

Discussion

Reply to William Dwyer

Free Will Reconsidered

Tibor R. Machan

I thank William Dwyer for taking the time to review my book—he didn't have to do it, so I am grateful to him. Here I will focus on the central elements of his review.

At the very start, Dwyer tells us that he thinks “that if I choose 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” (Dwyer 2001, 83). Well I do not share this thought, for—not because of—two reasons.

First, making a choice in the sense in which I identify that act—namely, to take the initiative to apply one's mind to figuring things out in the world—does not require some given, prior reason for me to have done this, not in any specific sense other than that that is the kind of being I am, one that relates to the world via thinking about it and acting in line with the results. This is what I consider a *first* choice, one that can be made repeatedly—as when one keeps in focus, pays close attention to the world, is continuously awake to it. But it is so fundamental that no prior knowledge is required for it. And there is good precedent for thinking that no such prior knowledge is required for making such a choice; the criminal law, in general, assumes that ignorance is no excuse. This means that some matters we ought to come to know and if we have not, that is our fault and we can be held responsible for the negligence involved in not having come to know what we should have come to know. This is evident also in ordinary life, apart from the law, when folks who have failed to consider something blamed themselves by saying, “Damn it, I

didn't think," without then saying, "Because I believed that not thinking would be justified."

Second, a reason is not anything like a cause, some variable or factor that moves something to end up in a certain state. This is because a reason is a conviction or idea formed by the agent who might not have formed it. So it is the agent who forms a reason for which he or she might take an action.¹

I *may* reflect on some issue and form an idea which then I *may* use to derive some additional idea, including the idea of doing something I *may* then go ahead and do. At each turn, I am free to suspend the thinking process, although I may well cultivate my character so that this is less and less likely. So the reason didn't make me do anything, I did.

To identify reasons with causes is to beg a question that has been at issue in the discussion of free will. As I suggest above, however, it is most reasonable to hold that a reason is not a cause—it is *sui generis*, the grounding of action in a human being's mind, as it were, not something that is replicated elsewhere in the world as causes are.²

Let me focus now on Dwyer's frequent use of a particular locution. He tells us several times that what I explain or give an account of in terms of the free choices people make could "easily be explained" by reference to various causes (96). I doubt this, very seriously. His claim to this effect is at best question begging and assumes that his own preferred compatibilism has already been shown to be right.

Indeed, Dwyer gives no general reason to think that what is explainable by reference to initiative can be given an (event-)causal explanation. Instead, he offers a mere promissory note, as do most determinists who say that what hasn't yet been explained by reference to various causes will, in time, be so explained—say, the variations of Bach's compositions or the individuality of nearly all major painters. In the position I consider correct, there is indexed much that renders these phenomena and millions of similar ones explainable (in the sense of giving a coherent, rational account of them).

I want to reiterate the point, also, that objective knowledge is unexplained by reference to non-agent causes because then its

important ingredient of being independent of preconceptions or prejudices would be missing. If my conclusion about O. J. Simpson's guilt is caused by X—some factor other than *my own initiated reflection on the evidence and arguments* regarding the issue—then this conclusion is something I did not reach independently and it must be arbitrary, indeed, not *my own* conclusion at all.

Let me now turn to Dwyer's preferred alternative, soft determinism, which is the one championed by the contemporary philosopher of choice in these matters, Daniel C. Dennett.³

For compatibilists and Dwyer, soft determinism tells us that as we understand the conscious world, it will be possible to have a causal explanation of human conduct, just as it would be the agent's responsibility to have engaged in that conduct. But it is a myth that such a doctrine could be right—no *bona fide*, ultimate personal responsibility can be attached to behavior that is, let's say, softly determined. And Dennett and company do admit that the will isn't free from the impact of various forces that ultimately make it do what it does. In my terms, this means that a person, whose will is but a theoretical starting point of action, isn't free as he or she acts other than in the sense that *no other person* is doing what he or she does. This isn't a defense of any kind of free action at all and thus not of any kind of moral responsibility that credits the agent as *the* source of right or wrong conduct. Absent the possibility of so crediting a person, the idea of moral credit or blame is a *non-sequitur*.

A better idea of soft determinism is just what its major proponents, such as Hume, had in mind. This is that instead of some fact(s) or event(s) causing one's behavior, some fact(s) or event(s) causes the will to acquire certain attributes, which then cause one's behavior. This might be envisioned along lines of a hammer that does not directly strike a nail but, instead, strikes a piece of rubber that is placed between it and the nail (say, when one wishes to protect the precious metal of which the nail is made). The nail moves, however, because of the hammer's striking of the rubber, which then pushes the nail.

