Philosophical Conversations

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Philosophical Conversations is designed to stimulate thought and discussion, and keep you philosophically active. The format will be the presentation of a brief position paper to which responses are encouraged. In the subsequent issues selected responses may be published in addition to a new position paper. We invite you to respond to this position paper either by contacting the author or the Department. (Address - mail and e-mail, and phone numbers and fax numbers are provided at the end of this issue).

I Think, Therefore I am Free

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1. Re-framing the Issue. Consider two broad types of actions exemplified by the following: (1) I raise my arm and (2) I tell you a lie. In each type of case, I routinely claim to have made a free choice. But there are both phenomenological and logical differences between the two. Phenomenologically, there is a sort of conceptual hesitation in lying but not in raising an arm. There is not so much a time delay (though some recent experiments suggests there is) but rather the additional element of consciousness of the wrong of lying. Nothing like that consciousness occurs in raising an arm. Logically the arm raising—say, simply to scratch my ear—is a natural event to be explained, falling under no normative rule requiring me either to raise or not to raise my arm. Lying is, obviously, normatively charged and places me under a strong injunction.

If there is such a difference as this, it suggests how radically misconceived the debate has become. Insisting on naturalistic solutions—ones compatible with our current general understanding of nature—distorts the problem. Squeezing every case into the same non-normative mold oversimplifies and diminishes the original motivation for raising the issue of freedom. That motive is, uncontroversially, I take it, to understand our accountability. If it were not for cases of the lying type we would have no interest in freedom and it is doubtful whether the concept would have any meaning for us at all. The interminable free will debate[1] shows only that physical science, as we know it, is not suited to explain or even clarify free action understood as actions for which we are accountable. That bias prevents us from seeing the variety of types of evidence that exist for free will, some of which I want to explore here.

2. *Causes and Norms*. There neither are nor can be laws of physics that count as norms for accountability; that would be a conceptual confusion. Conflating the two types of cases presses physics for more than it can possibly deliver. Following Hume, Kant says, "the *ought*, if one has merely the course of nature before one's eyes, has no significance whatever."[2] Hume was right as far as he went: plain facts do not imply norms. But the swift advance of science during the last couple of centuries compared to plodding ethics has made norms look increasing ontologically odd. Kant's resolution was to deny that we can jettison either science or norms but, unlike Hume and many later compatibilists, he thinks these quarrelling twins can never be reconciled and simply have to be separated.

Here is the crux of the matter. When we ask for the cause of a norm-governed action *as such* we are asking the wrong question. Such a cause inevitably looks odd from the naturalistic viewpoint but the oddness is in the eye of the beholder. The inquiry into the springs of norm-governed action makes sense but not as a causal inquiry. We do make choices and our problem is to justify them with good and appropriate reasons. We have no causal laws that explain the occurrence of choices, much less provide sufficient reasons for action, nor in principle could we, since choices are governed by norms, not causes. Here are three conclusions (which may be equivalent) we can draw, all of which spell big trouble for naturalism: 1) the language of plain facts does not imply normative language, (2) causal laws plus physical facts do not imply the normativity of choices or actions, and (3) the causal and normative orders are simply causally irrelevant to each other.

But doesn't there have to be some sort of connection between the physical and the normative? How can normative activity override physics? Doesn't "ought implies can" just mean that there's no obligation to do what's impossible? Yes, that is one ground of the common doctrine of excuses. But the positive meaning of the slogan is that wherever there is an obligation there is freedom sufficient to satisfy it. Both implications presume freedom. Since every action has its maxim, limiting the conceptual evidence for freedom to cases where there is a normative principle is no limitation at all. For this is a problem with every rule—even in logic. We need to insure that our principles are as objective as possible.

One may respond with skepticism about objective prescriptions (rules of conduct). Surely these are not objective in the same sense that astronomy reports objective facts about planets. Of course not: a different canon of objectivity is in order. If nothing escapes the reach of physics, the implication is some form of materialism and free choice and free action will be no part of reality. But what's wrong with that? Has the history of science not made it clear that we have genuine "evidence" only for material relations subject to physical law? What evidence could there be that there is any such thing as the normative?

