

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: A CONDITION OF FREEDOM

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Abstract

The philosophical inquiry into the conditions of freedom of action is divided over the question of causes of human actions and reasons for actions owned by the agent. It is argued by the determinist philosophers that even the reasons for actions, such as our desires and our rational thinking over our desires, is caused by natural conditions outside consciousness. On the other hand, conception of ourselves as rational agents, acting on our own, involves the idea that natural causality is a process of events causing other events, whereas our actions are not merely events in nature. However, the contention that our free actions are not like natural events involves the idea that they spring forth from a self who thinks and acts on certain occasions, even though the actions may appear as events to an external observer. This, however, requires that somehow the conditions of free action are different from the way natural events take place. One of the conditions that seem to differentiate actions from events is that actions are intentional occurrences. Nevertheless, intentionality of actions is, in my view, hard to be philosophically corroborated in contrast to the obvious and over looked aspect of being self-conscious about what we do or intend to do. Though it is clear and undeniable that most of the time we are conscious of what we do or intend to do, still the idea of a continuant self-acting divergently through his choices and decisions is, in my opinion, a necessary condition for the actions to be called free in contrast to natural events caused by other events. However difficult it may be to explain this continuant self in the flux of nature, still I think the very idea is a necessary condition for explaining the various ways in which thoughts, desires, will, intentions, and actions are related. In other words, to be a rational agent means to be self-conscious. This paper is an attempt to bring back the debate of freedom and determinism under the focus of this notion of self-consciousness. The notion of self-consciousness seems to me intuitively obvious as a unifying condition of freedom, such that without this our freedom of action either entails randomness, or we unintentionally end up in arguing for freedom in a deterministic fashion by trying to explain the mental behind the physical and vice versa.

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The question of the relation of thought, actions and freedom signifies human nature in contrast to the causal explanations of physical events and processes. Philosophers have argued either to refute *determinism* in human action or prove that *freedom* is an illusion borne out of our ignorance of causes of our thought and actions outside our consciousness.

However, even philosophers arguing for freedom do not agree as to how freedom is realized in actions. On the one hand, freedom seems to imply *randomness* that conflicts with *rational explanations* of actions. On the other, pondering over the question of a *self-conscious* person acting on his own reasons involves further questions about desire-action relations.

So we have a problem unfolding more problems. Acting on what one wants and acting on what one thinks seem to involve the difficulty that, where as desires are beyond choices, still choice is a matter of thinking what to do. Further, choosing to do something and wanting to do something may not coincide. However when it comes to explaining why one did what one did, the agent may unavoidably refer to his wants as an explanation of what he did. And here it may be asked *whether he could have wanted otherwise*, despite the philosophical argument that a *free action is free in that one could have acted otherwise* than what one did.

In this paper I intend to bring out the problem of the relation of freedom and self-consciousness. It appears that philosophers have overlooked that freedom of action presupposes *self-consciousness*. Therefore what I will offer is an analysis of the arguments of philosopher that may implicitly involve the thesis of self-consciousness, thereby, bringing it out to the surface, despite determinism haunting all explanations of free action.

Thought and Action:

It seems that freedom of action depends on freedom of thought. Secondly, it is the relation of thought with certain actions that renders such actions *different from* the natural events and processes. For Stuart Hampshire, this relation of thought and action is much more complex. Hampshire thinks that,

We cannot represent human conduct as detachable from the thought that directs it, as if actions were a universal system of natural signs, always intelligible on mere inspection. We can only be sure that we will always be able to understand what a man is doing, or is trying to do, on mere inspection of his overt behavior, if we know that he generally follows the same habits and rules of thought as we do.¹

However, Hampshire's view points out a dilemma involving explanation of actions from *the agent's point of view* and *predictability* of action from the *observer's point of view*. A determinist might successfully predict, *in physical language*, the *exact physical activity*

¹ Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, London: Chatto and Windus 1965 p.206.

of an agent, and the agent's actual physical activity might *exactly correspond* to the determinist's account. In such a case, the actions would turn out to be free from the agent's point of view, but determined from the observer's point of view.

