

THE RELEVANCE OF LINGUISTIC THEORY TO THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL

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As I see it, the problem of free will may be roughly stated as follows: Whether or not our feeling of freedom is an illusion. So stated, I do not believe that the problem is a "pseudo-problem"; that is, a puzzlement which arises out of the misuse of language or a misunderstanding of the nature of causal laws, and so on (although it is quite likely that there are such misuses and misunderstandings). Rather, it is a *real* problem, and it is a problem which contemporary thinkers have by and large, failed to face. So in this paper I try to face it and having done so, I answer the question: "Is our feeling of freedom an illusion?" as follows: "No, it is not." But first . . .

I assume that what I call "our feeling of freedom" is a fact; that is, that most of us, at least in our philosophically unreflective moments, do believe in regard to at least some of the choices and decisions we have made in the past that they were *free* choices; i.e., that they were made in circumstances involving equally compelling alternatives, that they were not simply expressions of our strongest *desires*, that they were not *causally* determined by our environmental histories, and they they did not simply flow from our already formed characters but in fact seemed, in some way not quite clear to us, to transcend those characters. The most relevant examples of such choices are those which involve questions of morality. For example, I chose not to cheat on the exam even though to do so would have been the only way to pass the course; I chose to leave my name and number on the parked car I hit even though I knew this would result in the personal loss of a substantial amount of money, and so on. These choices were not *easy* choices to make. In each case I was torn between two compelling alternatives representing desire and duty. And it is, perhaps, precisely because these choices were *not* easy ones to make that I am convinced that they were *free* choices. But, the question is, is my conviction a reasonable one? The phenomenological evidence is in. Introspection tells me I am free. But am I *really* free?¹

It is sometimes supposed that to ask the question "Am I really free?" is just to ask the question "Are some of my choices uncaused?"; but unless the term 'uncaused' here is further qualified (at least in the sense that some answer is given to the question "Uncaused by what?") this interpretation is singularly unilluminating. Let us then qualify 'uncaused' here and restate the question as follows: "Are some of my choices uncaused by anything other than my *self*?" As I have already indicated, introspection

prompts me to answer the question "Yes," and I assume, would prompt most of us to answer the question "Yes," but this is to say (again) no more than that we believe ourselves to be free; that we do indeed have "the feeling of freedom." The question remains "Am I *really* free? Is it *really* the case that some of my choices are uncaused by anything other than myself?" Some philosophers, of course, have contended that the question, so stated, is quite misleading. Consider the following view which I shall call the *empiricist* view:

All our actions, including our choices, follow from our characters, and our characters follow from the education and circumstances provided us by society. If this is the case, it would seem that our so-called free choices are not made by ourselves but by our society. But, the empiricist argues, it does not follow from this that we are not free, since we are a part of society and as capable of making our own characters as others are of making them for us. If society educates us, so can we educate ourselves. If the behavior modificationist can influence our characters, so can we turn the techniques of the modificationist on ourselves and take a hand in forming our own characters. Insofar as our own characters are formed by our *self*, we may say then that the choices which follow from our characters are free choices. It is true, of course, that I will only take such a hand in modifying my own character *if I wish* to so alter it, but in a society which includes freedom among its values; i.e., in a society which teaches its members: You *can* change, if you wish; the wish will have been implanted (depending of course on my greater or lesser exposure to the freedom value in the society). Hence, I *am* free, because to say that I am free is just to say that I can change if I want to and that I can learn to want to from society. But it does not make sense, the empiricist goes on, to say that I am *really* free, meaning that there is some objective reality supporting my feeling of freedom. Indeed, the feeling of freedom is *all* there is to freedom, since to say that I can change if I want to and that I can learn to want to from society is to say no more than that I am free if I think I am and I can come to think I am if society tells me I am. It is, therefore, misleading to ask the question "Am I *really* free?" since there is no such thing as *real* freedom; there is no freedom beyond the phenomenon; my feeling of freedom is all there is to freedom. "I am free" means "I think I am free," and I can learn to be free only if society so teaches me.

