

Books

Do Knowledge, Ethics, and Liberty Require Free Will?

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Initiative: Human Agency and Society

Tibor Machan

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As I ride the Valley Transit Authority bus, reading Tibor Machan's latest book, *Initiative: Human Agency and Society*, I notice on the seat next to me the ubiquitous Watchtower pamphlet, *Awake!*, with the question emblazoned on the front, "Does FATE Control Your life?"—the very question that Machan is addressing in his book. If, as Objectivism would argue, I have the freedom to focus, then I must choose to be *awake*, as the Watchtower pamphlet exhorts its readers. But I also think that if I chose to be awake to the issues I am now facing, then I must have done so for a reason, which means that the reason *determined* my choice.

So, what does Machan have to say about this? Does he believe that fate controls our lives? Quite the contrary. In a readable and non-technical approach to one of the classic issues in philosophy, he argues that free will is required for knowledge, ethics, and political liberty. He also criticizes Nobel laureate economists George Stigler and F. A. Hayek for their economic determinism, as well as arguing that Hayek commits the very fallacy of scientism that he criticizes in others. Even the newly respected public-choice school of economics comes under fire for discounting the importance of ideology in the motives of professional politicians—for claiming that "self-interest" rather than political idealism informs public policy.

Machan begins by telling us that he will offer eight reasons why a belief in free will "makes very good sense" (although I counted only seven). Four of these, he says, explain why nature does not preclude free will, while the other four establish that free will actually exists (Machan 2000, 16).

Nature versus Free Will

In defense of his claim that nature does not preclude free will, Machan challenges the view that since physical causality governs everything else in nature, it governs human beings as well. He points out that there are different kinds of causal laws and that not all of nature operates according to "efficient" or mechanical causality. There is such a thing as "agent causality," in which the acting agent "initiates" his own conduct (16, 17). One will recognize the similarity between this view and the one endorsed by Objectivism (Branden 1969, 54–59).

Machan is certainly correct that insofar as a rejection of free will is based on mechanical or efficient causality, it overlooks the phenomenon of "agent" causality or what Aristotle termed "final" causation. Hard or mechanistic determinism lacks plausibility on precisely these grounds. However, the implication that determinism is incompatible with self-initiated action is one that soft-determinism or compatibilism would reject. Don't animals initiate their own action? Doesn't a lion that spots a zebra and gives chase "initiate" the chase? Yet neither Machan nor Objectivism would say that animals have free will.

Moreover, self-initiated action governs *all* forms of life, not just the higher mammals. As Ayn Rand (1982, 32) observes:

Living organisms possess the power of self-initiated motion, which inanimate matter does not possess; man's consciousness possesses the power of self-initiated motion in the realm of cognition (thinking), which the consciousnesses of other living species do not possess. But just as animals are able to move only in accordance with the nature of their

bodies, so man is able to initiate and direct his mental action only in accordance with the nature (the *identity*) of his consciousness.

I would add that if the power of self-initiated motion in the lower organisms does not imply the freedom to act differently, then neither does the power of self-initiated motion in human consciousness imply the freedom to choose differently. If animals can initiate *physical* action without being free to do otherwise (as Objectivism claims), then human beings can initiate *mental* action (thinking) without being free to do otherwise. If Rand is correct, then the ability to "initiate" an action, whether mental or physical, does not imply free will, but is perfectly compatible with determinism.

In short, all living organisms, even those typically regarded as determined, are goal-directed and operate according to the principle of "final" causation. Mechanical or "efficient" causality is not the only alternative to free will.

The strongest causality-based argument against free will, and one that Machan does not address, is not that everything in nature operates according to mechanical or efficient causality, but that it operates according to causal necessity. As Objectivism observes, the law of causality is a corollary of the law of identity. Just as the same thing must have the same attributes under the same conditions, so it must perform the same actions under the same conditions.

H. W. B. Joseph makes this point in his *Logic: An Introduction* (a book recommended by the former Nathaniel Branden Institute and currently endorsed by Harry Binswanger of ARI¹). Joseph states that "the causal relation is a necessary relation, such that if you have one thing [the cause] you *must* have another [the effect]" (Joseph 1906, 407). To say that A causes B is to say that given A, B *must* happen. If a person is the cause and his action is the effect, then if you have the cause (namely, the person under conditions C at time T), you *must* have the effect (namely, his particular choice of action). Otherwise, the actor is not the cause of his action. But if you have this kind of necessary connection between the actor and his action, then you do not have free will. Far from supporting free will, the theory of agent

causality rejects it as incompatible with causal necessity.

Years ago, I asked Leonard Peikoff how he could endorse *both* free will *and* causal necessity. He replied that, according to the law of causality, a person must act the same way under the same conditions (by engaging in a process of choice), but that he doesn't have to make the same choice. He reiterates this point in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*:

Since man is an entity of a certain kind, he *must* act in a certain way. He must continuously choose between focus and nonfocus. Given a certain kind of cause, in other words, a certain kind of effect *must* follow. This is not a violation of the law of causality, but an instance of it. (Peikoff 1991, 69)

But if the law of causality requires the same *kind* of behavior under the same conditions, then why doesn't it require the same *specific* behavior? How could it require one but not the other? On a metaphysical level, this distinction between sameness *in kind* and sameness *in particular* is arbitrary.