Consequently, if believing actions as free from the point of view of the agent does not contradict determinism, then Hampshire's account of freedom leads to *compatibilism*. It is difficult to decide between compatibility and incompatibility of freedom and determinism. Hampshire has presumed that the will is free because he is more concerned with freedom of thought, which he thinks increases the possibility for the exercise of free will.

Hampshire argues that the degree of freedom of action depends upon freedom of thought. He says 'with a new self-consciousness, and with the extended vocabulary that goes with it, we discover new motives for actions and new objects to which practical intentions are directed.'² However, this view of freedom seems to make free will a trivial and presupposed part of the freedom of mind. It means freedom is a matter of degree, depending on degrees of free thoughts.

This also suggests that rationality requires an enlarged understanding of freedom rather than simply confining its meaning to an exercise of free will in practical reasoning. Even a presupposed idea of will and its relation with practical reason is not free from possibilities of confusion. Hampshire states:

The idea of the will, and of its relation to practical reason, may gradually seem less clear and the expression may even seem inapplicable, to a man who had always thought that he understood clearly what he meant by it; he may have thought of himself as attaching supreme value to the will without ever having reflected upon the variety of its possible meaning.³

It follows that a philosophy of mind may provide clarification and re-examination of powers of mind including will, intention, motive and other related concepts. Our ordinarily accepted classifications of the powers of mind may need re-adjustment in case of new inquiry into the powers of the mind. Thus, for Hampshire,

More of human conduct than we had thought, and aspects of it that we had not expected, may be outside the possible control of practical reason, less of human conduct than we had thought may flow from an unalterable natural endowment. Perhaps even our ideal of what human being might at their best become, if every new recognized possibility were realized, may be changed by this new knowledge.⁴

This in turn leads to a revision of already held philosophical opinions about mental states, conduct, and morality. Thus more philosophical inquiry is always in place. These

² Ibid., p.244.

³ Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, op. cit., p.253.

⁴ Ibid., p.254.

considerations entail an ever-extending freedom of thought. Accordingly, Hampshire claims:

Any philosophical inquiry into the conditions of freedom, and into the essential human virtues, will always need to be revised, however adequate it may seem to the particular conditions of its time, and to the concepts prevailing in the thought of that time. This philosophical inquiry, always resumed, is itself a necessary part of extending men's freedom of thought.⁵

However, this entails that freedom is a privileged quality of those having advanced knowledge. If we follow Hampshire then our belief in freedom of our will would be subject to classification, some having more freedom than others. This would entail the drastic consequence that, then, we would have to review our ordinary conception of personhood.

Nevertheless, it appears to be true that more knowledge increases freedom in terms of opening up more possibilities of making divergent choices. But the problem is not this. The problem of freedom must be tackled in certain *basic possibilities* rather than increasing possibilities. The basic possibility of free choice is what seems to be enough in so far as refutation of determinism is concerned.

Still it is possible to be more conscious about certain aspects of our life. Thus where the power of consciousness is enhanced, there we may find deeper choices made. But this aspect needs to be worked out, since it is unclear as to how self-consciousness may be said to be more or less operative. The degrees of freedom associated with degrees of consciousness seem to raise more complex issues. Here it suffices to point out that, in a sense, one may lose one's self-consciousness through psychological disorders or other brain washing techniques. At least this suggests the possibility that freedom is also lost in proportion to the loss of self-consciousness in such ways. Thus it is not altogether untenable to take self-consciousness as a matter of degrees. Watson thinks likewise that freedom is an achievement. Watson states:

To be free is to have the capacity to effect, by unpaired practical thought, the determinants of one's actions. So viewed, free will is not something we simply have or lack, but it is an achievement that admits of degrees.⁶

However, it is not clear how this capacity affects the determinants of actions. Taylor elaborates this aspect in terms of 'depth' as a quality of a stronger evaluator of one's desires. Taylor states:

The strong evaluator envisages his alternatives through richer language. The desirable is not only defined by him by what he desires, or what he desires plus a calculation of sequences; it is also defined by a qualitative characterization of

⁵ Ibid., p.273.