The view that I have just described may be summed up as the view that freedom is a *social phenomenon*. It is a view similar to that held by any number of empiricist philosophers and by most behavioral psychologists. It is a view quite consistent with the *tabula rasa* concept of human nature, that is, it seems to be the only way to account for the existence of

the feeling of freedom in a being who comes into the world totally ignorant and completely malleable to society's manipulations. It is the view that freedom, like every other interesting attribute of the human animal, is an acquired characteristic, accidental rather than essential. Opposed to the view that freedom is a social phenomenon is the view that freedom is an *individual reality*, which is the view that the human individual is innately, inherently, essentially free; that man does not *learn* to be free (although he may have to learn how to use his freedom); that man does not come into the world totally ignorant but rather equipped with the *innate* ability to make free choices. On this view, the question "Am I *really* free?" not only makes sense but is answered firmly "Yes, I am *really* free, whether I ever stop to think about it or not, whether society limits my alternatives or not; indeed, I am free despite anything I or society can do about it (although perhaps society can persuade me to use my freedom in its interests) since I am *born* free; since it is the very essence of my human nature to be free."

The view just described is a view held by a good many Christians, some rationalist philosophers, and (perhaps) some existentialists.² I shall call the view the *rationalist* view, as opposed to the preceding *empiricist* one, hastening to point out that all rationalists have not held it, but since the innateness claim is a rationalist sort of claim, I can see no reason not to call it for present purposes the rationalist view of freedom. And so the question we began with: "Is our feeling of freedom an illusion?" which was taken to mean "Am I *really* free?" becomes "Who is correct, the rationalist or the empiricist?"

It is my contention that the rationalist is correct, or more nearly correct, and the empiricist wrong, or more nearly wrong here, and I can think of two ways in which to support my contention, one of which I shall not pursue. I shall *not* argue (although it seems to me a reasonable argument) that the view that freedom is a social phenomenon is false because it cannot account for the emergence of freedom as a social value. That is, I shall not raise the question: How does a society of *individuals* who have no concept of freedom arrive at *its* concept of freedom? Rather, I shall argue that the free act is essentially a creative act, and that there is empirically justifiable evidence to support the claim that the human individual (that is, you and me and every other human being who has lived or who ever will live) is innately, essentially creative.

Unfortunately, I cannot (within the confines of the paper) fully develop a thesis regarding the nature of creativity. But I have claimed that freedom is the essence of creativity and, in good conscience, I ought to support that claim. I shall do so simply by reminding you of the story of Buridan's ass. As you no doubt recall, the animal in question found

himself standing at a point equidistant from two separate and quite appetizing bunches of hay. Being unable to decide which way to turn (since hunger, his strongest desire, compelled him to go in two directions at once) the unfortunate beast starved to death. I want to suggest that had Buridan's ass made a decision and turned in one direction or the other, he would have been engaged in, at the moment of decision, a creative activity. He would have transcended himself in the same way that the artist goes one step beyond the given at the moment of artistic production.

Creativity is not, of course, limited to the making of choices between equally compelling alternatives. It is involved in any activity in which the output exceeds the input in the sense that *here* we have a whole greater than the sum of its parts. It is what makes us, after reading our friend's poem, say with amazement, "I didn't know he had it in him!" because, in fact, he *didn't* have it "in him." Creativity *begins* with experience, but produces that which cannot be explained or accounted for by appeals to that experience. It results in the novel, the innovative, the different; the new way of looking at an old idea.

At this point, of course, one may very well be tempted to say: "So what? So the free act is a creative act. What of it? Not all of us write poems like your friend. Perhaps there are a few talented individuals who are free, but what about the rest of us? And anyway, can't the creativity and/or freedom of these individuals be accounted for on the view that freedom is a social phenomenon?"

So we need to answer two questions here: How do we know that creativity is innate (if it is innate)? And how do we know that *all* of us and not just a favored few are creative? To answer the second question it would suffice to find some ability which all of us have and use and which is an essentially creative ability. There is, of course, such an ability; it is the ability to speak and understand the sentences of a natural human language. No knowledge of linguistics and very little reflection suffice to support this claim. One need only consider the fact that although the sentence you are reading now is one you have never encountered before, you are able to understand it, and the fact that of the sentences you have uttered today, probably all of them were entirely new and novel utterances, never produced or heard by you before. But even if linguistic ability is an essentially creative ability and, therefore, we are all creative, we are still left with the question: How do we know that creativity is innate (if it is)? Or rather, now that we have placed things in a linguistic framework, how do we know that the ability to produce and understand the indefinitely many sentences of a natural language is innate?