The will that Hume and others position between the cause and the behavior takes the place of the piece of rubber. And clearly this

does not introduce any kind of independent agency for the nail, despite its being a step removed from the hammer in consequence of it. Similarly, the will that has been shaped by prior facts or events causes the behavior and provides no—indeed, prevents any— independent agency to account for it.

Once soft determinism is seen as every bit the determinism that hard determinism is, it is no longer plausible to see it combining the crucial aspects of the sort of determinism that excludes free will— namely, efficient causal explanation of behavior, and genuine freedom of choice—namely, the agent's own causal independence rendering him or her responsible for the ensuing conduct.

The only compatibilist view that makes sense is one that sees the human being as the determining agent or cause, if you will, in accounting for that human being's conduct. In that sense, I am a determinist, along the lines proposed by Roger W. Sperry and some other agent causation theorists of free will.⁴ The nature of the beings we are, as volitionally conscious entities, does determine—in the neo-Aristotelian fashion Dwyer mentions but for opposite purposes— what we *can* do. But in the case of each human individual, it is that individual who will determine what it *will* do.

Several minor points need now be touched upon so as to complete this brief response.

Someone's interest in something is not a sufficient cause for doing anything—one may well choose to resist this interest (as, indeed, most responsible people do with many of their fleeting or even persistent interests). This same goes, also, for desires and other so-called motives. (The language of motivation is highly influenced by deterministic analysis since it arose out of the attempt to reconcile accounts of human conduct with accounts of the behavior of physical objects, as in Hobbes.)

A choice of the sort that is at issue in the free will vs. determinism dispute needs to be distinguished from a choice that is at issue in selecting one item or course from many alternatives. In the latter case, knowledge of the various alternatives is already required; in the former, there are only two alternatives and no prior knowledge is required in order to end up with one or the other. That is why such

a choice is basic, a matter of initiative or creation. (It is precisely because no such prior knowledge exists that, as Ayn Rand argues, failure to make that choice constitutes opting out of the moral game and, indeed, life itself! Once the choice to think is made, then it follows that one has signed up for a human life, as it were, and this is why it would be immoral to evade thinking henceforth—it would be a sort of breach of an oath.)

Animals may exhibit a kind of self-determination but, because of their type of consciousness, the self that is performing the determination is understood to be the result, *without remainder*, of the interaction of their biological make-up and their perceptions of the constituents of their environment. (It is interesting that Dwyer does not note in his discussion of this point something that he still acknowledges: namely, that the mere possibility of self-determination does not establish that something is actually determining its own conduct.)

There is much else that could be discussed but I have tried to do most of it in my book (Machan 2000). I hope that those interested in the debate will consult what I wrote there, rather than only a review of it.⁵

I want to conclude by simply noting that while Rand has inspired much of my thinking in these and other matters, both her work and her students' work must be treated independently of mine. There are innumerable nuances in this discussion; some of us have dealt with these points quite differently. We need to *choose* the best account of the free will position and its understanding of human conduct.

Notes

1. A very helpful account of the distinction can be found in Searle 2001, 61ff. As Searle notes: "In explaining actions by giving reasons, we do not normally cite causally sufficient conditions. . . . If the causal antecedents are insufficient to determine the action, then how can citing them explain why this action occurred rather than some other action that was also possible, given the same set of antecedent causes?" Searle goes on to provide a very powerful account of the issue which, of course, I cannot reproduce here. Indeed, Searle's is a very helpful account of practical reasoning, with the individual human being's rationality seen as, among other things, the initiating ground for why one acts and can—if one makes the effort—carry out long-range commitments. None of this can be given an account solely in terms of the billiard ball or even soft-determinist-type causal system unless

one construes that account as, so to speak, having its cake and eating it (as I explain below).

2. It is my position that the perplexing nature of the free will issue and of the nature of meaning, intention, conceptual consciousness and so forth, have a lot to do with the fact that these are unique features of the world, emerging with human life mainly. So it is very difficult to compare them with other phenomena that we know throughout nature. (This is perhaps one of the main reasons it is so tempting for many—for example, Plato, Descartes, and Kant—to introduce notions dependent upon the supernatural when this topic arises.)

3. See especially Dennett 1984.

4. See, among others, Deutsch 1997, 338–39, and Brown 1994, 64.

5. For a very thorough and fascinating collection of essays on this topic, see Libet, Freeman and Southerland 1999. In my view, it is Libet who comes closest to the right solution to the problems involved, in his “Do We Have Free Will?”

References

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