

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE NEW MEXICO-WEST TEXAS  
PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY**

---

**FOR APRIL 1975**

---

Printed in the United States of America by the  
Texas Tech Press, Lubbock  
1976

## HOW TO PROVE 'FREEDOM OF THE WILL'

G. F. SCHUELER

The main motive behind philosophers' attempts to prove 'freedom of the will' seems to be the fear that if human beings never freely perform actions then they are never morally responsible for their actions. The intuitive bases for this are, I suppose, two. First, in every case where there is a claim that a person A is morally responsible for a state of affairs X, this claim can be shown to be false by proving the truth of at least one of a limited set of propositions, all of which can plausibly be described as saying that, in one way or another, A was not free. For instance, the claim that I am morally responsible for the death of my aunt on the grounds that I put poison in her breakfast tea can be rebutted by proving that my uncle forced me to do it by holding a gun at my head.

Second, since each of this limited set of propositions, if true, can be described as showing that A couldn't have avoided doing as he did *and* since any one of them, if true, will defeat the claim that A was responsible for X, it seems plausible to think that anything which shows that A couldn't have avoided doing as he did will show that he was not free in the required sense and hence that he was not morally responsible for his actions. So, for instance, along with the-gun-at-the-head or being drugged, or the like, relieving me of responsibility, it may also seem plausible to think that if my early family environment "formed" my character and attitudes in such a way as to make me now try to kill my aunt then, since I couldn't have avoided having this character and these attitudes, I couldn't have avoided trying to kill her, hence I was not free to do otherwise and so I am not morally responsible for killing her.

And if determinism is true then no one can ever avoid doing as he does, hence no one is ever free, and hence no one is ever morally responsible for his actions. That is, the argument (against 'free will') by which determinism is supposed to undermine moral responsibility goes as follows.

(1) The claim that a person A is morally responsible for a state of affairs X can always be shown false by showing that (even if A's action(s) causally resulted in X) A could not have avoided doing what he did.

(2) If determinism is true then no one can ever avoid doing what he does.

(3) Hence, if determinism is true no one is ever morally responsible for anything. That is, all statements of the form "A is morally responsible for state of affairs X" are false.

(4) Determinism is true.

(5) Hence, all statements of the form "A is morally responsible for state of affairs X" are false.

It might seem that an obvious way to attack this argument would be to attack step (4). The problem with this is that to say that determinism is false is to say that indeterminism is true and the truth of indeterminism, given the rest of the argument, is also incompatible with moral responsibility.<sup>1</sup> If determinism is true then no one can ever avoid doing what he does because everything he does will be caused by events over which he has no control. On the other hand, if indeterminism is true then no one will ever be able to avoid doing what he does because anything he does will either be caused by events over which he has no control, or it won't be caused by anything at all. But if it wasn't caused by anything at all then, though something else could have happened (i.e., it would be consistent with the laws of science that something else happen), still the agent couldn't have avoided doing it.

The issue of whether or not determinism is true is the issue of whether or not the universe is constructed in such a way that given its state at any particular time, its state at any subsequent time is uniquely determined. If one thinks that (2) is true, i.e., that the truth of determinism would make all actions unavoidable, then it must be because one is thinking that the truth of determinism would mean that all behavior is "outside the agent's control," determined by "impersonal forces and events," i.e., that there is no place left where the agent could "break into the causal chain." But if this is the way one is thinking of the matter then proving the truth of indeterminism will do nothing to prove free will, since if indeterminism is true actions will still be unavoidable in exactly the same sense that they will be if determinism is true. If indeterminism is true then, presumably, there will be "breaks" or "gaps" in the "causal chain." But these will certainly still be "outside the agent's control" just as much as events will be if determinism is true. If determinism is true all events will be "under the control of impersonal forces" and hence not of any agent. But if indeterminism is true events will *either* be under the control of impersonal forces (at those places where there are no "gaps in the causal chain") *or* "under the control" of nothing at all (where there are "gaps"). But in neither case will they be "under the control" of any agent. If determinism makes all behavior in this sense "unavoidable" then so does indeterminism.

So arguing against (4) (and hence for "(4') indeterminism is true" will do no good since when we change (2) to (2') by substituting "indeterminism" for "determinism," the resulting sentence still have to be regarded as true. And so (3'), which is produced by making the same substitution, will still follow from (1) and (2').

The way to defeat this argument, and thus, if you like, 'prove freedom of the will,' is not by attacking step (4) but by attacking step (1). Clearly a premise of this nature, i.e., that a certain kind of claim can *always* be

shown false by a certain kind of evidence, must rest on *a priori* considerations about the meaning of the terms involved. And here clearly the crucial phrase is:

(6) A is morally responsible for state of affairs X.

(1) could therefore be cast into doubt if it could be shown that (1) does not follow from the meaning of (6). For if (1) doesn't follow from the meaning of (6) it is hard to see what other support it could possibly have. And presumably (1) could be shown false if its negation could be shown to follow from the meaning of (6). For if the negation of (1) follows from what it means to say that someone is morally responsible for something then if propositions of the form of (6) have any meaning at all, (1) will be false. And even those who deny freedom of the will (i.e., who accept (5) as true) must accept propositions of the form of (6) as being meaningful since they think propositions of this form are always false.

Now it might not be as difficult as one might think to show that the negation of (1) must follow from the meaning of (6). This will be true, for instance, if it is true that the meaning of (6) must be given in terms of paradigm cases. For obviously if this is so then at least in the paradigm cases of A being morally responsible for X, showing that A could not have avoided doing as he did will not show that A is not morally responsible for X.

Presumably the paradigm cases of A being morally responsible for X will include such things as A's knowing all the relevant facts, A's intending to produce X, A's not being 'driven' by drugs, illness, or fear, there being a causal connection between A's action and the production of X, and probably some other things as well. Among these other things, however, I suppose that there will be nothing that entails determinism or indeterminism. Here then is one way of proving 'freedom of the will,' by showing that the meaning of propositions of the form of (6) must be given in terms of paradigm cases.

#### ADDENDUM:

This whole argument can be stated in terms of the distinction between the extension and the intension of a word. The problem of 'freedom of the will' arises because it is commonly thought that it is part of the intension of the term "morally responsible" that a person cannot be morally responsible for an action which he couldn't have avoided doing. [This is essentially (1) above.] The problem is that given this view then, whether determinism or indeterminism is true, it follows that no one is ever morally responsible for anything. [(5) above.] This is the same as saying that there is nothing in the extension of the term "morally responsible."

My suggestion here is that if it could be shown that the 'meaning' of the term "morally responsible" must be given by means of paradigm cases then that would be enough to show that the extension of "morally responsible" is not empty [i.e., that (5) above is false] since *whatever* cases are in fact paradigm cases of moral responsibility will automatically fall within the extension of this term.

Of course I have not in fact shown that the meaning of "morally responsible" must be given by paradigm cases, only that *if* it can be given in terms of paradigm cases then the problem of 'freedom of the will' (or at least this part of it) will be solved. But if I am right in thinking that any account of the intension of "morally responsible" will contain (1) then it would seem that this is the *only* possible way of solving this problem.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>This claim has, of course, been discussed by a number of philosophers. See, for instance, David Hume, *Treatise*, Bk. I, pt. III, sec. 2; R. E. Hobart, "Free Will As Involving Determination And Inconceivable Without It," reprinted in Bernard Berofsky ed. *Free Will and Determinism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); or Philippa Foot, "Free Will as Involving Determinism," also in Berofsky.

*University of New Mexico*