But limiting evidence in that way begs us to reconsider the same issue. We need to stop asking what the natural causes of choices and other normative features of experience are. Instead of what causes our choices, obligations, rights, etc., the appropriate question is what *justifies* them. When we make this move—call it *the normative turn*—attention shifts immediately to the accountability of action and away from natural laws. Our expectation that there ought to be a link between the two should have dissolved once Hume made it clear that there could be no argument from one to other. Norms cannot be explained causally any more than physical events can be explained normatively.

Moreover, as Peter Strawson following Plato and Kant, has argued, from the perspective of the "reactive attitudes," we can forsake neither.[3]

Still, naturalism grows in popularity and many, both scientists and philosophers, now seem to think that there are no insuperable difficulties in understanding human actions as nothing more than the effects of physical states of the body. Let us ask, is there serious evidence that leads away from such reductionism and conflation?

3. *Norms of Reason.* I think there is. Take the case of argument.[4] Everyone argues but no one who argues could be rationally content that his or her conclusions are just the outcome of the operation of physical laws and prior events. Everyone thinks his or her own conclusions not merely caused but justified, that the force of their arguments is due to satisfaction of rational norms. The point may sound *ad hominem*. Merely in order to argue does one have to accept reasoning as something outside the purview of natural science, perhaps even otherworldly? In that case, of course, one could not apply naturalism to one's own practice and the only way out would be not to argue. Or one could adopt some form of dualism.

Consider Descartes' methodic doubt about a priori knowledge in the first *Meditation*. When I try to add 2 and 3, there is an opening, as there is in any cognition, for the demon to interfere, i.e. for some unknown source of systematic deception to intervene. The demon, like divine foreknowledge, is merely a personification of natural forces, robbing me of that control of my own thought that my nature as one who would reason requires of me, that I expect of myself and for which others may rightly hold me to account. The reason, of course, is that, as a thinker, I not only behave in certain ways but also grasp the relevant rational norms, the principles that justify my conduct. If we let them, physical laws, far from explaining freedom, actually undermine it. But the dualism for us is not therefore Cartesian. It is rather a dualism of kinds of principles, normative and non-normative. The underlying stuff of reality—if there is any—may be quite neutral between these.

But what if physical law underlies our sense of obligation and the apparent implication of freedom is only an illusion? That is evidently a popular view. But the point is delicate. Consider the issue again with regard to Descartes' demon. I said that he is the personification of natural law, coercing our thought. But if that is right, then, when we try to add 2 and 3, it is literally nature that calculates rather than we. And in that case nature will itself be subject to the same norms to get the calculation right as we are under so that freedom is no less implicit in nature's calculation than in ours. Calculation is norm-governed no matter who or what does it.

Think of there being two kinds of freedom: normative freedom corresponding to the freedom implied by the necessity to obey norms and non-normative freedom, corresponding to the freedom we discern in actions that are not even apparently norm governed. For non-normative freedom there is only the sort of subjective evidence cited and such evidence is, indeed, much too weak to stand against natural law. But for normative freedom there is not only the phenomenological evidence but, more importantly, there is the conceptual evidence as well. "Ought implies can" is irrelevant to non-normative freedom. Brain events accountable to no logic are not arguments. It is only non-normative freedom that is susceptible to naturalistic skepticism since it has no *sui generis* conceptual foundation but merely supplies more grist for the purportedly all-consuming, naturalistic mill.

With respect to genuine freedom, it is the fact that we are subject to norms that does all the heavy lifting. We would not find it rationally acceptable in physics to start out asking for an explanation of a physical phenomenon only to find ourselves faced with answers expressed in spiritual terms. That is part of what those of a naturalistic bent find objectionable about religious explanations in cosmology or medicine. We can no more deduce goals or functions from an inventory of observable parts and their relations—which is the proper purview of natural science—than we can deduce 'ought' from 'is.' That fact is what finally defeated Aristotelian "science."

It is easy for the partisans of naturalism, convinced as they are of the unity of reality, of the absolute flatness of it all, to think that morality, which they dismiss as an illusion, is the only motivation for believing in freedom. But, of course, naturalists themselves must accept norms for science, ones that, like the moral norms they repudiate, bind by directing rather than determining. Like any norms, the norms of good scientific inquiry may be violated because, unlike natural law, they are not sufficient to determine that anyone will accept or act on them. So, they are not natural laws and the dedicated naturalist should conclude that it is irrational to believe in them just as it is irrational to believe in morality. But, of course, precisely as scientists and naturalists, they cannot evade that commitment. The important point is that the norms of science imply freedom no less certainly than the norms of morality. The world is not physically flat and it is not ontologically flat either.