It is true, as Peikoff says, that given a certain kind of cause, a certain kind of effect must follow, but that is because it is also true that given a certain *specific* cause, a certain *specific* effect must follow. Were the latter not true, it is difficult to see how the former could be. The same kind of entity must have the same *kind* of attributes under the same conditions, because the same *specific* entity must have the same *specific* attributes under the same conditions.

It is often said that, according to free will, one's action is not causeless, because it is caused by one's choice. But what caused the choice? Both Machan and Objectivism would answer that the moral agent did, which is true enough as we have seen, but the question is not who or what *made* the choice but *why* was it made? What caused the moral agent to make this particular choice *rather than* an alternative? Or, more in keeping with Objectivism, why did he choose to focus rather than refrain from focusing? Peikoff answers:

There can be no intellectual factor which makes a man

decide to become aware or which even partly explains such a decision: to grasp such a factor, he must already *be* aware. For the same reason, there can be no motive or value judgment which precedes consciousness and which induces a man to become conscious. The decision to perceive reality must precede value judgments. Otherwise, values have no source in one's cognition of reality and thus become delusions. Values do not lead to consciousness; consciousness is what leads to values.

In short, it is invalid to ask: why did a man choose to focus? There is no such "why." There is only the fact that a man *chose*: he chose the effort of consciousness, or he chose non-effort and unconsciousness. (59–60)

But if Peikoff's claim were true, then "the decision to perceive reality" could not be judged as a moral imperative, in which case, one could not be held morally responsible for making it. Prior to consciousness or value judgments, there is no way for a person to *know* that he ought to perceive reality. Nor could such an act even be viewed as a "choice" or "decision," since that would imply a conscious recognition of alternatives and a prior evaluation of their relative merits.

In *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, Nathaniel Branden makes a point similar to Peikoff's, but whereas Peikoff denies the presence of motives, Branden (1969, 41–42) recognizes them:

Just as a man cannot escape the implicit knowledge that the function of his mind is volitional, so he cannot escape the implicit knowledge that he *should* think, that to be conscious is desirable, that his efficacy as a living entity depends on it. But he is free to act on that knowledge or to evade it.

But if a person "cannot escape the implicit knowledge that he *should* think . . . that his efficacy as a living entity depends on it," then he must already be aware that thinking is important; he must already

know that raising his level of consciousness is desirable. Contrary to Peikoff, the "implicit knowledge that he should think" must already entail a *value judgment* or a *motive* for doing so.

In fact, Branden acknowledges the presence of motives explicitly when he states:

In some cases, the "motive" of non-focusing or non-thinking is anti-effort. . . . In other cases, the "motive" is some wish, desire or feeling. . . . In other cases, the "motive" is escape from fear. . . . These "motives" are not causal imperatives; they are feelings which a man may choose to treat as decisive. (42)

So, according to Branden, there are indeed "motives" that bear on one's choice to think or not to think. (He places the term "motives" in quotes presumably to distinguish it from motives that arise from one's consciously held, abstract values.) Nevertheless, he denies that these "motives" are causal imperatives, arguing that they are feelings that one may choose to treat as decisive.

But what is the motive for treating them as decisive *versus* ignoring them? To this, the answer must be that there is none; otherwise the choice would not be free. For a choice to be free, a person must be indifferent to which alternative he chooses. If he were not, then he would necessarily choose the alternative he values most—the one he has the strongest *motive* for choosing.

Objectivists have often chafed at the characterization of volition as "indeterminism," which "holds that not all human action is necessitated, because some actions allegedly have no causes" (Binswanger 1991, 5). But it is difficult to see how Objectivism's view of volition as entailing an arbitrary choice based on nothing is superior to indeterminism as a realistic account of human action. Since both views deny that the choice to think or not to think is governed by a prior reason or purpose, both claim that the choice is fundamentally causeless.

Thus, the question remains as to how one could choose an alternative that one has no reason for preferring. I was hoping that

Machan might respond to this question—might fill in the gap that Objectivism leaves unanswered—but he does not address it.

Nor does he address the concept of agent causality in which one's character determines one's actions, except to say that the character traits that prompted the actions had to be "learned and cultivated by the individual who has them" (Machan 2000, 27). But this does not deny that one's character can itself determine the manner in which one acquires these traits—in which one develops and modifies one's character. As Joseph (1970) observes, if a man's actions were not so determined, then they would not be his, "and that if he might indifferently do or forbear an act, no matter what his character was, he would be nothing in particular." Joseph suggests that if there is an error associated with determinism, it "lies not in holding a man's actions to be necessary but in holding them to be mechanical" (410).

The second reason commonly given for rejecting free will, says Machan, is the dominance of the empirical method, namely that of sensory observation. Since the senses don't reveal free will, the conclusion is that there is no such thing. Machan disputes this by arguing that knowing is not confined to the evidence of the senses but includes inference and theory as well. He says that even the idea that knowledge is empirically based cannot be known simply by empirical observation (Machan 2000, 17–18).

It is true that knowledge is not confined to the evidence of the senses, but unless there is some empirical evidence for free will, one cannot legitimately infer its existence. Empirical evidence is not, of course, confined to *sensory* observation, i.e., to extrospection; it includes introspection as well, which is why this objection to free will strikes me as naive. Many advocates of free will defend it precisely on the grounds of introspection. Unfortunately, the empiricist claims *for* free will are no more defensible than the empiricist argument against it. The determinist could reply that just as extrospection cannot *refute* free will, neither can introspection *prove* it, because it cannot prove that one could have chosen differently under the same conditions.

