
Free Will

Graham McFee

Central
Problems of
Philosophy
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Free Will

Central Problems of Philosophy

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Preface and acknowledgements

While an undergraduate, I became aware of both the interest and the intractability of the problem of free will: a small prize was offered in the philosophy department for any undergraduate who presented a solution to that problem that would satisfy any two members of the department; at least, we undergraduates believed in such a prize. (Two members were required, obviously, to stop the candidates simply replaying his or her own preferred solution back to a particular staff member, as though that might have been convincing even for one!) This prize was not won during my tenure as undergraduate and research student.

Part of the attractiveness of the topic, though, was its ability to grab the attention of beginners – to show them what philosophical issues were and why they were quite generally important. Therefore this was a suitable topic for use (as here) to introduce relative beginners to philosophical issues and methods. Moreover, one's point of final arrival could be a long way into philosophy. Thus here, although issues broached and methods offered derive from Anglo-American analytical philosophy, the conclusions reached, and the conception of the philosophical enterprise subtended, are not: at least, not ones dominant in the current incarnation of that tradition (see Chapter 9).

Such a way of writing, displaying (and commenting on) both arguments and argumentative strategies, could seem like giving students “target practice” on philosophical views. This misleading picture of how philosophy should operate leaves out the crucial ways in which constructing and commenting on arguments (and

drawing distinctions) can elaborate one's understandings of any position, permitting consideration of internal consistencies for such positions: if I accept/assert that, can I also accept this? And here the response may involve noting differences between the *this* and the *that*. Although clearer when seen directly in the laying-out of opponents' views, this point applies throughout the text, not just where it is highlighted explicitly. This text also illustrates that the primary concern of philosophy is not with words only, but with human perplexities.

The central difficulty here concerns the possibility of genuine agency: hence the expressions "freedom of the will" and "freedom of action" are treated as equivalent. In particular, I address the possibility of action or agency, rather than the scope and limits of such agency, although there are a number of interesting puzzles or issues there too. My explanation of this direction, expanded in the body of the book, is that discussion of the limits of agency presupposes the possibility of agency: and there seems reason not to presuppose this, reason provided by our determinist argument. If, in the end, we conclude that human agency is possible, this is once we have faced (and learned from) determinism.

Other concerns might be (and have been) given the title "problem of free will": again, the justification of my problem (the problem addressed in this work) should suggest responses in the face of these (other) problems.

However, the formulation of the arguments is contentious, in two ways worth recording: the forms of words chosen to introduce or explain key points will necessarily be contentious, sets of expressions suitable for one set of readers are less so for others. Equally, the examples used in exposition and criticism could be replaced with others; those others seeming more compelling or more persuasive to a particular readership. While problematic for any text, this is especially besetting for a text in philosophy (at least on some conceptions), where the expectation is that exactly the right form of words and exactly the right example have been selected. But what worked for one audience need not do so for another. It is a philosophical commitment here that no sense can be given to the expression "the right" in these two cases (p. 118); that both words and examples chosen represent the best I can do to make these points clearly to this imaginary audience.

Consonant with the aim to be introductory, there is no engagement with the complexities of scholarly debate: the text is written largely without the apparatus of scholarship, such as detailed quotation from sources, historical reference and the like. Instead it returns repeatedly to a number of KEY CASES, as central examples (and, to some degree, test-cases).

This text has been very long in the making. I have been thinking about the freedom of action since those undergraduate days; it provided the topic of some of my earliest publications; and I have lectured (and read papers to philosophical societies) on it for twenty years. As a result, the debts accrued are huge and, since I am probably incapable of remembering them all, let these stand for the rest: to Terry Wilkerson, my first tutor on these topics, who set me off on this line of investigation; to generations of students (especially undergraduates) at the University of Brighton, for their responses to lecture series on this topic, over the past ten years or so; to those who participated when I read papers on this topic: in particular, students at the University of Pepperdine, California, in March 1996 (and to Russ Gough for organizing the presentation), and my long-suffering students at the University of Brighton Philosophy Society, who, although asking (optimistically?) if I was going to offer a different topic this time, never appeared too disappointed at the answer; to my colleague Bob Brecher, both as stand-in for all those colleagues whose inputs I value, and for his helpful and supportive comments on a set of lectures given in Brighton in Autumn 1993; to friends who have read all or part of this text for me (even if/when I have not heeded the comments): in particular, Katherine Morris, who read all of one draft, and Gordon Baker, who read part of it. Their influence on the argument is far wider than just those places where I attribute a specific note or some such; to my wife, Myrene – although I typed this book, she contributed to every phase of its development through detailed discussion of issues and proofreading, as well as more general support.

