

Discussion

Rejoinder to George Lyons and Tibor R. Machan

Free Will and Determinism

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Tibor Machan thanks me for reviewing his book, stating (contra my determinist metaphysics) that I didn't "have" to do it. Of course, I didn't "have" to do it, inasmuch as no one required me to; in that respect, one could say that I did it of my own "free will." But there is another sense in which the determinist would say that I did indeed "have" to do it, given my values at the time I made the choice. Whether or not those values could have been different is another matter. The advocate of free will would say that they could, whereas the determinist would say that they could not.

I wrote "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). Machan (2002, 215) says that he does "not share this thought, for—not because of—two reasons." Here, Machan implies that there is a legitimate distinction between doing something "for" a reason and doing it "because of" a reason. But to do something "for" a reason *is* to do it "because of" a reason. There is no valid distinction between "for" and "because of" in this context. For example, a prosecutor might say to the jury, "Ladies and gentlemen, I submit that the defendant killed her husband *because* she was smitten by a jealous rage."

Moreover, it makes no sense to say that one does something *for* a reason, if the reason is not in some sense a causal antecedent of the action. If there is no causal connection between the reason and the action—if the reason can exist without the action's occurring—then the reason has no motivating effect on the action, in which case, it makes no sense to say that the action is taken *for* that reason.

Machan says that “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 . . .” (215). But observe that the reason is contained in Machan’s very statement. One makes a choice to apply one’s mind, he says, “to figuring things out in the world.” Surely, the goal—that of “figuring things out in the world”—is in this case the *reason* for applying one’s mind. Absent any such reason, one’s choice would be arbitrary and nonsensical.

He adds: “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” (215). To say that no prior knowledge is required for making such a choice strikes me as exceedingly strange. What about the knowledge that the choice is worth making as a means of “figuring things out in the world”? Moreover, how could one be held responsible for making a choice that one had no prior knowledge one ought to make?

Yes, the criminal law says that “ignorance is no excuse,” but what that *means* is that we have the capacity for discovering what the law is, and will be held accountable for exercising that capacity. The law assumes that we at least know that it requires us to become duly informed. I would not be held responsible for something that I could not reasonably have known or understood.

“This [accountability],” says Machan, “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” (215). But it is considered “negligence” only because we are assumed to have *known* that we must acquire that knowledge.

Machan writes: “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’” (215–16). What I am expressing when I say, “Damn it, I didn’t think” is regret that it didn’t occur to me to give an issue the thought it required. But, as I stated in my review, this in no way implies freedom of the will or the ability to have acted differently under the circumstances.

“Second,” says Machan, “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” (216). First of all, even if a reason might not have been formed by the agent who formed it (which, as a determinist, I would deny), it does not follow that it is not a cause, if it then *causes* someone to draw a particular conclusion or to take a particular action. Its status as a cause is not affected by how the moral agent acquires it—whether deterministically or freely—but only by how it functions once he *does* acquire it.

Secondly, to say that a reason might not have been formed by the agent who formed it implies that reasons are chosen for no prior reason; it implies that they are ultimately arbitrary. Leonard Peikoff (1991, 65) endorses this view when he writes that man “does choose a course of behavior for a reason—but this does not make the course determined . . . , because man himself decides what are to be the governing reasons.” This, of course, means that his decision is itself independent of a reason. Contrary to Machan (and Peikoff), a reason is indeed determined—determined by one’s understanding (or misunderstanding) of reality and of its relationship to one’s values.

Machan (2002, 216) goes on to say that the reason for an action didn’t “make” one take the action. Of course, it didn’t “make” one take the action, because what we mean by “*make* us do something,” is “force us to act contrary to our values—contrary to what we would have done, had we not been forced to act otherwise.” A reason necessitates our action only in the sense that it provides the motivation for our choosing one alternative *rather than* another.

Machan addresses my statement that the “free choices” people make could “easily be explained” by reference to various causes (Dwyer 2001, 96). He says he doubts this very seriously, and argues that I beg the question by assuming “that [my] own preferred

compatibilism has already been shown to be right" (Machan 2002, 216). I wouldn't say that it begs the question to argue that an alternative explanation is possible, if the case for free will has not been conclusively established. That would be like saying that it begs the question to argue that a murder could have been committed by someone else if the evidence is not sufficient to prove that the defendant committed it.

Machan writes: "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*" (216–17).

