

Free Will as Involving Determination and Inconceivable Without It

by R. E. Hobart (= Dickinson S. Miller)

Mind, Vol XLIII, Number 169 (January, 1934)

Preamble -- Free will and determinism are compatible. In fact, the former requires the latter. Failure to see this is failure of the analytical imagination. This failure is epitomized in the story of the peasants who were shown the workings of a locomotive yet insisted that inside it there had to be a horse.

Self and Character – Indeterminism: A free act of will is the [an?] act of the self. The acts of will or volitions are spontaneous, not caused (3-4), but they cause physical acts. [In later times this view has been called the theory of agency.]

What we judge morally are selves or characters, settled sets of motives [and dispositions]. "By character we mean... the sum of a man's tendencies to action, considered in their relative strength; or that

sum in so far as it bears upon morals." (3)
Indeterminists, in cutting the self off from character by making volitions spontaneous, make moral evaluation of persons impossible.

The spontaneous self is a duplicate of the person or character, like the horse in the locomotive. But the indeterminist cannot escape the basic dilemma. Either this self decides to act in a certain way because, on the whole, it preferred to decide in that way [that is, determined by one's character] or "the decision was an underived event, a rootless and sourceless event." Indeterminists tacitly think of selves as acting in the first manner while never admitting or recognizing this fact.

Freedom –

"Can" – "I can will anything, and can will effectively anything that my body will enact."
(10) The 'can' here expresses a *power*. A power is inherently dispositional and depends on laws. That is, "A person has a power if it is a fact that when [that is, if] he sets himself in the appropriate manner to produce a certain event, that event will follow." (8)

One has the power to do things that one does not do.

[Hobart simply asserts that 'can' is univocal, but I think it's better to distinguish this 'can' from that which expresses nomic possibility. In this latter sense, of course, I could not have willed or done otherwise, if determinism is true. Nonetheless, I had the power to do so, and that is the sense of 'can' (according to Hobart) relevant to moral evaluations. This sense is not well-defined here {And of course there may be many subtly different but relevant senses.} I think what Hobart was getting at it is:

S 'can' do A \equiv S is the (natural) kind of thing that has the power to do A.]

Hobart has a simple [overly simple] model of decision-making: wish—will—act. I have the power to will as I wish and to act as I will, so I (at least sometimes) have the power to act as I wish. All this is consistent with, and even requires, determinism, since the relation between these elements is supposed to be lawful.

Freedom \equiv the absence of interference or restraint.

Compulsion – “The indeterminist conceives that according to determinism the self is carried along by wishes to acts which it is thus necessitated to perform. This whole mode of speaking distinguishes the self from the wishes and represents it as under their dominion. This is the initial error. This is what leads the indeterminist wrong on all the topics of his problem.... In fact, the moral self is the wishing self. The wishes are its own. It cannot be described as under their dominion, for it has no separate predilections to be overborne by them; they themselves are its predilections.... The answer that has ordinarily been given is surely correct; all compulsion is causation, but not all causation is compulsion. Seize a man and violently force him to do something, and he is compelled—also caused—to do it. But induce him to do it by giving him reasons and his doing it is caused but not compelled.” (13)

Passivity – “It is not clarifying to ask, “Is a volition free or determined?” It is the person who is free, and his particular volition that is determined. Freedom is something that we can attribute only to a continuing being, and he can have it only so far as the particular

transient volitions within him are determined.”
(13)

Will compared to ligaments. We can't move without either, but each is bound to the rest of the process by tight causal bonds. Without these bonds, motion is impossible.

Spontaneity – An act or utterance is spontaneous if it springs from the inclinations or impulses of “the being himself.” Deny this (causal) connection, and you deny spontaneity.

Source – Is there any reason why a source of an action (say, a person's will) can not itself have sources? Acc. to Hobart, no.

One should also be clear to distinguish *flowing from this source and previously from another* from *not flowing from this source but from another*. The libertarian confuses the two, compounding the mistake by confusing causation with compulsion.

Prediction – “To predict a person's conduct need not be repellent.” (15) To predict it is to indicate to a person that he is more naïve or stereotyped than they would like to think.

Material Fate – [Replies to an article by Eddington in *Philosophy*, January 1933.]

“Fatalism says that my morrow is determined no matter how I struggle. This is of course a superstition. Determinism says that my morrow is determined through my struggle. There is this significance in my mental effort, that it is deciding the event.” (16)

Even supposing that materialism is true, determinism does not amount to fatalism. In this case, the mental struggle has (or is) a physical struggle counterpart “which, so to speak, represents it and is in a manner its agent in the physical world.” Then outcomes depend on *this* struggle.

Self as Product and Producer --

A familiar objection. “How can one be praised or blamed if he was framed by nature as he is? A man can surely be blamed only for what he does himself, and he did not make his original character; he simply found it on his hands.”

Hobart just digs in his heels and denies this (essentially repeating what he has said earlier). “It is the stuff people are made of

[character?] that commands our admiration and affection. Where it came from is another question..." (18)

Responsibility – The basic argument is reiterated, quite elegantly.

"The parent produced the man, none the less the man is responsible for his acts. We can truly say that the earth bears apples, but quite as truly that trees bear apples. The earth bears the apples by bearing trees. It does not resent the claim of the trees to bear the apples, or try to take the business out of the trees' hands. Nor need the trees feel their claim nullified by the earth's part in the matter. There is no rivalry between them. A man is a being with free will and responsibility; where that being came from is, I repeat, another story." (24)

Desert. Hobart's theory of punishment.

"I believe that the ideal ends of the theory of justice are (1) to see that all possible restitution is made, (2) to see as far as possible that the malefactor does not repeat the act, and (3) as far as possible to render the act less likely on the part of others." (25)

Worth thinking about, but it's not metaphysics.

Some Comments

I. Daniel Dennett argues that "philosophers such as Ayer and Hobart, who argue that free will requires determinism, must be wrong. There are some ways our world could be macroscopically indeterministic, without that fact remotely threatening the coherence of the intentionalistic conceptual scheme of action description presupposed by claims of moral responsibility." (p. 292 of "On Giving Libertarians What They Say They want" in *Brainstorms*).

Dennett's argument here is that we could introduce a randomizer to choose between various particular ways to implement a certain kind of action when we are indifferent to the choice amongst the various ways. Say I am confronted with 200 identical cans of soup in a grocery store. Which do I choose? We could have a mechanism for selecting one arbitrarily without, it would seem, leaving us not responsible for the action.

But this sort of indeterminism is not likely to satisfy a libertarian. "The libertarian would not be relieved to learn that although his decision to murder his neighbor was quite determined, the style and trajectory of the death blow was not. (292)

II. Free will. We have the power to do as we wish, where these wishes are in turn products of our own character. [Hobart doesn't say this explicitly. This idea seems to be implicit in what he does say.]

This definition defeats (it seems to me) Taylor's objection that a person with free will could also be the puppet of an "ingenious physiologist" who implants volitions, since the implanted volitions have no relation to one's own character.

We could not have free will in this sense unless there were a causal connection between our character and our choices and our actions.