It is often argued that free will can be verified introspectively, because we have the *experience* of choosing freely. But do we? It is

true that we have the experience of making choices—of choosing one alternative rather than another—but that process should not be confused with free will, which is the ability to choose differently under the same conditions.

After all, what would it mean to *experience* free will—to *experience* the ability to choose differently under the same conditions? It would mean that we've *observed* ourselves choosing differently under the same conditions. *That* would be an experience of free will, but it is clearly one that we will never have, since we will never again find ourselves in precisely the same conditions. At the very least, we will have changed psychologically.

The sense that we could have chosen differently under the same conditions may also arise, because we can *imagine* ourselves doing so. But to imagine such a choice is not to experience it. Imagination and experience are two very different things.

Still another reason for rejecting free will, says Machan, is the idea that nowhere else in nature do we find such a phenomenon, so why should we expect human beings to possess it. Machan points out that there is a large variety of different phenomena in nature, so that there is no reason to assume that that variety does not include free will (19). Machan is certainly correct. Nowhere else in nature do we find the phenomenon of rational intelligence, but that doesn't mean that human beings aren't rational. Similarly, the fact that free will does not exist anywhere else in nature does not mean that human beings aren't volitional. Unfortunately, whereas introspection can reveal our ability to reason, it cannot tell us that we have free will.

Proving Free Will

Having dismissed the arguments against the *possibility* of free will, Machan then devotes himself to proving its *actual existence*. He begins by invoking the argument that determinism is self-defeating, an argument that is no stranger to Objectivism. Branden (1969, 49–54), Peikoff (1991, 70–72), and Binswanger (1991, 20–22) all make the argument in various forms. Machan (2000, 20) develops it as follows:

[I]f we are fully determined in what we think, believe and do, then, of course, the belief that determinism is true is also a result of this determinism. . . . There is no way to take an independent stance and consider the arguments unprejudiced because of all the various forces making us assimilate the evidence in the world just the way we do. One either turns out to be a determinist or not, and in neither case can we appraise the issue objectively, because we are predetermined to have a view on the matter one way or the other.

Those familiar with the Binswanger monograph, "Volition as Cognitive Self-Regulation," will recognize Machan's formulation as a virtual duplicate of Binswanger's, which states:

A determined mind would not have the power to step outside of the forces that drive it, to take an independent look at reality. Thus determinism implies that every idea is a prejudice. . . . A determined mind would be incapable of objectivity and hence could not consistently assert that any idea is objectively superior (or inferior) to any other—not even the idea that determinism is superior to the advocacy of free will.² (Binswanger 1991, 20–22)

However, to say that one's judgment is causally necessitated in no way implies that antecedent causes are interfering with it, distorting it, or preventing it from being objective.

To better understand this, consider the following example: Suppose I am interested in discovering the truth about a particular issue, say, that of determinism versus free will, such that my assessment is determined by that interest. Does this mean that my assessment cannot be considered independent and objective? Quite the contrary. If it is determined (i.e., motivated) by my interest in discovering the truth, then my assessment is the very essence of objectivity. Binswanger (2000, 16–17) says:

the "motive" for focusing is not like any other motive: it is

the desire to subordinate all desires to the facts of reality; it is the desire not to let desires govern the level of one's awareness. The will to focus is the will to know the full truth regardless of how one will feel about the truth one will discover, regardless of whether one "feels like" thinking or not, and regardless of whether one has a specific incentive to do so or not. The will to be objective, by its very nature, cannot be based on any desire (other than the desire to face the facts).

But the desire to face the facts *is* a desire nonetheless, so it is not a contradiction to say that I was objective, because I wanted to be—that I was unbiased, because the goal of my thinking was to arrive at the truth. On the contrary, it is difficult to believe that anyone (if he understood what he was saying) would claim that he *didn't* want to be objective—that the goal of his thinking was *not* to arrive at the truth! Nor can it be correct to say, as Binswanger does, that "the will to focus is the will to know the full truth . . . *regardless of whether one has a specific incentive to do so or not.*" The desire to know the truth is itself an incentive that must be present if one is to think objectively about an issue. Indeed, to say that one could choose to focus on the facts with no incentive whatsoever, i.e., without doing so for the sake of knowledge and understanding, is not consistent with the goal-oriented nature of human cognition.

Soft determinism or compatibilism does not imply that reason is not (as Kant put it) "the author of its own principles"; it does not imply that we cannot evaluate ideas on our own, independently of prejudicial influences. It simply says that our conclusions are necessitated by antecedent causes. These antecedent causes can and do include our own valuation and understanding of the truth.

Moreover, it is introspectively obvious that a conclusion is not something one chooses. On the contrary, it is precisely one's grasp of the evidence that *determines* one's conclusions. As D. J. O'Connor (1971, 44–45) observes: "You can no more understand the evidence and reject the conclusion than you can look up at a cloudless sky and consider whether you will agree that it is blue." If I believe in

capitalism, it is not because I *choose* to believe in it, but because I *understand* it to be a better system than the alternative.