Graham McFee
Eastbourne, February 2000

1 Free will: the issue

Introduction

Few issues in philosophy are as interesting, both to lay person and professional, as the problem of the freedom of the will (or freedom of action – the two descriptions I take to mean the same thing). For, as noted in the Preface (and as we will see), the central issue here concerns the ability to initiate (or possibility of initiating) *action*: that is, of there being (genuine) actions at all.¹ Merely being able to *will* certain actions, actions not then performed, would be indistinguishable from just wishing for impossible outcomes. And would be accommodated to the degree that such wishing itself counts as action.

Equally, over the years, few problems have seemed as intractable to philosophical solution as the problem of free action. In what follows I will both lay out the central issues involved in this philosophical problem, and consider various ways in which human concerns with freedom, responsibility and the understanding of other people are involved. Further, I shall offer (in later chapters) some thoughts on possible lines of solution. However, as a beginning, it is important to understand what the issue might be, or, more exactly, why there is an issue here at all.

Two important distinctions for understanding human activity

When we consider the world around us, and our place in it, we regularly note two related contrasts whose closer identification will take us into the question of the freedom of the will. The first

distinction contrasts what might be called “agency” with what might be called “natural phenomena”: roughly, a distinction between things that people *do*, as opposed to things that just occur. Consider an example. In the late 1980s (at least in England), so-called crop circles² – large areas in fields with crops flattened in geometrical patterns – were noted in fields of wheat, barley and the like. Two views of the origin of these crop circles offered an explanation of them as natural phenomena (although of differing sorts), while two treated them as the outcome of agency (terrestrial or extra-terrestrial).

One group attempted to explain the crop circles scientifically: for instance, invoking an electrical phenomenon (a “plasma vortex”), which might be so localized as to produce this effect. A second group talked, instead, about natural “earth forces”, explained roughly like the forces evident in the phenomenon of dowsing for water, where the “natural vibrations” of the water are detected by the dowser via the hazel twig. Of course, the detail of that attempted explanation might leave it still mysterious: do we really understand dowsing for water? Are there such “earth forces” at all? Importantly, though, both these explanations represent admittedly different ways of describing the mechanism at work here: having said what the causes of the phenomenon are, the phenomenon is explained. Here the crop circles are treated as *happenings*; as naturally occurring phenomena for which no further explanation need be sought.

The third explanation offered for the crop circles was as the product of persons perpetrating some kind of hoax. Fourthly, some groups urged that the crop circles were the product of extra-terrestrial intelligences trying to contact humankind. Again, both these explanations offer – in their different ways – appropriate accounts of the crop circles in terms of *agency*: what we are told is roughly who makes them, and perhaps why.

This case shows very clearly two kinds of explanations that we standardly employ in thinking about the world around us. Some things simply happen, following through the laws of nature – in the case of crop circles, the laws of nature might be rather more complex than we presently understand, but of the same kind (say a plasma vortex, whatever that is) – or by some natural force of a different kind, as for dowsing or for ley lines, or something similar.

Equally, human beings have at least the possibility of agency – and, again, the crop circles provide a suitable model here: although the agency might be extra-terrestrial rather than human.

This distinction already raises a key question: which events should be explained in terms of agency, and which as the working out of natural processes? This may not be easy to sort out. For are not our actions as *natural* (and hence as causally explicable) as any other event?