On the face of it, the claim that this ability *is* innate is just ridiculous. No one is born with an innate knowledge of any language. But the

claim need not be taken so broadly. It is not the case that the language is innate, but rather that the ability to learn a language is innate, this will not suffice to support our claim regarding man's essential creativity if the learning or acquisition of a language on the part of the child is not itself a creative activity. The question now becomes: Is language learning a creative activity? And the only way to answer that question is to find out first just what it is that a child learns when he or she learns a language. The relevance of linguistic theory to the problem begins to be felt—for what linguistic theory tells us is what it is that we 'know' when we know a language; that is, what a child 'learns' when he or she learns a language. And what it is that we know when we know a language is the grammar of that language.

The grammar is not learned, of course, in the sense that one learns "the rules of grammar" in what used to be called grammar school. But it is learned in the sense that the child develops or acquires the ability to speak a language which *has* a grammar. And to say that a language *has* a grammar is to say that the language can be described in terms of a system of rules which relate sounds and meanings to various ways. So we can speak of a child learning the rules by which we mean that he or she acquires the ability to relate sounds and meanings in accordance with the rules of the language. In this sense we can talk about linguistic knowledge and learning and so on, although we by no means mean conscious knowledge and learning and so on. So we can say that *what* it is that the child learns when he or she learns a language is a system of rules of a very complex and highly restrictive sort. I take the nature and substance of these rules to be essentially as Noam Chomsky describes them in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* and other works. I want to point to one feature or characteristic of these rules which I believe is relevant to the present discussion; namely, the fact that the rules of language (indeed, of any human language so far encountered), though themselves finite, iterate to specify a theoretically *infinite* set of grammatical sentences of the language. We already noted this fact when we talked about the ability we all have to produce and understand entirely new and different sentences. The question is: How does the child learn the system of rules which enables him to do this in the brief span of two or three years from what amounts to a highly degenerate sample of the language? How is it that the child's ultimate knowledge of language extends far beyond the data presented to him; that the theory (the grammar) he has in some way developed has a predictive scope of which the data on which it is based constitute a negligible part?

It has been argued by Chomsky and others, of course, that either the child has an innate ability to learn the rules, or the rules themselves are, in

some sense, innate. The latter claim is, of course, the stronger, and I shall not make it. On the other hand, the former claim; i.e., the claim that the child has an innate ability to learn these rules is not a very startling one. All normal human beings do learn to speak and it seems reasonable to suppose that they are genetically predisposed to do so in a way that dogs and horses are not. What is of interest to the present thesis, however, is: What is the *nature* of this predisposition? What *is* this innate ability like? What *kind* of an ability is it? Unfortunately, the young discipline of developmental psycholinguistics has yet to provide a comprehensive answer to these questions. But it seems clear that, in the sense I have given to the term 'creative,' that ability is, or involves (at the very least) the ability to create. It is or presupposes the ability to transcend the given, to get out of something more than has been put into it, to produce the whole which is greater than the sum of its parts, to begin with experience and with that which cannot be explained solely by appeals to that experience.

I asked the question earlier: How do we know that creativity is innate? The answer now is obvious. If the ability to learn a language is an essentially creative ability, then since the ability to learn a language appears to be innate, it follows that creativity is innate. The question whether the ability to learn a language is essentially a creative ability remains, of course, to be completely answered. But the evidence to date (the complexity of the system of rules which constitute a grammar plus the limited amount of time and paucity of data available to the child who learns that grammar) strongly suggest that learning a language is indeed a highly creative activity. The evidence suggests then that the human individual is essentially creative, and hence, essentially free. The answer to the original question "Is the feeling of freedom an illusion?" is "No, I am really free, whether I ever stop to think about it or not, whether society limits my alternatives or not; indeed, I am free despite anything I or society can do about it since I am *born* free; since it is the very essence of my human nature to be free.

NOTES

¹I hasten to mention at this point (although perhaps it is obvious) that the question "Am I really free?" is not a question about whether I do or do not have certain political or civil liberties. The question "Am I really free?" is not like the question "Am I free to worship in the church or synagogue of my choice?" The latter question is a question about what, if any, alternatives are available for me to choose from; the former question is a question about whether, given the available alternatives, I am able to make a choice which is indeed *my* choice and which is not simply the result of previous psychological and/or social conditioning.

²I say "perhaps" here since I take it that it would be inconsistent of the true existentialist to hold any view regarding the essence of man; but it is certainly a view that can be 'picked up' from the existentialists.