It may be replied that people can choose to evade their knowledge, and thus arrive at erroneous conclusions. But if people evade, it is not something they *choose*, for if they did, then they would know they were negating their knowledge, in which case, they couldn't do it, any more than they could knowingly choose to believe something they don't believe. Whatever actions people can be said to *choose*, evasion is not one of them. In order for an action to qualify as a "choice," it must be made knowingly and consciously.

Binswanger (1991, 17) seems to recognize this when he states: "It is, of course, not rational to be irrational, but that one is being irrational and why that is self-defeating will not be apparent to one who is choosing to be irrational. Were it otherwise, irrationality would be impossible to us." But if irrationality is not "*apparent*" to one who is "*choosing*" to be irrational, then irrationality cannot be characterized as a "choice." Binswanger also recognizes that "what we believe is not a primary choice" but "depends upon the nature and extent of our thinking. The ideas one accepts will be different depending upon whether or not one thinks them through logically and rationally. The *content* of our conclusions depends on the nature of the processes that reach those conclusions" (7). However, if the rationality of these processes is not a conscious choice, as he acknowledges, then how can Objectivism consider one's conclusions any more reliable under free will than under determinism?

Consider especially Branden's argument that free will "is not an issue of the degree of man's intelligence or knowledge. *Nor is it an issue of the productiveness or success of any particular thinking process*" (Branden 1969, 39; emphasis mine). "The choice to think (not the *process* of thinking, but the *choice* to think) and the process of focusing his mind are an indivisible action of which man is the causal agent" (41). So, if, according to Branden, we are not the causal agents of our *thinking processes*—if we do not freely *choose* the validity of these processes—then how can we consider them a reliable guide to knowledge? Doesn't the Objectivist view of free will succumb to the very criticism that it levies against determinism? And if not, then how

can *determinism* be said to succumb to it?

I have digressed a good deal from Machan's original argument, but I have done so in order to relate the argument to Objectivism and to show that we do not freely choose either the content of our ideas or the cognitive processes that lead to them. But this in no way impugns the trustworthiness of our conclusions. In fact, if our beliefs were due to an act of free choice, then that itself would make them untrustworthy, since they would then bear no necessary correlation to the facts of reality.

Machan introduces another epistemological "dilemma" to which he thinks determinism is vulnerable. The determinist says that we "ought" to believe in determinism rather than free will. According to Machan, however, "if one ought to believe in or do something, this implies that one has a choice in the matter; it implies that we can make a choice as to whether determinism or initiative [free will] is a better doctrine. This, then, presupposes that we are free" (Machan 2000, 20).

Does it? I submit that whatever "choice" we have concerning whether determinism or free will is a better doctrine is not the kind that is relevant to free will. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Machan "ought" to believe in determinism. Could he simply *choose* to believe in it, given his present understanding of the issue? Of course not. Yet that doesn't prevent me from saying that he "ought" to believe in it, *if* he is to hold a correct view of the matter. It doesn't prevent me from judging him as mistaken. And, of course, the reverse would be true from Machan's perspective. Even if I ought to believe in free will, it would not follow that I can simply choose to believe in it, given *my* present understanding of the issue.

Or consider this example: Suppose that a socialist enters a voting booth to cast his ballot. We can certainly say that he "ought" to choose the libertarian candidate over the socialist, but is he free to make that choice, given his political orientation? Certainly not. He could no more vote for the libertarian candidate under those circumstances than I could vote for the socialist candidate, given *my* political orientation. So what then do we mean when we say that a socialist "ought" to vote libertarian? We mean—and can only mean

—that *if* he is to choose the best candidate, *then* he ought to vote libertarian.

To be sure, we do assume that *if* the voter were to understand the fallacies in his socialist viewpoint and were sufficiently motivated to vote libertarian, *then* he could make the appropriate choice. So, there is a sense in which "ought" does imply "can," but it is not the sense in which "ought" implies free will—i.e., the sense in which it implies the ability to choose otherwise under the circumstances.

Anyone who has ever made a mistake in trying to solve a problem or in arriving at a conclusion knows that although he "ought" to have gotten a different answer (if he were to think correctly), he could not simply have *chosen* to avoid his mistake. If he could, then he certainly would have, since his goal was to arrive at the correct answer.

It is the failure to recognize that errors of knowledge are involuntary that causes Machan to argue that "*criticism*" makes no sense if we lack free will. He states that if determinism were true,

[o]ne's insistence on following certain standards would . . . be the result of nothing more than certain forces that make one insist on it. Those who would deny those standards would have as valid a ground for that as those who embrace them. All propositions, in the end, would turn out to be equally sound, equally true, which would produce intellectual chaos. (140)

Well, certain forces *do* "make one insist on it," don't they? I am insisting on my viewpoint, and Machan is insisting on his, not because we've *chosen* to do so, but because our respective understanding (or misunderstanding) of the issue leaves us *no choice* but to believe as we do. Does that mean that Machan has as valid a ground for embracing his position as I have for embracing mine? Does it mean that both our positions are equally sound, equally true? No, of course not. Clearly, one of us is right and the other is wrong, despite the fact that, given the differences in our respective understanding of the issue, we have no choice but to disagree.