But, as I pointed out in my review, there is no incompatibility between self-initiated reflection and causal necessity in human beings, any more than there is between self-initiated motion and causal necessity in animals. And even if my reflection on the evidence and arguments was not "initiated" by me in the sense of being set in motion independently of any antecedent causes, there is still no reason to regard it as unreliable if it is caused and necessitated by my interest in discovering the truth. Granted, if my conclusion about O. J. Simpson's guilt is caused by some factor other than my concern for truth, then there is reason to view it as unreliable. But there is nothing in soft determinism that says that I cannot arrive at a conclusion based on a rational and objective evaluation of the evidence.

On the contrary, only if my conclusion were *determined* by my character and judgment could it properly be considered mine. If it were the result of free will—if it could have been otherwise—then it would bear no necessary connection to my identity, and would not, therefore, be my conclusion at all. Far from free will's being required for the authorship of one's conclusions, it is in fact determinism that is required for it.

Machan says that "no *bona fide*, ultimate personal responsibility

can be attached to behavior that is, let's say, softly determined" (217). If anything, the opposite is true. What do we mean by saying that someone is morally responsible for an action? We mean that he chose the action with full knowledge of what he was doing. For example, a fundamentalist Islamic militant who is plotting to bring down the "Great Satan" thinks he is doing God's work. Given his fanatical beliefs, he could not have chosen differently; he could not have chosen to respect and honor the American people. But we would still be justified in arresting him for conspiring to do violence against us, for he knew what he was doing, and would have followed through with his plans if allowed to do so.

In that respect, we do hold him "responsible" for his actions, even though we recognize that, given his beliefs and his religious indoctrination, he could not have acted otherwise. He is still the author of his actions, even though they proceed from his beliefs, which in turn, follow from his upbringing and his previous experiences. And we can still "blame" him for his actions, because all it means to "blame" someone for an evil action is to recognize that he chose it consciously and deliberately. The fact that he himself didn't think it was evil is irrelevant.

It is true that we don't blame or punish someone for an action that was involuntary or beyond his intentional control, because any such act would not be a reflection of his character. But this does not mean that if his choice were *determined*, it would not be a reflection of his character. On the contrary, *only* if his choice is *determined by his character* can that choice be a reflection of it, and therefore deserving of blame and punishment.

If his choice were free, it would be free of any necessary connection to his character, and could not therefore be a reflection of it. But in that case, how could we justifiably blame or punish him? Since his choice would bear no necessary correlation to his character or identity, "he" could not be held responsible for it. Thus, far from determinism's being incompatible with moral responsibility, it is *free will* that is incompatible with it!

Machan says that the only compatibilist view that makes sense is one that sees the human being as the determining agent or cause of

his own conduct. He says that in that sense, he is a determinist, along the lines proposed by Roger W. Sperry and some other agent-causation theorists of free will. But there is no contradiction in viewing a human being as the cause of his own conduct and that conduct's being determined by antecedent causes. In fact, as we have seen, only if a person's conduct were tied to—i.e., necessitated by—his character under a given set of conditions could it be considered "his." If he were capable of choosing *irrespective* of his character, then his conduct would not reflect it, in which case, "he" could not be credited or blamed for that conduct.

It may be objected that a person is responsible for his character insofar as he freely made the choices that led to its formation, but this merely pushes the issue back one step. If the antecedent choices that formed his character were not themselves tied to his previous character state, then "he" could not be credited or blamed for them either. If a person is to be held responsible for his choices, then those choices must proceed ultimately from his character. To the extent that they do not, "he" is not responsible for them. Moreover, as Rand observes, all living entities generate their own action. But that does not mean that all living entities possess free will. So if the actions of lower life forms can be self-generated and simultaneously the result of antecedent causes, then so can the actions of human beings.

Machan disputes the idea that a person's values determine his action. He states: "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)" (218). Yes, but that's because they have *an interest* in resisting it; it is because the resistance is of a *higher value* than the initial inclination. That one can resist a particular interest or inclination doesn't disprove the idea that one's values determine one's choices; it simply implies a stronger value than the "interest" that is being resisted. The alternative to this view, and one that Machan is committed to, is the highly implausible thesis that one can choose an action that one values less over an action that one values more, or at the very least that one can make an arbitrary choice

between two equally valued alternatives, with no motive for preferring one over the other. But in the latter case, such a choice would have no moral import.

Machan writes: "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" (218–19). But, again, how can a moral agent be responsible for a choice whose value he has no prior knowledge of? Any such choice would be morally arbitrary, as he would recognize no reason for choosing it over the alternative.

Machan continues: "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" (219). But there is no "moral game" to start with, if there is no knowledge of which alternative is morally desirable. Lacking any knowledge, one wouldn't know what it is that one is opting out of! In any case, I'd be surprised if Rand held the view that Machan attributes to her.

He writes: "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" (219). Signed up for a human life without knowing what it is that one signed up for? And this is supposed to represent a moral commitment that one is bound to uphold forever after? I don't think so! In any case, what reason does Machan have for believing this? He simply asserts it with no further support or justification.