A second distinction overlays that one, to some degree. Here, what we *do* is contrasted with things that merely *happen* to us.³ Of course, there will be significant parallels here, since many of the things that happen to us result from natural phenomena: it rains on us as a result of . . . well, readers should fill in whatever natural laws are presently favoured by meteorologists, for example, since this represents our “best guess” as to why rainfall occurs. None the less, we standardly think of the life of humankind in terms of two varieties of occurrences. The first may reasonably be called “happenings”, things that happen to us (the result of the working out of causal laws), and the second, reasonably called “actions”, issue (in some way or other) from what we want or think valuable or some such. Such a conception of action may be hard to pin down more exactly: is snoring, for example, an action in this sense? But there are plenty of clear cases to concentrate on. Our standard example [KEY CASE 1] is my simply walking across the room. This will be an *action*, something I *do*, if anything is. It will be explained, perhaps, in terms of my wanting to cross the room, perhaps in terms of my crossing the room for no reason: certainly it is not the result of post-hypnotic suggestion nor of drug-taking, since either of these might raise questions about the degree to which my *not* crossing the room was “open to me” (Ginet 1990: 95). Equally, this walk across the room was not at gunpoint, nor a consequence of stress; again, cases that might seem only doubtfully actions *of mine*.

This notion of action is, to some extent, technical: in particular, it includes some omissions; cases where my failure to do something, or even my doing nothing, are relevant. So that my *not* sending my granny a Christmas card counts, for these purposes, as an action. But this is a fairly common-sense view of the scope of the idea of action: my mother might well criticize me for “what I did”, where “what I did” is *fail* to send my granny the Christmas card.

However, my bodily activities, say, my walking across the room [KEY CASE 1], are also describable, using this contrast, as *happenings*. So the distinction between happenings and actions applies also to me. Then there are two ways of thinking about (describing) my behaviour: that sometimes used by my doctor, viewing me as a broken machine, as a happening; and that I would normally use of myself, where I speak in terms of what I wanted, chose, or some such: that is, I treat these events as actions.

Again, what is the basis for this distinction? Even supposing one had much more surface detail, one might well wonder whether there are patterns of explanation used exclusively on one side of the distinction, and others used exclusively on the other. Certainly, a commitment to the freedom of action must respect such distinctions.

With these two important, and common-sense, distinctions before us we can begin to move forward, clarifying what we are trying to identify in drawing such contrasts.

Responsibility, and sense of self

The distinctions just drawn are important in the understanding of our daily lives for two related reasons. First, they are integral to notions of *responsibility for one's actions*, for it seems unreasonable that anyone should be held responsible for things one could not help, things one did not choose to do and so on. That is to say, actions done from choice, for which I am morally responsible, are contrasted with events that occur without my having chosen, where I am not morally responsible. Actions done *intentionally* (for which I am morally responsible) are contrasted with events occurring not intentionally (for which I am not morally responsible, or for which my responsibility is reduced⁴). And such contrasts are enshrined in the *legal* contrast between being “fit to plead”, and hence culpable (in principle), or not fit to plead and hence not culpable. Consider a very important case for us [KEY CASE 2]: the idea of *kleptomania*.⁵ For our purposes, I “define” a kleptomaniac as somebody who, for instance, takes a scarf from a department store without paying for it, but who is judged to be ill (and therefore not culpable) rather than to be a thief. A kleptomaniac is not guilty of theft because he or she is not fit to plead, and that

effectively means that the “action” is not from choice or not voluntary, and hence not really an action at all. So finding this to be a case of *kleptomania* has a clear effect in respect of responsibility: such a person, we might say, needs to be helped or cured, rather than punished.

Much has been written about the connection between freedom of action, or choice, and responsibility, and I shall say something about it later. For now, though, it is sufficient to articulate the intuitively plausible idea that one is responsible for one’s actions in ways that one is not responsible for *mere* bodily happenings. For example, a falling object strikes my knee in such a way as to produce the classic “knee-jerk” reaction, sometimes used in testing reflexes: my leg extends, knocking over a waste-paper basket. If this is the full story, I am not responsible for the ensuing mess: it is not my fault – the leg extension was not an action but a mere *bodily happening*, and one obviously beyond my control.