Machan says that "disagreement seems to make no sense in deterministic terms," because "people faced with the exact same evidence [and] presented with the identical arguments, reach different conclusions" (53). But the difference in their respective conclusions can easily be explained by the fact that their *understanding* of the evidence and of the arguments is different. And that understanding is not something they freely choose to accept or reject, any more than their conclusions are something that they freely choose to accept or reject. Here Machan's position is clearly at odds with Objectivism, which holds only that we choose to think or to refrain from thinking, and that our subsequent thought processes *determine* our beliefs.

In keeping with his view that normative concepts imply free will, Machan states: "There are no such things as guilt, regret, apology, pride or sense of achievement, if there is no free will" (89). Machan may seem to have a point when it comes to guilt, for why would a person have guilty feelings if he didn't believe that he could have chosen otherwise under the circumstances? But the fact that he *believed* that he could have chosen otherwise doesn't *prove* that he could have. For example, a person who is too afraid to enter a burning building to save a neighbor's child may later have guilty feelings for not doing so. But that does not prove that he could have overcome his fear under the circumstances. He made what he thought was the best decision at the time, even though he now believes that he should have acted differently, given the grief that he is suffering from the child's death.

Even if he now blames himself for his failure to act, because he believes in retrospect that it was a risk worth taking, the fact is that he did not think so at the time, or else he would have acted differently. Despite his regrets, he acted on his judgment and could not have acted otherwise.

This brings me to Machan's second point, namely, that regret presupposes free will. Here, I think, it is even less obvious that free will is involved, for we regret actions that we clearly could not have avoided taking. For example, I regretted investing in a stock after it fell. Could I have avoided the investment at the time I made it? No, because I didn't realize the stock was going to fall. Had I expected it

to, I wouldn't have made the investment. Regret does not mean that one could have acted differently under the circumstances; it simply reflects a *desire* to have done so.

The same goes for an "apology." I may speak in such a way that I offend someone without realizing it. Once I discover that I have offended him, I will apologize, not because I could have avoided offending him, but because I want to make clear that offending him was not my intention. Or I may have *intended* to offend him, but later regret my decision, in which case, I will apologize for it even though I had no reason to avoid the action at the time I took it.

What about "pride" or "a sense of achievement"? Does either of these imply free will? No, for they are simply an automatic response to one's conviction of having accomplished something important. The fact that one's accomplishment is an inexorable consequence of one's interest, motivation and talent does not minimize its importance or detract from one's having produced it.

Machan says that we can observe our own freedom introspectively—that our willingness to criticize our choices implies that we believe we could have acted otherwise. For instance, we often say,

"Damn it, I didn't make the right choice," or "I neglected to do something." . . . [W]e see ourselves as free, as when we fail to heed a doctor's advice to favor a foot. . . . The same occurs when we speak and use the wrong word or when we write and fail to express ourselves properly, misspell words, or deploy bad grammar. (22)

The examples Machan mentions here could easily be explained as inadvertent or unintentional mistakes that we later regret making, because we didn't think of it at the time or because we didn't realize that we were making a bad choice. Such examples by themselves are not sufficient to prove free will. Nor does it follow that if we choose an action that we later view as inappropriate, we could have chosen otherwise at the time. All it means is that hindsight is twenty-twenty, and that if we had viewed the previous choice from our present perspective, we would have chosen differently.

Machan says that when we realize that people have free will, we can understand

why social engineering and government regulation and regimentation do not work, why there are so many individual and cultural differences, why people can be wrong, why they can disagree with each other, and so forth. It is because people are free to do so, because they are not fixed in some pattern as are cats, dogs, orangutans, and birds. (24)

Admittedly, people are free to differ in the sense that they are not forced by nature to act in the same way and to develop the same culture, but that doesn't mean that they are free in the sense that they have free will. It doesn't mean that they could just as well have *chosen* to agree with each other and, therefore, to avoid being wrong. Clearly, they could not. Nor does it mean that they could have *chosen* to develop the same cultural and behavioral patterns, despite their different experiences, influences and values.

Machan says that the "complexity, diversity, and individuation of human beings is best explained by the fact that human beings are free rather than determined" (25), as if environment and biology had nothing to do with it. We know that the cognitive potential of human beings is far greater and more sophisticated than that of the lower animals, and this, combined with differences in environment and native temperament, could well explain why human beings are more diverse than animals.

Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Machan invokes the common thesis that without free will, people could not express genuine praise or blame (26-27). However, we praise people for achievement and success just as much as for making the right choices! For example, an athlete may be praised for winning a race, whereas another athlete who tried just as hard, but finished last, gets no praise. The difference is not that the winner made better choices than the loser, but that his *performance* was better. The

difference in performance had nothing to do with any difference in choice; it had to do solely with a difference in ability or talent. It is that successful display of talent that caused the winning athlete to be praised over the loser.

An author writes a best seller, for which she receives high praise. Another author puts just as much effort into his novel, which never gets published; he receives no praise. Again, the difference is due not to the fact that the best-selling novelist made better, more conscientious choices, but that she produced a better selling novel than the unpublished author did. The praise she receives is for her success—for her accomplishment—not for the work that led to that accomplishment, since the unpublished author put just as much work into his novel, but received no praise for it.³

What about blame? Does it require free will? No more so than praise does. After all, we blame people for transgressing what we believe to be objective moral principles, even when they don't share these principles. For example, feminists blame conservative legislators for outlawing abortion, even though the legislators could not have done otherwise, given their "pro-life" convictions. Conservatives blame liberals for supporting abortion, even though the liberals could not have done otherwise, given their pro-choice convictions.⁴

Again, there is admittedly a sense in which "ought" does imply "can," the sense in which a person "can" choose to do what he "ought" to once he understands why and is sufficiently *motivated* to choose it. Clearly, if one ought to do something, then one must be capable of choosing it, provided one recognizes it as a value. Otherwise, it is not something one "ought" to choose. As Rand (1961, 2) observes, morality "is a code of values to guide man's choices and actions." If one is incapable of choosing a particular alternative even when one recognizes it as *worth* choosing, then no moral code can prescribe it.