4. *Norms and Freedom*. Finally, whence these norms of reason and morality? How do they arise to make their demands on us? How can we even be or become aware of them? We oscillate between seeing the sources of our actions as deeply internal and seeing them as deeply external. What is deeply internal is the acceptance of norms; what is deeply external is their content.

Think again of norms of reasoning. It is a matter of accepting certain contents. I recognize that a certain norm is rational, that it does indeed define or capture objectively valid inference, like modus ponens. This gives the relevant content. So, as a creature able to recognize this fact, I take it as guide and policy (a Kantian maxim). I "identify with" the principle as a defining feature of my own normative character. But is accepting a norm not a function of will, presupposing freedom? Not necessarily. I suggest instead that both features—recognizing the norm and accepting it—are more judgment than will. I do not invent the norm's content and my acceptance is recognition of the fit between the norm's requirements and my rational nature. Nor is it every aspect of my nature that needs to fit. My idiosyncrasies are out of the question. What cannot in principle be public is out of the question. Whatever would make application of the norm across relevant instances self-defeating (as in Kantian contradictions of the will) is out of the question. And here we have the deeply external or objective aspect of freedom. The irony, of course, is that in this respect freedom is necessity.

If there is a circle here, it is benign. We simply understand both normativity and freedom together as a complex feature of ourselves comprising two aspects of accountability. It is not so much that we give norms to ourselves, as Kant seems sometimes to suggest. Rather, because we are rational creatures we are essentially, inevitably, subject to various kinds of norms, principles implying normative freedom. So it is not as if norms have an origin apart from the creatures subject to them any more than such creatures can subject themselves to norms arbitrarily. The same point holds of any natural law. There is no gravity or natural selection apart from things that instantiate these laws.[5] In *our* natural element—in morality and reasoning—the norms are as natural as any natural law.

This point suggests an interesting detente between Descartes and Wittgenstein and a kind of provenance for norms. Descartes' cogito remains as irrefutable but as feral as ever, giving evidence only of solipsism. Wittgenstein's private language argument[6] corrects this defect by pointing out the presupposition of public norms for language use. What is true of language is true of thought. Thinking and speaking imply engagement with a community—of language users, of inquirers, of moral agents, etc. Community is required because norms—the necessary ground for making mistakes—are inherently applicable to multiple cases. A norm applicable to only one case is no norm at all.

Now, since thought and language require norms and norms require freedom, thought and language imply freedom. To think or to use language one has to be free. Indeed, being subject to any norm—being, as Wittgenstein says, able to make a mistake (which itself requires having a concept of the norm)—will imply freedom. Hence, we face a new cogito: I think, therefore I am free. One can no more coherently deny one's freedom than one can deny one's existence.[7] In saying or thinking sincerely, "I am not free," I deny that I am subject to the norms implied by saying or thinking anything. But in that case I could not be using a language and I would have no thought to express, since there would be no such thing as making a mistake. So the cogito of freedom retains the full force of Descartes' original but without the solipsistic confinement. In combining internal acceptance and external content, passing beyond mere compliance with natural law, genuine freedom opens to us a world of normative engagement.

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[1] To be sure, not everyone confuses the two types of cases. In the current literature, Philip Pettit has argued effectively for a "responsibility based" conception of freedom. See his *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. Ch. 1.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. & ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B 575.

[3] Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Free Will*, ed. by Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 59-80.

[4] Few writers on freedom have paid much attention to the fact that freedom is implied by norms of reasoning. One recent tract that makes something of the point is John Searle's *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), Ch. 5. However, despite this insight, in his main line of argument, Searle construes the problem in traditional terms without regard to whether norms are at stake. This may be due to his insistence on having refuted Hume's denial that normative claims can be derived from merely factual claims (see, e.g., *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Ch. 8.

[5] Of course, in social contexts we can and do subject ourselves to rules of our own invention. More needs to be said about how obligations arise in such artificial or quasi-artificial contexts as games, business, politics, law, etc. One insightful, recent account is John Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., tr. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), esp. §§ 43, 199-202, 243-258.

[7] Cf. Jean Paul Sartre, "…man is condemned to be free…if I do not choose, I am still choosing…" "Existenialism Is a Humanism," tr. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947).

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