Again, one is not responsible (or not fully responsible, perhaps) if, for instance, one belches, so long as that belch is recognized as resulting from gastric disorder. It is not something I chose to do, or did deliberately, and therefore, to that degree, I am not responsible for it. Moreover, I could not choose *not* to produce that belch (except perhaps by careful attention to my diet): at most, I might have delayed its emergence.⁶ It is a bodily happening. Now consider (possibly fictional) societies where belching after eating is seen as a compliment to one’s host. Then the belching would be taken as an action, done from choice, deliberately, and so on. In *this* case, one would be responsible for one’s belching: or, more precisely, at least for one’s failure to belch.

Before beginning philosophy (at least), we think of ourselves as clearly understanding the connection between doing something oneself (as opposed to it merely happening) and being responsible for that occurrence. Indeed, the word “responsible” is used in two senses: as getting whatever praise or blame results from that action – roughly equivalent to morally or legally responsible; and, differently, as being the agent – my being responsible for the mess might well mean, for example, that my actions consisted in knocking over the rubbish bin. (So this would not be the earlier case, where a waste-paper basket’s overturning was the result of a mere bodily happening.)

Now consider a defence used by those tried for war crimes (for instance, Adolf Eichmann): “I was just obeying orders”. While some orders ought not to be obeyed (as agents might decide), there is some mitigation in the fact of orders from legitimate authorities; we think of the actions as coming from the intentions or motives or whatever of those authorities.

If this connection between responsibility and choice is clear at a common-sense level, the second reason for a concern with action is rather less so. It concerns our sense of ourselves, for we think of human beings as at least sometimes *agents*, in the sense that they initiate activity. Now consider the suggestion that, instead of people around one, there were simply robots whose programming was done from some central computer. Those robots would not be performing actions at all; to be accurate, we should attribute all of their behaviour to the central programming computer. So crucial to our understanding of what does go on around us (where there are persons, not robots) is that there is agency in the world; and we, of course, are among those agents.⁷ The case of the robots would be an extreme version of, say, a criminal mastermind directing his or her minions; *extreme* in the sense that these would not be minions at all, since they would simply be a step in the chain of causes by which the computer brought things about.

We note in passing how the notion of a *causal chain* arises here; a key notion for considerations of freedom of action. If *B* causes *C* and *A* causes *B*, there we are beginning to clarify the way in which *C* depends on *A*. And if *A* is itself the result of some earlier cause, and so on, we now have a chain stretching back, where explanation of the current event (*C*) will ultimately be explained in terms of some earlier event or sequence of them.⁸

In my earlier “computers and robots” story, it would be unattractive, not to say impossible, to think of oneself as such a robot. Integral to a conception of ourselves is to see us making at least some choices on some occasions. So it would be deeply problematic to give up the notions of action, choice, and such like. Giving them up would undermine not only our account of responsibility, but also our sense of ourselves. And this is the nerve of the issue concerning free will: is our common-sense understanding of ourselves as agents warranted?

What free choice is not

When considering free choice, two features can mislead us in later discussions. First, talking of “free choices” is not suggesting that one can do anything. I cannot jump over the moon: the laws of physics preclude that. As a result, I cannot choose to jump over the moon. One’s choices are limited by physical possibilities of that sort, where the term “physical” here means, roughly, “explicable by the laws of physics”. Equally (another case of physical [im]possibility), given my background, age and so forth, it is no longer physically possible that I become a member of the England rugby team. But my choice is limited in another important class of cases. For example, I haven’t played rugby for twenty years; I’m not in relevant teams; I haven’t pursued contacts with people who might know of my skills in rugby; and so forth. Or, a parallel example, having spent the past years trying to teach philosophy, the choice of becoming the managing director of a large multinational company is no longer open to me. Neither of these points, of course, says anything about the question of the freedom of action. I am “constrained” both by the laws of physics and by the “laws” of social interaction: not all possibilities are candidate choices for me.

