

© Keith Waddington 1993

Keith Waddington

J. Ornstein

Phil 201/2

21.10.93

Determinism

The Politics

Although it certainly seems futile to seek any proof of the delusion of free will, since we are most all suffering from that delusion; nevertheless, it seems likely that certain ideas must exist which lead logically to the realisation that the concept of freedom we share is not only vaguely defined, but also overstated and rooted entirely in appearances.

Blatchford, in his essay entitled "The Delusion of Free Will," elucidates clearly the point of vague definition, believing that he does disservice to the Libertarian cause, whereas in truth his hapless words leave loop holes from which they might easily cling.

When a man says his will is free, he means that it is free of all control or interference: that he can over rule hereditary and environment. (34)

. . . the free will party will claim that conscience is an unerring guide. (34)

The free will party seem to think of the will as something independent of the man, as something outside of him. They seem to think that the will decides without the control of the man's reason. (34-35)

Already we can see that Blatchford approaches the problem of free will and determinism not as a philosopher seeking truth, but as a politician seeking to prevail in an altercation and thus discredit the opposition. Although some of his arguments supporting Hard Determinism are sound, they often rely upon simplistic and artificial examples, with Bob doing what he was caused to do, and Bert having no real choice.

Corliss Lamont, in "Freedom of Choice and Human Responsibility," seems similarly inclined towards partisanship, investing great labour in telling us what *they* (the Hard Determinists) believe, rather than exploring the question in its own right.

Lamont seeks support for the libertarian view in "common sense"; and also suggests that the determinist argument can be defused by admitting that ". . . a great deal of determinism exists in the world." (43) We might begin by stating that Fatalism has existed for at least as many aeons as common sense has supported our "freedom." Also, his second point sounds rather like suggesting a balloon can be deflated by admitting it is full of air.

These are Lamont's opening arguments, and one would think, by merit of their inaugural positions, his strongest. Indeed, his final words sink into absurdity, suggesting that if determinism is true, then ". . . we shall have to scrap a great deal in existing dictionaries and do a vast amount of redefining." (45) It is from this perspective that he insists the dispute of free will versus determined behaviour is simply a question of

semantics, since even Hard Determinists, in their everyday speech, use what we might describe as Libertarian language.¹ The matter cannot be completely resolved until we have examined, in some detail, the nature of the Hard Determinist's universe. For the moment we might simply recall that everyday conversation makes use of everyday conception, which is based upon a strict code of interpretation.

Partisanship is, in itself, no reason to dismiss a philosophical proposition: it merely introduces doubt into the nature of the enquiry. When it is combined with simplistic thinking, however, we might justifiably turn our attention elsewhere.

W. T. Stace, "The Problem of Free Will," at least makes some genuine attempt to define what free will really is. Unfortunately, he too slips into the mire of oversimplification. His examples of free and unfree acts are polarised to the point of creating a pseudo-Manichean world of black and white. His brand of determinism rests upon a proviso: free acts find their cause in psychological states. Of course, this avoids the question of the cause of psychological states.

The Truth

Where then, in this plurality of beliefs, lies the truth?

Determinism, for all the hot argument it incites, is essentially a banal theory. It means, quite simply, that *the*

¹I will carefully avoid the suggestion that every human question is a question of semantics.

past determines the present as the present determines the future.

As far as the human being and free will is concerned, this translates to the realisation that "free choice" does not exist only in so much as we choose according to who we are, and that we did not make ourselves. In this light we might briefly return to mundane Bob and Bert. The fact is, even in an entirely causal universe, they do have choice in so much as the choice does exist. The point is that the choice of the choice is inevitable. Stace's wild card of psychological cause proves useless when truth keeps an ace up its sleeve: it is beyond reason to suggest that we are not part and product of the natural universe. Why then should the mind, which we might define as our general character based upon what our individual brain is, be in anyway disconnected with the rest of the universe? Indeed, if it is—if we are—part and parcel of the natural universe, then logically we must be subject to its law of causality. Three main arguments could refute this: 1) the mind is not as defined and is not subject to any physicality; 2) the universe is not entirely causal; 3) there is a supernatural factor not taken into account.

The first point suggests that perhaps it is consciousness, or particularly self-consciousness, which somehow breaks humans free, at least to a degree, from the threads of cause and effect. But why should this be? Especially when consciousness spends much of its time searching out cause and effect. Indeed, it could be said that intelligence is little more than the

ability to see connections between things. Since *everything* we examine shows itself confined to the dynamics of causality, clearly it is the professor of free will who must prove *his* case.

What then, to tackle the next point, if the universe is not entirely causal. Paul Davies, in *God and the New Physics*, points to two main areas where the Newtonian universe, the entirely predictable universe, might prove erroneous.