Machan makes a noteworthy observation about a double standard that is often held by environmental determinists who absolve smokers of responsibility for their addiction while blaming the tobacco companies for creating that addiction. On the premises of environmental determinism, he notes, the tobacco companies are

just as much a product of their environment as the smokers are of theirs (Machan 2000, 32). Here, Machan is clearly correct. There is an appalling lack of consistency among liberals who hold this version of determinism, which is simply a rationalization of their hatred for big business.

Of course, everyone must be held responsible for his choices, including both smokers and "Big Tobacco" (if the latter should be found guilty of fraud). But this ascription of responsibility is not incompatible with soft determinism, any more than holding an anti-abortionist legislator responsible for outlawing abortion is incompatible with his being unable to vote otherwise, given his political and moral convictions. To hold someone "responsible" for his actions is simply to recognize that they reflect his consciously held values.

Machan says that people can be held morally responsible for their bad conduct, because, he states, "[m]ost of those who do wrong are voluntarily yielding to the temptation to evade facts, to let themselves be motivated by various strong emotions, and to fail to resist flawed ideas as to how they ought to proceed in life" (140).

Is this a true characterization of voluntary action? Well, it is certainly true that people can choose to act on strong emotions, but can they choose to evade facts or to resist flawed ideas? What does it mean to evade facts? If it means to ignore them when one knows they are relevant to the validity of one's conclusions, then it is difficult to see how one could do this consciously and willfully. One would be drawing conclusions that one knows are questionable in the very act of supposing them to be reliable, which is not psychologically possible. This is not to deny that people can evade facts under the influence of strong emotions, but they do not do so consciously and willfully, i.e., with full knowledge of what they are doing.

Nor can they resist a flawed idea if they don't *recognize* it as flawed. And they certainly *would not* recognize it as flawed, if they believe that it is true. Conversely, if they do recognize it as flawed—if they do not believe that it is true—then it will *have* no cognitive appeal that needs to be "resisted." So in neither case does it make sense to talk of someone's "resisting" a flawed idea!

By contrast, Machan states that "[i]f someone disagrees [with

one's argument], the implication is that one has argued badly. If someone agrees, the implication is that one has argued correctly. One is held responsible for either" (142). Since I don't agree with Machan's argument, does that mean that he has argued badly and therefore irresponsibly? By this standard, the validity of one's argument would depend on someone else's recognition of it, not on the soundness of the argument itself. In any case, assuming that one argues conscientiously, it is difficult to see how one could be held morally responsible for someone else's disagreement.

Moreover, what happened to the listener's responsibility for "resisting bad ideas," which Machan claims to be a voluntary act for which the person is morally responsible? If the listener were acting irresponsibly by failing to "resist bad ideas," then how would his disagreement imply that one is making a bad argument? Clearly, it would not.

But these are minor inconsistencies in Machan's theory. The major problem with it is that he attributes moral responsibility to areas that are simply not governed by conscious, voluntary action. This is not to say that people shouldn't be held morally responsible for their conduct. But the question is: What is the *point* of holding someone morally responsible? What *purpose* does it serve?

The answer is that moral judgment is a means of assessing someone's character, so that we can predict his future conduct. When we deal with people, we need to know with whom we're dealing, just as we need to know the character of anything with which we deal. Judging a person according to his choices enables us to do that. To hold someone "morally responsible" for an action is simply to recognize that the person's action was deliberately chosen—that it reflected his consciously held values.

For example, suppose that an anti-abortionist bombs a Planned Parenthood clinic, because he views it as contributing to the murder of innocent children. In other words, suppose he considers his action morally justified and is so committed to it that he could no more have avoided it than he could avoid endorsing anti-abortionist candidates in the next election. In that case, would it make sense to absolve him of criminal liability? Of course not! Despite—in fact, *because of*—his

action's having been determined by his consciously held values, we should waste no time in convicting him of a crime and putting him behind bars. Why? Because incarceration not only deters crime but also removes a dangerous criminal from society—a criminal who values crime and will be motivated to commit similar crimes in the future.

In fact, the deterrent effects of blame and punishment make more sense under a model of soft determinism, in which motivation determines choice, than they do under a model of free will. If the motive to avoid blame and punishment did not in some way determine the decision to abstain from crime, then moral and criminal sanctions would be a waste of time and resources.⁵

Free Will and Social Science

Machan argues that classical liberalism or libertarianism depends on a belief in free will and on "the primary significance of making room for its exercise in human communities." By contrast, he sees contemporary liberalism and its belief in "positive freedom" as dependent on a belief that human nature is "basically inert" and governed by the "ontology of classical mechanics" (116).