But, now, suppose it were urged that I can *try* to, say, become managing director of the multinational company, where my (vain) efforts were taken as evidence of my so trying. Yet how is my trying in this (vain) sense more than my mere wishing? For, of course, one might well feel that this contrast exploited the borderline between two cases: I might succeed, but I don’t (therefore I tried, but . . .); and I had no possibility of success (so my gestures were indicative of wishing, not trying). It may be impossible to sharply distinguish these cases in practice. But both build-in the possibility of action and choice, even when (as in the second case) that choice is severely limited.

In contrast, those who believe in the freedom of the will, or free action, are simply urging that sometimes and in some situations there are some choices open to me: that the notion of choice makes sense in this context. That is to say, they are not urging that one can always or inevitably choose anything. Indeed, one might well think that choosing one thing was always choosing *that* rather than something else; and hence that the choice was necessarily “constrained” by having to be between *this* and *that*, etc. But that is not

the kind of constraint under discussion here (see note 4): rather, it is a case where the notion of choice applies. So the question (for our *determinist*: see Chapter 2, p. 21) is whether one can ever choose anything at all! I shall say more on this topic when we return to the views of those who deny that humans are agents in the relevant sense. The point here, though, is simply to recognize that defenders of free will are urging no more than that I am free to walk across rooms [KEY CASE 1], drink water and so forth, and not that I am free to become (in my earlier example) the managing director of a multinational company. So the second point is that the idea of freedom at issue in this debate is not (simply) freedom from compulsion to do this or that, but the very possibility of (genuine) action.

Notice some standard cases of non-freedom as presently understood; cases where one's behaviour results from physical disorder, from some drugs accidentally ingested, or from hypnosis, say. In these cases, you are not exercising choice, and so are not (usually) blamed or congratulated; or at least, the praise or blame are not as full as it might be if you were fully responsible. Here, the notion of moral responsibility doesn't really get under way. Roughly, these are physical states over which the person has no control. And kleptomania [KEY CASE 2] will provide the clearest case of occurrences that, even at a common-sense level, are not actions, and therefore not appropriate places for moral responsibility.

As a useful comparison here, consider the following case [KEY CASE 3]. If a gunman orders me to jump out of the window or I will be shot, we may say that I have no choice. However, there is some (very limited) choice here: I can choose to jump or stand still and be shot, which I might opt for in certain circumstances (for example, if the choice involved betraying a loved one). In a contrasting situation, four burly characters seize me by my arms and legs and hurl me through the window. In that case I genuinely have no choice: in the other, a very minimal choice. For my jumping through the window at gunpoint, the notion of choice *applies*, with however small a range: for my being hurled through the window, the notion of choice simply does not apply.

Further, the notion of choice does not have application in the case of my being hurled through the window even if, at the last moment, I shout to the burly characters, "Please, please, throw me

through the window!” In neither case am I *choosing*. So, cases of constraint must involve something stronger than merely cases of compulsion. As I put it before, the concern is with cases where the notion of choice does not apply.

This case allows us to see clearly (if obliquely) how what is here called “constraint” differs from “compulsion”: say, the falling of stones under gravity is not compelled, although the stones’ behaviour is in accordance with the causal law. Just so, if I am compelled to act in a certain way, I have a choice, albeit a limited choice (as in KEY CASE 3): the notion of choice applies to me. What is here called “constrained” behaviour (such as our kleptomaniac in KEY CASE 2) is behaviour to which the notion of choice does not apply: not actions at all. So, as KEY CASE 3 illustrates, cases of compulsion differ from cases of constraint, with our concern being with the latter.

