace – please, not Newton! – and Colin Blakemore, Pinker, etc.

The fact that we have little if any idea, scientifically, of how the will interacts with the brain, let alone the external world, is no excuse to ignore its primacy. How spirit moves matter is unclear (to put it mildly), but it does. Of course, those who say there's no spirit have declared this problem out of existence. Such is the radical extremism of aggressive materialists lately.

Pinker says every mental process is now, or soon will be, known to have a physical correlate. This is a huge exaggeration beyond what is actually known. He also says that, given such mapping of thoughts to electrical &/or biochemical processes in the brain, we have no need of the 'ghost in the machine'. His logic is faulty. Even if it

were true that all mental processes had been correlated with scientific observations in the nervous system, that correlation would not illuminate the question of whether there is a person – roughly, that which departs at death – choosing to think this way. The physical brain changes could be results, rather than causes. The materialist such as Pinker assumes that they are causes, but the ‘dualist’ (his tag for me) that they are results.

Tom Richards’ criticism of (most of) recent academic philosophy may well be fair; but I believe the posture of nerdish evasiveness is not inherent in the subject. This paper has the bold aim of prompting a resurgence of useful, widely appreciated philosophy (& psychology). If free will can get inserted as the most important foundation-stone of a psychology still struggling to recover from the decades of pathetic behaviourism (a variety of determinism), some progress may be then built on it. The inaccessibility of Psyche to scientific observation was perhaps too hastily taken as a reason for psychology to neglect (to the point of rejection) the fundamental fact of free will. Where will we get to if we again take it seriously? I challenge philosophers & psychologists to discuss the question.

—

I trust you will relish, as I do, Wm Temple’s imagined exchange

“Why is this canvas covered with paint?”

“Because I painted it.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I hoped to create a thing of beauty for the delight of myself and others.”

This amusing but instructive little cameo neatly reminds us of the unavoidable need to take account of formal and final cause, as well as free will, in human affairs. The roles they play in understanding evolution we must leave for another occasion.

I take this opportunity to outline, and to expand, the categories of cause. Aristotle’s ‘lecture notes’ on causes, the more useful version being those called ‘Physics’ rather than the even briefer ‘Metaphysics’, proposed four categories of cause. Unfortunately a turn of phrase in the ‘Metaphysics’ version – ‘the making of a statue’ – has misled some to believe that the category which has become known traditionally as Efficient Cause includes the processes in matter &/or energy leading to a changed state of the universe – the processes which are the only category of cause acknowledged by materialists, apart from Material Cause which is of course by all accounts needed, *e.g.* the bronze from which the statue is made is a requisite precondition for the statue’s coming into existence.

In order to grasp more clearly what Aristotle actually wrote, I found most helpful

the account of Aquinas. It turns out that Aristotle actually did not, in his account of causes, give any name or any significant status to the processes which science observes. At this rate, I will argue that we need not only four but five categories of cause. These are, in their different senses, pre-requisites for the result (the bronze statue, or the bottle of Babich claret). Very briefly:

1. **Material** cause – the bronze without which the statue cannot come to be, or the more complex grape juice + yeast required as the material basis for Babich to make claret.

2. **Efficient** cause – Babich, or the sculptor who made the statue. These are persons. Many effects in the biosphere and some beyond are set in train by acts by agents such as these. Some of them wield free will.

3. **Final** cause – the purpose or goal e.g. as fitness is to walking for exercise.

4. **Formal** cause – the 'claret idea' in Babich's mind, a pre-existing form.

5. The processes in matter &/or energy leading to a new state of the universe, e.g. the conversion of grape juice into aqueous ethanol and minor components characteristic of claret, or the sculptor's working of the bronze into the form of the statue. These processes preoccupy Dawkins *et al.* – indeed, they acknowledge nothing else; but Aristotle had so little understanding of physics & chemistry that he didn't name or clearly identify this category, which I propose to call **Proximal** cause.