⁶ Gary Watson, *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, p.8.

desires as higher and lower, noble or base, and so on (He has) a vocabulary of worth.⁷

But here again it can be seen that both Watson and Taylor are talking about something that pertains to *being a better person* rather than just a person. The problem of freedom may be seen in this perspective. One may argue, like Hampshire does, that more thoughts pouring over one's conditions makes one more reflective, or a stronger evaluator in Taylor's sense, and it makes us more free. Nevertheless, these views seem to presuppose human freedom rather than establish it against determinism. Still, given the possibility of evaluation of one's desires, there seems to be a closer link between the degrees of freedom and the degrees of thoughts associated with desires. In what follows this aspect of the problem is unfolded.

Desires, Thoughts, and Freedom

Hampshire's account of desires, in his later work,⁸ shows that an individual is free to do something even when his actions are caused by his desires. Free actions involve one's choice or decision to do something. It is possible, on this account, first *to decide to want to do* one thing rather than the other. In other words it is possible first to decide or choose between one's various desires. But this does not make sense. It is not clear in what sense an individual can decide or choose freely to want to do something. Usually it is the actual action about which one decides or chooses as a means for fulfilling a particular want. But to say that one can decide to want to do something sounds unusual.

However, Hampshire claims that some desires are based on certain reasons. Since the reasons for certain desires are subject to change, therefore the existing desires are also changeable. This change of desires is taken as a basis for formation of new desires through reflection and criticism. Still it not clear how one can freely choose or decide to desire, or want to do something. In one sense this is possible. Thoughts or reasons are believed to be independent of causal laws. In addition, since Hampshire thinks that certain *desires can be formed on the basis of thoughts*, therefore one can decide to want to do something after reflecting on its *desirability*.

Nevertheless, this account is not free from difficulties. It is not clear, how the knowledge of previously undiscovered possibilities can lead to desiring something. Some philosopher's call this process as *second-order desires*.⁹ The *desire that one wants to want something* is a second order desire. However, this is confusing because it leads to an *infinite regress of wanting to want* to have certain wants.

The Problem of *desirability of certain desires* involves our sense of values in that some desires are more worthy of pursuit. But the question remains as to why we value such

⁷ Charles Taylor. "Responsibilities for Self" In *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Oskenberg Rorty, University of California Press, 1976, pp.281- 299.

⁸ Stuart Hampshire, *Freedom of the Individual*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1975, p.39.

⁹ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Individual and the concept of a person" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, LX VIII, No.1, Jan., 1971, pp.5-20.

desires. A desire, as such, may or may not conform to our view of our self as a kind of a person, since baser desires may arise in good selves unintentionally. Thus both Hampshire and Frankfurt are drawing on this to argue about formation of desires by our critical and evaluative abilities.

But the possibility of evaluation and reformulation of our desires presupposes that we have a *unified view of ourselves* as persons. But to have a *unified view of self* is not possible without being *conscious about this self* as the *same self* that desires various things at various times. In a deterministic world of ever changing natural process within and without consciousness, this seems impossible.

Even in case of having some reasons for desiring something, there must be a *single self-conscious* being who deliberates over various reasons. A *determinist* can object that *the reasons by which desires can be reformulated are also caused* by certain brain events. But I think here determinism itself faces the challenge to explain how any reason become one's own reason. For, if we suppose deterministically that reasons are caused by neural events, then the so called human actions become mere mechanism.

In such a case the so-called reasons would become either *epiphenomenal*, or they must be regarded as mental events in the chain of events. The *self has somehow disappeared* from the deterministic explanation of reason.