Two “languages” for describing and explaining human events

To clarify the common-sense position, I shall introduce (in a purely technical way) a contrast between two ways of describing or explaining behaviour. I call these, with deliberate looseness, two “languages”. First, in thinking of persons as agents, we are using the “language of action”, of choice, of rational behaviour. This is roughly the sum of all the remarks that can be made about persons but not about inanimate objects. This point is difficult to make very precise, since (for example) both persons and rivers might run down hills. (And to distinguish different senses of the term “run” here would thereby be to concede that any contrast was not identifiable purely from the words used.) Nevertheless, such a contrast picks up our standard understanding that some characteristic ways of describing events involving humans are as human events: that is, recognizing them as *actions* rather than *happenings*, and therefore thinking of them as the result of agency rather than conceiving of them as natural phenomena.

In contrast, consider a “language of causes”, of causal explanation and description. I will here take it for granted, first, that the physical sciences provide such causal descriptions and explanations, and, second, that we have a rough-and-ready understanding of such causal explanations and descriptions.

It is worth sketching some initial differences between reasons and causes. Asked why some event occurred, one variety of response (causal explanation) is in terms of some set of circumstances that, given the prevailing conditions, led to that occurrence: the response typically making an implicit or explicit reference to some scientific principle of the kind sometimes called “laws of nature”. That is, asked why there was a rainstorm today, one might refer to the conditions of wind and low pressure that, at this time of year and in these latitudes, characteristically lead to rainstorms. Then saying that such conditions obtain would be explaining the occurrence of today’s rainstorm: “it happened because such-and-such a weather front came in from the east”. This would be to describe the cause of the rainstorm. Equally, asked why I fell forwards, you might mention the sharp blow that had been delivered between my shoulder blades: I fell because of that blow. If pressed further, you might also talk about my position at the time of the blow (“balancing on the chair”) and the size of my assailant (“hit by a big bloke”). In these ways too you present a causal account of the event.

In contrast, another variety of response (reason-style explanation) might point to the agent’s aim or purpose: I went on that side of the boat in order to balance it in the gust of wind, or I learned French so as to read Sartre’s writings. Again, I went to Scotland for my holidays because I like the solitude, or because there is good smoked salmon and I like smoked salmon. Here, the occurrence is explained by giving reasons for its occurrence. (Notice that both kinds of explanation can begin with the word “because”.) Typically, then, actions will be performed for some reason (or none), but bodily happenings will have a causal story only.

My uses of words such as “reason”, “actions” and “cause” here are technical rather than everyday. So that, for example, describing the events at a peace conference typically employs the language of action. Asking, “What is the cause of the negotiations breaking down?”, will, in my technical language, be a request for a *reason*. This conforms to our common-sense way of thinking about action, at least typically. Some peace conferences may break down because, say, there are no seats: more likely, though, one breaks down for the reason that the participants cannot agree who sits where.

Correspondingly, asking for the reason that my car won’t start this morning is, typically, asking in the language of causes. The

response is that there is water in some electrical part of the car: cars do not have *reasons* in the technical sense used here. I mention this to simplify and clarify what is said, but also to emphasize that what will be argued does not depend on a particular set of words. This is important because philosophy is often accused of being “just about words”. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even in the case of our kleptomaniac [KEY CASE 2], the dispute is not whether to *call* the person a thief or a kleptomaniac, but how such a person should be treated: whether we should attempt to cure that person or to punish them.

This distinction between two languages helps to put our common-sense view more succinctly: it is that the explanation of human life requires both of these languages. For instance, my doctor thinks of my behaviour as movements of a physical body, explained causally (at least usually), and attempts to regulate the workings of this physical system, for example by giving me pills, injections and the like. Sometimes, say, in the case of mobile patients, the doctor’s attitude might be mixed, regarding me as able to take the pills at a certain time, to avoid certain foods and to engage in exercise. But even then, the doctor’s overall attitude is towards my body as a physical system in need of re-ordering: I am considered primarily from the causal point of view. On the other hand, in interaction with others, I see myself and them as agents, with the possibility of responsibility, and associatedly of praise and blame, for our respective actions.