. . . discoveries of modern cosmology reveal that our universe should have an expanding horizon in space, and that every day new disturbances and influences cross into the universe from beyond the horizon. (P.D.137)²

This though presents us with a paradox: unless the red shift of light from distant stars is not evidence of their movement—the Doppler Effect of light waves—it can be taken as a given fact that the universe is indeed expanding; the paradox of Davies' statement though is that it states that the universe is expanding *into something*, which clearly cannot be true. Even if we pass this problem aside, the question still remains as to whether or not these disturbances, which have not previously been connected with the web of causality and so introduce incalculable factors, are able to exert any influence on causality at the human level. It seems likely that the chaos they introduce is so far removed in space, and hence time, that

²P.D. refers to Paul Davies' *God and the New Physics*.

it is effectively assimilated and becomes a part of causality before exerting any vaguely local influence.

The second area where absolute causality is disputed is in the quantum factor. Davies elucidates:

Heisenburg's famous uncertainty principle assures us that there is always an irreducible indeterminism in the operation of sub-atomic systems. (P,D. 137)

The question in this case is not with remoteness but with smallness. Can chaos at the sub-atomic level have any effect at our level of existence; after all, the proverbial billiard ball will still act predictably, according to cause and effect, even though its subatomic bits are doing a mad *patternless* dance.

As far as the third point is concerned, the uncalculated supernatural factor seems surplus to needs. When one plus one make two, it seems pointless to suggest that there was an extra one hiding behind the first and so it makes three.

The Accident

When Bert was knocked down by a double-decker bus, everyone said it was a terrible accident. However, the bus and the Bert arrived at the same point in space and time not by accident, but by grace of a tremendously complex web of cause and effect. These include the bus driver arriving late for work because his wife had run away with the milkman so he was all in a bother and never got his morning tea since there was no milk and the caffeine which normally wakes him up and gets him going didn't and he was really still half asleep when he climbed into the cab and only knew he was behind schedule because the inspector saw

him and shouted "Get a move on" and Bert who was coming home from his night shift which he had been forced to do because Bob the real night shift man was on holiday because his girlfriend insisted they needed a rest was really fed up because he hated the night shift and was preoccupied with thinking up ways to get his own back on Bob because he was a vengeful kind of guy because he had too many male hormones and had always witnessed his father who also had too many male hormones getting what he wanted by being mean and nobody ever really told him otherwise except the local priest who he punched for his trouble and so he stepped into the road without thinking too much about where he was stepping and the bus driver was driving fast because he was still behind schedule and he was not the kind of bus driver who liked to be late because he was a very conscientious worker for seventeen reasons and he was suddenly blinded by the reflected sun in a car's side mirror the driver of which happened to be in that place for eleven reasons which were connected to several others and then crash the bus and Bert arrived in the same place at the same time and the bus won.

Of course, this example only scratches the surface of causality which brought the "accident" into being. The point is, if we can show that the most random of all things, namely, The Accident, is entirely unavoidable, then what hopes can we harbour of our own actions and choices being unavoidable. Just as accidents seem accidents, free choice only seems free choice.

It is because the threads of causality are themselves almost limitless that there seems almost limitless possibilities, and

thus the illusion of free will is maintained. This then might clarify the reason we need not, after all, rewrite Lamont's dictionaries.

The Future

Using again the formula: *The past determines the present as the present determines the future*, we can bring the perhaps erudite concept of determinism to a more practical level.³

My best friend, Jim, stole my favourite socks. I loved those socks as no man ever loved any other socks. When Jim "chose" to steal my socks, he chose the only choice he could. If we were somehow able to send him back in time without changing any of the original causes, which is to say he must go back with no knowledge of either the test or what he did the first time, all conditions being equal, Jim would make the same "choice." Jim, being Jim, will act according to Jim.

It is clearly a fallacy to believe in the endless possibilities of the future. Those endless possibilities lie rather in our ignorance of the future than in the future itself. A man trapped in an underground labyrinth and suffering from complete loss of memory might postulate endlessly over the

³It seems possible though that just as the earth worm would tend to overfeel the importance of the earth, we might overstate the importance of the present: since causality stretches from the beginning of time to the end, the present essentially could be nothing more than the material manifestation of that causality.

nature of the world outside his tunnels, toying with countless possibilities. Nevertheless, should the day come when he finds that elusive exit, all the possibilities save one will be crushed by the reality of what is.

The Blame

Recognising a purely cause and effect universe might seem at first a mere transcendental experience—especially when we recall only a supreme and omniscient being could prove equal to the difficulties of following the threads of causality. But even a partial view of the truth brings with it serious implications and forces a re-evaluation of our ways of thinking; and if this now begins to sound something like a religious conversion—without the burden of actually including a deity—then it is necessarily so.