Consequently, either we have to abandon the very idea of self, or we must have an explanation of its unity. Denying the existence of a self and replacing it by mechanical processes, under causality, entails many absurdities.

Malcolm has elaborated this. Malcolm takes mechanism as a 'special application' of physical determinism that applies to all organisms with neurological systems, including human beings. Malcolm states:

Having become believers in mechanistic explanations of behavior of others, could each of us also come to believe that mechanistic causation is the true doctrine in our own case? Not if we realize what this would imply, for each of us would see that he could not include himself within the scope of the doctrine. Saying or doing something for a reason... implies that the saying or doing is intentional. Since mechanism is incompatible with intentionality of behavior, my acceptance of mechanism as true for myself would imply that I am incapable of saying or doing anything for a reason. There could be a reason (that is a cause) but there could not be such a thing as my reasons. There could not for example, be such a thing as my reason for stating that mechanism is true. Thus my assertion of mechanism would involve a second paradox. Not only the assertion be inconsistent, in the sense previously explained, but also it would imply that I am incapable of having rational grounds for asserting anything including mechanism. Once again we see that mechanism engenders a form of solipsism. In asserting mechanism I must deny its application to my

own case; for otherwise my assertion would imply that I could not assert that mechanism is true on rational grounds.¹⁰

Malcolm's view implies that the problem of *agent's own reasons* conflicts with the deterministic explanations of reason. Given all that neurophysiology claims about human organism it becomes clear that a unified self has no place in it. But the problem, not tackled by Hampshire and Malcolm, is *the problem of explaining the possibility of having any reason as one's own*.

What does this sense of *my reasons* in Malcolm, and *agent's reasons*, in Hampshire, mean? It is clear that this sense, which is the most common and prevailing sense, is a sense the conditions of which are laid down by *human self-consciousness*. *Unity of the self means a continuity of an entity that persists and continually identifies, rejects, accepts, denies, acts, thinks, imagines, feels, and perceives*. However, the *continuant self* must be conceived as having certain power over his mental episodes of desires and wishes. Without existence of certain power of control, the idea of a continuous self is devoid of meaning. This point is important for any theory of freedom of self in action. Therefore, in what follows, I shall elaborate this under Hampshire's considerations.

Knowledge of Desire

Hampshire's account of desires shows that some desires are not mere occurrences; rather self-conscious individuals may also *form* their desires. It is also possible to change one's desires through criticism. Hampshire thinks that, "... because a desire may be the object of reflection, for men though not for animals, it may be disconnected from its natural and immediate expression in behavior..."¹¹

This shows, at least, that the occurrence of a particular desire does not necessarily end in actions as determinists suppose. Secondly, Hampshire elaborates that identification of one's desires involves three aspects. These aspects are identification, reflection and communication. Occurrence of desires in human beings is not merely an event causing another event or events. The individual is not a helpless victim of his desires caused by factors beyond his control. The individual is free where his desires are under his control. Hampshire claims that,

"In self conscious individuals desire to act in certain ways becomes something that one may reflect upon, criticize and abandon, because of the criticism, and not merely something that one has, as one has a sensation. Desires do not only occur, they may also be formed, and formed as the outcome of a process of criticism. Therefore one has reasons for wanting to act in certain ways."¹²

¹⁰ Norman Malcolm, 'The Conceivability of Mechanism'. In *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. I xxxvii, No. 1 Jan. 1968, pp.45-72.

¹¹. Hampshire, *Freedom of the Individual*, op.cit., p.37.

¹². Ibid., p.38.

This, however, does not suggest that reasons are not caused. There are two problems here. The first is about the *causes of reasons*, and second is about *reasons as causes*. Hampshire's contention implies that where as desires serve as determinate causes of actions, mediation through agent's reasons makes them somehow non-determinate. If we argue that agents have reasons for wanting to do something then the question arises about the content of these reasons. Moreover, the question why someone had those reasons and not other reasons makes the case of determinism stronger, since the answer would refer to the causes of those reasons. Determinists might argue that *given the causes of those reasons, no other reasons would be there in the agent's mind*. Secondly, even if there are reasons for wanting to do something, in what sense are one's actions determined by those reasons rather than the sheer wants?