“He didn’t do it”: three cases

So far my aim has been to articulate a common-sense view of the life of human beings and of their relationship to the physical world. Why might anyone have any reservations about the adequacy of such an account? To explore this idea, consider a set of cases where notions of *action* and of *responsibility* play a key role. In all three scenarios, the unfortunate Jones dies beneath the wheels of Smith’s motor car. But did Smith do it? Was it Smith’s fault? In all these cases, there is a natural tendency to suggest that Smith was *not* at fault, that he did not do it; and the cases are arranged so as to bring out a certain pattern in our thinking. These are “best case” or “most favourable case” scenarios, which means that they should be filled

in with *whatever* details supplement them so as to make them most plausible.

1. [KEY CASE 4] *Smith's car is defective – some vital part of the steering mechanism has crumbled to dust, and Smith is at the wheel struggling vainly when the car passes over poor Jones.*

This is a “best case” scenario, so let the defectiveness be something the driver could not spot, and let him have done whatever are reasonable checks on the car. Indeed, let him have done checking to the *n*th degree, so that he had the car serviced by professionals that very morning, but this was a peculiar kind of undetectable metal fatigue, say.

Here Smith had done all he could, and perhaps more than most of us would (or we do), to ensure the car's road-worthiness. Surely Smith is not responsible in this case: he just didn't do it. Roughly, the causes of the event were elsewhere. There is mechanical causation at work here: so that Smith's acts become irrelevant at a certain point. He is no longer in control of the car: he couldn't help it.

2. [KEY CASE 5] *Poor Smith has a heart attack while he is driving, and is paralysed. Then the car runs over the unlucky Jones.*

Again, this is a “best case” scenario, so let Smith have had all the normal check-ups including visiting an eminent heart specialist that very morning. But this was an undetectable heart condition.

Here again, surely Smith was not responsible – he didn't do it – because there was/is an explanation in terms of causes beyond Smith's control, although now they amount to events within Smith's body.

3. [KEY CASE 6] *Smith had a tumour pressing (or whatever) on his brain, and so steers the car in a straight line on a certain bend, and hence over the unfortunate Jones.*

Again, since this is a “best case” scenario, let Smith have recently undergone whatever tests you like, but let this condition be an undetectable one. This resembles the second case, except that now the cause is in the brain of Smith. (And this will be important in what follows, since causality involving the brain is the norm.) Here again Smith didn't do it; the death of Jones did not issue from a wish or from a desire (or even a whim) of Smith's. Like the other cases, this is surely an accident: something no doubt regrettable, but really no one's fault.

The moral from these three cases is that, with events in which a persons is involved but not *doing* the thing in question (as Smith didn't really do it in these three cases), then they are not responsible for that event. The person is not being a moral agent in respect of that event. In the case of real accidents, there are no such agents.

All this follows from the fact that, in each of these scenarios, the event was caused by (roughly) something other than Smith, even though in the second and third cases that "something" was inside Smith or a part of Smith. These cases show how a kind of explanation (in terms of causes), that is characteristically used in the natural sciences, may be applied to human beings, or to human activity.

In all these cases, Smith is not culpable (or not fully culpable). But our easy explanation – "matters beyond Smith's control", say – simply will not work when the "matters" at issue derive from states of Smith's body. For, on the face of it, all the events for which Smith *is* responsible derive, at least mediately, from states within his body. Still, the direction of thought suggested by these cases should be clear enough.

Notice, first, that we can imagine the ensuing courtroom battle in which the defence attorneys argue that what occurred was not murder; while the prosecution urges that it was. Here the dispute is whether to characterize the event as one in which the driver Smith was an active agent, and hence murdered Jones, or to say that the driver was not an active agent, was not acting deliberately or intentionally: that to some degree, and perhaps wholly, this is something which simply occurred. While it is a discussion of what to say (or how to characterize the event), its implications are profound: was it murder or something else . . . say, (only) manslaughter? To opt for this later sort of account is to focus on descriptions of the event in terms of the language of causes: that is to say, to focus on, at best, the movements of the body solely, ceasing to regard the event as the action of some person. What I am calling *movements of the body* are explained and described in the same way as movements of other physical events in the universe: that is, they are described and explained by talking (either formally or informally) in the sorts of (causal) terms characteristic of science.