But for a soft determinist who *rejects* the "ontology of classical mechanics," it does not follow that political freedom is of little or no value. On the contrary, the freedom to act on one's own judgment is, for him, of paramount importance. If one's action is determined by one's value judgments, then the only way that those values can be realized is under a system that recognizes one's right to freedom of action.

Moreover, if initiative arises from and is determined by one's motivation, then what better system to provide that motivation than free enterprise and the profit motive! If any system is incompatible with the motivational premises of soft determinism, it is the disincentives and unrewarding fetters of statism. Unless our action is determined by incentives, a system that affords those incentives (in the form of profit and loss) will be no more productive than a system that does not.

Machan attacks the "scientism" of classical liberalism, which he says views human action from an amoral, subjective, value-free approach. "The crucial point about scientism," he states, "is its thoroughgoing determinism, its denial that human beings are agents, its relegation of human reasoning into service of the human passions, so that cognition and self-regulation in light of understanding play no role in the explanation of human action" (131–32). Machan cites George Stigler as an example of a classical liberal who, as a determinist, finds it impossible to condemn the existing order including all of its evils, since, according to Stigler, we live in that wonderful Leibnizian paradise—"the best of all possible worlds." Stigler is reported to have defended this view before the Mount Pelerin society. (134).

However, the fact that we could not have done otherwise under the circumstances does not imply, as Stigler believes, that moral condemnation or moral prescription is irrelevant. If people's ideas and motivations determine their actions, then convincing them to change their minds and to pursue a different course of action can create the very improvements that one considers desirable.

In fact, if ideas did not, at least to some extent, determine people's actions, then philosophy itself would be irrelevant. Why bother to convince someone that he is mistaken if doing so can have no effect on his behavior? Why try to convince the socialist or the liberal that capitalism is the better system, if doing so does not cause him to think, act or vote differently? If people's actions are not determined by antecedent causes, then moral suasion and exhortation are pointless exercises in futility.

Machan does make a valid criticism of scientism, when he says that we cannot regard human beings as we do laboratory rats—that different methods and principles of science are required for dealing with man than for dealing with non-rational animals (137). He stresses that thinking, which is a unique attribute of man, is not automatic and that people have to will it (139). In this respect, he is in agreement with Objectivism.

Here, the compatibilist, who sees no contradiction between determined conduct and willed conduct, would also agree. He would

simply say that one has to understand the value of willed behavior in a given situation, if one is to exercise it. In other words, one has to be *motivated* to make the right choices, a motivation that can arise from one's *appreciation of the value* of exerting mental effort.

Machan cites Roger W. Sperry as demonstrating that there is a physiological basis for freedom of the will, which is the power of the cerebral cortex to govern the rest of the brain, especially when the lower brain might incline one in a different direction. The cerebral cortex can perform this function by altering our inclinations. "This is what is called self-restraint," says Machan. "This is resisting temptation" (139-40).

Again, the compatibilist would have no quarrel with this assessment. But he would say that it makes little sense to talk about resisting temptation without recognizing a motive for doing so. For example, if one is on a diet, one will resist the temptation to eat that piece of chocolate cake, but only because one recognizes the importance of staying on the diet. One's motivation to lose weight *outweighs* one's desire to cheat. Yes, the cerebral cortex monitors the lower brain, but only in accordance with its own higher purposes, values and goals, which themselves *determine* its regulatory function.

Machan observes that in drawing a parallel between biological evolution and social evolution, Hayek applies a methodology to the social sciences that pertains only to the biological sciences. In so doing, Hayek commits the very fallacy of scientism that he criticizes in others (152). Hayek also believes that institutions and ideologies prevail only because they have survival value. But if this were true, says Machan, then Hayek's ideology would itself exist only because it has survival value and not because it is rationally justified—in which case that ideology would be inconsistent with its own justification (154-55). This, of course, is a variation on Machan's earlier theme that determinism is self-defeating. Here, however, his argument has more going for it, if only because Hayek favors natural selection over reason as a means of knowledge. After all, insofar as it purports to be rational, any attempt to deny reason as a means of knowledge is self-defeating.

Moreover, says Machan, if we are guided by rules and laws that

have emerged through a process of natural selection—laws that we follow apart from our own choice—"then to call on us to act in one way rather than another is futile. We have no say in these matters" (156-57). Accordingly, Hayek's conception of human action leaves no room for morality or normative political theory, even though he regards liberty as a political ideal.

As an alternative to Hayek, whose views rest on environmental determinism and Kantian epistemology, Machan offers a case for liberty that is based on free will and rationality. He contests Hayek's anti-rationalism by pointing out that reason is on the side of freedom, and that central planners who dictate how people live their lives are not promoting reason but opposing it through an interference with the rational actions of others (167).

In an interview with *Reason* magazine (February 1975), Hayek claims that tying politics to ethics is incompatible with the view that we ought to be free to make our own choices. But, as Machan observes, without an ethical foundation, one cannot give liberty the normative support it requires. Nor can liberty be defended on the basis of ethical relativism, for if no values are superior to any others, then neither is liberty, in which case, one has no reason to prefer liberty to central planning (Machan 2000, 170-72).

Economist George Stigler has argued that it is only market forces—supply, demand, the availability of resources, etc.—not abstract ideas, that have a measurable impact on human action. However, as Machan notes somewhat ironically, Stigler's own economic views have been influenced by the ideas of Hobbes, Hume and Adam Smith. So why couldn't different schools of economic thought have a similar influence on public policy (185)? Conversely, if Stigler and others like him view "market forces" as *including* the influence of ideology, then the point that it is only market forces that have a measurable effect on human action becomes so broad as to be worthless as an explanation of human action (190).