Indeed, unlike Blatchford and Lamont's political diatribes, Richard Taylor's essay "Fate" makes great use of what we might refer to as religious diction, talking of "the consolation of fatalism," (96) "fatalist teaching," (96) "temptation," (97) "sublime acceptance" (97) and so on. And, like all good religions, there is a tendency towards unequivocal statements and a pre-packaged dogma of morality. Of course, since this is a religion without a God, it seems perfectly normal to find there is, likewise, no morality. Indeed, though Taylor begins by affirming the difference between fatalism and determinism is the difference of semantics, his fatalistic words seem inadvertently to demonstrate that it is rather a difference of degree, and that determinism might be best described as a philosophy and

Fatalism a religion.

When Taylor states that fatalist teaching:

. . . relieves one of all tendency toward both blame and approbation of others and of both guilt and conceit in himself" (97)

there is, floating in the space between the lines, the uncomfortable stench of passive acceptance. This is indeed the type of statement Libertarians love to find and clutch in clammy hands. Certainly it sounds very similar to Stacey's:

He who believes that 'whatever is, was to be' can try to escape moral responsibility for wrongdoing by claiming that he was compelled to act as he did . . .
(43)

If we return to Jim, my sock stealing friend: because Jim was caused to steal by previous circumstances and experiences and genetic inheritance and all the rest—in other words *who* he is—I will not blame him or even bother to say a word about it to him. Maybe I will even steal *his* socks. Does something sound askew here? Certainly, and the quick thinker can jump quickly for joy and announce that Jim was not "caused" to steal my favourite socks and that he is a dirty rotten thief—with warm feet. But of course, this is not actually the case. It is *because* we act according to what the past has made us that blame and admonishment are *essential*, for the *blame and admonishment of today will be the cause of effect tomorrow*. So, just like the quick thinker, I will call Jim a dirty rotten thief—with warm feet. On the superficial level—which is where we live, since

matter and actions have the power of gravity and effect respectively, whereas ideas possess only the strength of ephemeral will—I believe Jim to be blame worthy. Wearing my determinist hat—assuming that Jim has not stolen that as well—I find the admonishment was not due to the culpability of Jim, but because restraint would point the finger of culpability at *myself*. Which ever the case, blame exists, either in a superficial accusation or in the *transfer* of blame. It is in the notion that our actions of today cause the actions of tomorrow that blame truly lies—with *ourselves*. And it is also for this very reason that morality exists, not simply hypothetically, but realistically. Of course, we can only act according to what we are and what we have been made.

The danger of Taylor's fatalism is that it tends to cause a diminishing of the human experience. You see, Jim stole my socks after reading Taylor's essay and concluding that he would not be to blame if he stole my socks because his feet were a bit cold and he was a bit dishonest, anyway. In the complex web of cause and effect, it is a moral imperative that we each act morally, not because our actions are free, but because they are tied to so many other actions.

This same danger surfaces in Clarence Darrow's "An Address Delivered to the Prisoners in the Chicago County Jail."

[People] are in jail simply because they can not avoid it on account of circumstances which are entirely beyond their control and for which they are in no way responsible. (80)

This certainly sounds like a license to commit crime. At the same time it is, at least in a totally causal universe, undoubtedly true. It is in this quandary that we see the futility of punishment for punishment's sake, a la C. S. Lewis, for it does not seek to change the root of the problem: the "circumstances."

The circumstances Darrow believes need particular reform are those which allow the imbalance of wealth. If there can be any doubt as to the truth of Darrow's assessment, we need only imagine a utopian world where all material needs are entirely satisfied. Where, in such a place, would there be any need for crimes of property? Of course, such an Erewhon is entirely unlikely to be found between the points of the compass, though its existence as a hypothesis logically leads us to the conclusion that increased equality means decreased crimes of property.

Simply stated then, giving a robber the means to improve his material status honestly would, more often than not, prove to be the cause of new honest behaviour. Replacing the chain of criminal behaviour, cast like iron links in background, need, habit and circumstance, with the chain of punishment is to supplant one form of bondage for another.

None of this is to say that there is no place for punishment, only that as an end unto itself, as the rotating doors of our prisons clearly demonstrate, it has no use.

As we have seen, crime and punishment is one area where determinism pushes to the surface and becomes something more

than an abstract theory. Certainly, judges and juries give increasingly more importance to extenuating circumstances and background factors than ever before; and in this we can clearly see a movement towards a general acceptance of deterministic theory, even by the man on the street.

Works Cited

Burr John R. Philosophy and Contemporary Issues
866 Third Avenue, New York. Macmillian Publishing Company.
1992.

Davies Paul God & The New Physics
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York. Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1983