Second, at least some of these cases, as I have described them, are clear examples of constraint, rather like that of our kleptomaniac [KEY CASE 2]. Often Smith, like the kleptomaniac, is not really

an agent here. These are cases where it is very natural to accept that the person is not responsible for what occurs: he or she did not really do it. And here, ceasing to characterize an event as an action of the person removes at least some of the responsibility at issue. For only events characterized as actions are things people *do*, as opposed to things that just occur. So there is a clear connection between questions of morality and the common-sense idea of people as free agents. If we cannot describe events as “actions”, we cannot offer praise or blame (or any other moral comment) on anything that occurs; it would be like, say, blaming a snooker ball or a planet. For what is explained via “laws of nature”, as “naturally occurring”, is not amenable to moral judgement; earthquakes, no matter how destructive, cannot be morally evil, any more than (say) the falling rain is.

Finally, notice (at least parenthetically) the increasing tendency to use description in the language of causes; say, in respect of the doings of so-called “juvenile delinquents”, seen as products of under-privilege, poverty and the like. This causal story is presented to explain their not being fully culpable. Such people are seen, like kleptomaniacs, as in need of help or cure, rather than punishment, at least to some degree (Flew 1973: Pt III). The structure of such an argument is that if the person’s behaviour is appropriately considered causally (or to the degree that it is so considered), then it does not constitute *action*, is not suitable for praise, blame or the ascription of responsibility.

It should be clear by now how our common-sense understanding of persons and action might be argued against, by urging the primacy of the language of causes. Opponents would take the causal descriptions as primary and urge that descriptions and explanations that mention choosing and deciding (and so on) involve some kind of conceptual confusion. At its heart, this position simply involves treating all behaviour by human beings in the way that the rest of us treat the kleptomaniac and the unfortunate Smith [KEY CASES 4–6]. The central thought, to which I return (Chapters 2 and 3), is that what humans do can be explained, or at least described, using remarks from the “hard sciences”: in particular, biophysics and biomechanics. Such remarks do no justice to the sorts of reasons normally offered for human action. In short, they will be causal descriptions and explanations. We call adherents of

such a view “determinists”. And here, in line with comments in Chapter 2,⁹ we will reserve this term for those who regard the “ordinary” action-type explanations as empty.

Such determinists allow that human actions are, in principle, *predictable* in roughly the ways other phenomena are predictable,¹⁰ via the causal laws that govern them. For example, we can predict a rainstorm by noting that rainstorms occur under such-and-such conditions, and that those conditions now obtain in London. Hence, other things being equal, it is now raining in London. This follows from the causal laws governing rainstorms, together with the prevailing conditions. I shall elaborate this argument in Chapter 2. But notice that “predictability in principle” here does not require that actual prediction be done nor that it could presently be done: it is logically independent of such actual predicting. For we may well know neither the causal laws nor the current conditions. If the movement of the planets [KEY CASE 7] is now the subject for accurate prediction (the argument would run), it was always predictable, whether or not people were able to do the predicting (whether they had the technology). So whether or not there was actual predicting is beside the point. To clarify, the words “predict” and “prediction” here are used as in natural sciences and not as in fortune telling or any kind of guessing. To continue the planetary motion example, predicting the motion of Mars, or the eclipses of the moon, is not just guessing: an understanding of the laws of physics guarantees that the predictions will be true, at least in so far as those laws and theories are trustworthy. I shall say more about these ideas in Chapter 2.

Fatalism

It is worth putting aside, even at this early stage, a particular view, sometimes called “fatalism”, that the last couple of paragraphs may have suggested: the view that, since events are determined, activity is pointless. A good example occurs in Goncharov’s play *Oblomov*, where the central character simply stays in bed all the time, judging that, since all events are determined, there is nothing he can do. So nothing is worth getting up for: he might as well stay in bed.

But Oblomov’s position is not of a piece with those we are considering. If he can genuinely decide to stay in bed, he can make

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