Thus the question of having some reasons, and not other reasons, for a particular want raises difficulties for the incompatibilist account of freedom. Kane contends that the agent causation theorists are unable to cope with this problem. Kane states:

In order to actually motivate, reasons as intentional contents must be the intentional contents of some psychological attitudes an agent actually has. And while wants, desires beliefs and the like may be attitudes of mind and not themselves states or changes, an agent having one or another of them at some time or other is a state of the agent, and hence an event or occurrence in the broad sense that includes states and changes. Thus to explain the doing of "A" rather than "B" (or vice versa) in terms of having certain reasons or motives is to explain in terms of events or occurrences. For (agent-causation) theorist, therefore, complete explanation of this sort would only push the question of ultimate explanation further backward: what explains the agent's having these reasons or motives at this time?¹³

To make matters worse, a determinist may argue that the reasons for wanting to do something are not the true reasons. The link that we form between our desires and our reasons is superfluous because whatever reasons we have for wanting to do something, *we could not have thought otherwise*. Therefore, whatever we decided or chose *we could not have decided otherwise*.

Nevertheless, Kane's identification of reasons as temporal occurrences requires clarification. It is obvious that *having some reasons has nothing to do with having them now and not then*. For supposing two persons A and B have similar reasons for wanting to do X at the same time, this similarity does not render A's reasons not A's or B's reasons not B's. The question of having some reasons as one's own, therefore, does not suffer because of time and similarity.

However, the determinist explanation of reasons is problematic. One might ask the determinist as to *why the agent should think otherwise*. Clearly, once an agent thinks or reflects on his desires and reformulates them in Hampshirean sense, he sees whether his

¹³ Robert Kane, 'Two kinds of Incompatibilism', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 1, No.2, Dec., 1989, pp.228-229.

desires are desirable or not in terms of *his whole conception of himself*. If not, he would think about changing them or refraining from following them. His recognition means that his thinking and reflections are part and parcel of his view of himself as the kind of person he is.

In other words, one can say that the agent's reasons are his reasons as those reasons are consistent with his whole view of himself as a rational agent. He would not think differently if he thinks consistently with his other thoughts and beliefs. Thus, the determinist's objection that a person could not have thought otherwise seems unnecessary. Determinists overlook the *agent's self-consciousness of himself as a continuing rational agent* trying to reflect over his divergent desires. The grounds for this conception of self are deeper than what the causal paradigm has to offer. *It is here, that the causal nexus of nature seems to break.*

Thus we can see that the problem of freedom requires explanation in terms of existence of an *identical self-conscious entity* in an otherwise *continuously changing natural phenomena*. Therefore, Hampshire's free agent must be seen in the perspective of a *self-conscious subject*, rather than an object among other objects. Rankin also defends this sense of continuity in his distinction between a *substance* (agent or self) and an *event*. Rankin argues that *agent-action relation* is a 'substance-event' relation, whereas *cause-effect relation* is an 'event-event' relation. For him, agent, as doer, is *distinct from an event or doing* in that the 'same thing' is capable of doing something else.¹⁴ All activities are relations of this persistent entity.

Thus, our conception of freedom of action rests on the notion of a *self who is conscious of himself*, or *self-conscious*, such that the actions that follow from the self follow from an *identical entity* through change. However problematic this notion of an identical self-same entity may be, at least the conception freedom of action will always pre-suppose this. For, otherwise freedom either entails randomness, or the self altogether disappears in a deterministic world of events causing other events.

¹⁴ See K. W. Rankin, 'Doer and Doing', in *Mind*, vol. lxxix, No. 275, 1960, pp.361-371.