He writes: "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" (219). One could make a

similar claim about human self-determination, namely, that the self that is performing the determination is the result, *without remainder*, of the interaction of man's biological make-up, his perceptions, and his ideas and conceptual values.

Machan concludes his rejoinder by stating: "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" (219). I hope so too. My review was highly selective and critical, and should not be taken as a comprehensive summary of Machan's book. *Initiative* is a good read, not too technical, and it affords much food for thought.

I want also to thank George Lyons for his response to my review. Lyons is a compatibilist, and it's nice to have some critical comments from this side of the fence. George says that I ignore the compatibilist version of free will, preferring to emphasize motivation and goal-direction as an alternative. I'm sorry if I gave the impression that I don't recognize a compatibilist version of free will. One can certainly "choose freely" in a determinist context, if that means pursuing one's values free of any obstruction or interference. A determinist can also recognize that human beings have a degree of freedom that animals do not, for human beings enjoy a much richer context and are endowed with a far greater and more sophisticated range of options. I thought that I alluded to that in my review.

Lyons makes a good point when he notes that although compatibilism does not permit the ability to make choices independently of the causal context, it does permit one to change and modify one's behavior over time in accordance with the acquisition of new knowledge and information. It is in that respect that the doctrine of determinism is compatible with the idea that "ought" implies "can."

He asks: "What determines the goals people have, and is this a fatalistic situation or not? What is the point in holding ourselves responsible for goals we just happen to have?" (Lyons 2002, 209). Well, of course, not all goals are ones we "just happen to have." Fundamental values such as pleasure and happiness and the motivation that these provide for our choices are determined by our biological nature. But derivative goals are the result of our conceptual

values, which in turn result from the degree of our thinking, learning and understanding. Holding someone "responsible" for his goals means what? It simply means that we recognize that he chose them with full knowledge of what he was doing, and that we should treat him accordingly. To blame someone is but to recognize that his conscious choices are directed towards goals that we view as undesirable.

Lyons says that "[t]here is no clear distinction in [my] view between a very mechanical pursuit of goals by a machine, which we would not hold responsible for its program, and a genuinely responsible agent" (209–10). Here, unfortunately, Lyons betrays his ignorance of Objectivism. According to Rand (and here I agree with her), a machine does not pursue goals at all, because it has nothing to gain or lose by its actions. It cannot regard anything as for or against it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interests. It can have no interests and no goals. "Only a living entity," Rand (1964, 16) tells us, "can have goals or can originate them."

Furthermore, I would never say that an organism is a morally responsible agent, simply in virtue of being goal directed. A fish is goal directed, but it is not a morally responsible agent. Goal-directedness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for moral responsibility. Human beings are morally responsible agents, not only because they are goal directed but also because they are intelligent organisms that are capable of regulating their actions on the basis of moral reasoning.

Lyons (2002, 210–11) writes: "Objectivism and Dwyer seem to view expanding knowledge in a rationalistic way, as though just exerting mental effort or being goal-directed somehow presents a solution to the problems of accomplishing ends. In practice, it actually requires a risky and unpredictable creativity." Neither I nor Objectivism has ever, to my knowledge, held that simply exerting mental effort or being goal directed presents a solution to the problems of accomplishing ends. I don't know where Lyons got that idea.

He continues: "Yet predictability is what Dwyer claims, within

the Hobbesian view, as the real basis for blame, credit, or responsibility, a completely different theory than proposed here. Dwyer says 'moral judgment is a means of assessing someone's character, so that we can predict his future conduct' (Dwyer 2001, 101). A different view is that we need to blame or credit what changes in someone's character, because it is from that evaluation improvement in what changes is accomplished. When character is predictable, we need no moral judgment at all, only what Machan associated with determinism—social engineering of people's behavior" (211).

My point was that we need moral judgment—an evaluation of a person's moral character—in order to predict his behavior in the first place. Nevertheless, Lyons makes a good point. Moral judgment is also necessary to evaluate people's conduct, if only for the purpose of changing and improving it.

Lyons writes that my "concept of judgment refers to something we do need to know—the goals that adaptive goal-seeking things have—in order to respond to them effectively. This is blame and credit in the sense of identifying causes of action. Yet a cause of action can be innovation in goals just as much as goals themselves" (211). True, but any innovation in goals must *itself* be done for the sake of a goal, otherwise the innovation would have no purpose, which would make no sense for a goal-directed organism. Ultimate goals are given by nature; they are not chosen. All behavior must be motivated, and all motivation must begin with values that inhere in the valuing organism. Human beings are no exception.

References

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