Machan also sees a similar problem with the "public choice" school of economics, which holds that, despite their claims to be disinterested public servants, government bureaucrats are in fact pursuing their own private interests just as much as any business

person or consumer is. Machan says that one cannot justify public choice theory simply on the premise, advanced by Milton Friedman and other economists,⁶ that everyone, including alleged public servants, pursue only their own "private interest," because that makes public choice theory vacuous and tautological. If "private interest" simply means whatever is of concern to someone, then a bureaucrat who pursues his private interest would *not* necessarily be ignoring the public interest. If public choice theory is interpreted solely in accordance with psychological egoism, then it says nothing unusual and has no explanatory power (188).

What Machan says is certainly correct. However, I think he gives public choice theory an unsympathetic read. To be sure, he may simply be responding to the more extreme versions of the school. But the theory, as I understand it, simply says that when one assesses the motives of public officials, one must recognize that they are pursuing their own welfare as much as, if not more than, the welfare of those whom they claim to be serving. Before the advent of public choice theory, business owners were presumed to be serving their own welfare, and government officials, the public welfare. What public choice theory sought to do was to evaluate the motivations of public officials with the same realism that economists had hitherto been applying to consumers and business owners. The belief that government bureaucrats are nothing but disinterested public servants, whereas private businessmen are greedy, self-serving utility maximizers was a dangerous myth that begged to be corrected.

This does not, of course, imply that the only motivation a public official can have is lining his own pockets, or that none is motivated by political idealism. Machan is quite correct that moral ideals do motivate the behavior of politicians. Nevertheless, personal fame and fortune can, and often do, play a significant role in political ambition. For further details, see the previous administration.

Machan's fundamental point, of course, is that ideas matter, and that economic man is not motivated by subterranean urges and passions that are immune from the influence of philosophy and ideology. In this, he is certainly correct. But it is also important to recognize that determinism is not incompatible with the influence of

ideas on human behavior. On the contrary, ideas matter more under a model of soft determinism in which human action is motivated by the beliefs people hold than under a model of free will in which people are free to act independently of those beliefs.

Conclusion

I have been highly critical of this book's central thesis, namely, that free will exists, that it determines the content of our beliefs, and that it is a prerequisite for reason, morality, and political freedom. Nevertheless, I believe that Machan does make some telling criticisms of conventional versions of determinism that dismiss self-responsibility and deny the impact of abstract ideas on human action. He also does a good job of exposing the philosophical flaws in such Nobel laureate economists as Hayek and Stigler, while making the point, too often neglected by libertarians, that objective morality is a precondition of political liberty. Despite its shortcomings, *Initiative* is a readable book that contains some important and perceptive insights on contemporary free-market ideology.

Notes

1. In his endorsement, Binswanger writes: "This is a very advanced and very brilliant work on the philosophy of logic, in the Aristotelian tradition. First published in 1906, it is a high-water mark in the field, showing how much we have lost in the ensuing decades. In a no-nonsense, almost diffident style, Joseph proceeds to tackle the most profound issues with the level-headed, fact-centered seriousness of a first-hand thinker. This is a challenging, technical book by a great mind, a book that will reward the advanced student of logic who gives it the careful study it deserves." This endorsement appears on the back cover of the newly reissued 2000 edition of Joseph's *Introduction to Logic*, published by The Paper Tiger, Inc.

2. This argument may have gotten its inspiration from a passage in Chapter 3 of Immanuel Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* in which he states: "[W]e cannot possibly conceive of a reason as being directed from outside in regards to its judgments; for in that case, the subject would attribute the determination of his power of judgment not to his reason, but to an impulsion. Reason must look upon itself as the author of its own principles independently of the power of alien influences." The argument that determinism is self-defeating has also been defended in contemporary philosophic literature by Taylor 1939 and 1942; Kenner 1964, 247-48; Jordan 1969; and Boyle 1972.

3. It is true that we also praise people for making the right choices (e.g., for simply giving a good effort). But the point is that an act of praise is simply an expression of approval and/or recognition for what the person did, whether for the effort that he made or for his superior performance. It does not imply that he could have done otherwise.

4. There is also a sense in which to "blame" someone means to fault him for acting against his *own* moral principles. However, this is not the only, or even the most common, use of the term. Few of us, for example, would "blame" the Nazis for not adhering more faithfully to their own ideology. More likely, we would blame them for *implementing* it.

5. Some may question if punishment deters crime. But the deterrent effects of law enforcement were never more dramatically illustrated than in the 1920s when the police went on strike in Chicago. On the first day of the strike, eight banks were robbed simultaneously. The possibility of being apprehended and put behind bars was something that would-be bank robbers took very seriously indeed! It is true, of course, that the prospect of prison does not deter all potential criminals. In fact, some are so incapable of coping with life on the outside that they *prefer* incarceration to a life of independence and freedom.

6. Cf., Friedman's statement that "every individual serves his own private interest . . . The great Saints of history have served their 'private interest' just as the most money grubbing miser has served his interest. The *private interest* is whatever it is that drives an individual" (Friedman 1976, 11).

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