

OF COURSE WE DO!

A REPLY TO PAUL COULAM'S DO WE CHOOSE WHAT WE DO?

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The appeal of determinism to intelligent people is a real puzzle to me. The denial of free will is so self-evidently wrong-headed — whether one considers it from the point of view of personal experience, or more strictly, from the point of view of logic — that I simply cannot understand how men and women with the willpower to earn university degrees can be bothered to give determinism the time of day, let alone take it seriously.

Generally speaking, then, I have no patience with determinists, and do not usually bother to give them time or take them seriously. But Paul Coulam once kindly gave me some of his time, so I will respond in kind and here-with relay, *via* the good offices of the Libertarian Alliance, my instant reactions to his essay¹ — which I have read quickly, once, and only because a good friend asked me to.

1. COMPATIBILISM IS SELF-CONTRADICTIONARY

Determinism is the *contrary* of free will. Determinism maintains that human actions are the result of forces outside individual human control. Exponents of free will maintain the opposite: that each human being is a self-directing causal agent; i.e., aside from reflexes and automated body mechanisms, each causes his or her own actions.

Thus to pretend that determinism and free will are *compatible*, as Paul does, is as clear a self-contradiction as one could wish to find. One might equally well assert that there is no conflict in claiming something to be wet and

dry at the same time; or that there is nothing unusual in swearing that a man is both innocent and guilty of a crime.

No matter *what* they say, nor *how much* they say, compatibilists rule themselves out of the court of rational debate as soon as they state their thesis.

2. DENNETT DOES NOT INSPIRE

Paul relies heavily on the views of Daniel C. Dennett. Dennett is indeed a well-known philosopher, but citing him as a source hardly inspires confidence. I say this because in his 1991 book *Consciousness Explained*,² Dennett held that consciousness is an illusion; i.e., that it does not really exist. Since denials of consciousness are commonly associated with determinism, indeed logically entail it, it needs to be pointed out about Dennett that:

- a) he had to be conscious himself — if only of the terms ‘consciousness’ and ‘illusion’ — before he could make the claim that consciousness is an illusion;
- b) he assumed the existence of consciousness in other people; i.e. he attempted to draw their conscious attention to his own consciously-held ideas — by publishing a book;
- c) he could not deny consciousness without admitting its existence. Otherwise, what was it that was being denied? What means were employed to make the denial? To which faculty was the denial directed? And for what purpose? Consciousness is in fact axiomatic, it cannot be denied without self-contradiction.

Further, d) the concept ‘illusion’ came into being in order to help us distinguish between the real and the merely apparent. The term ‘illusion’ is therefore unintelligible unless there are real, non-illusionary existents (such as consciousness) to contrast illusions with.

To repeat, philosophers who make such obvious mistakes, or who leave unanswered such obvious problems, do not inspire confidence.

3. NO CONFLICT BETWEEN CAUSALITY AND WILL

Of course all events are caused. But if we are to avoid an infinite regress, we must presuppose something which *acts as a cause*. *Vis-à-vis* physical reality, the ‘first cause’ is the universe itself, the forces of which initiate or bring about physical events.



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Of course human actions are caused. But they are not caused blindly by antecedent molecular motions, they are caused by human volition. There is no conflict between causality and free will: free will *acts as a cause*.

Neither are emotions caused blindly by random or instinctive neuron firings. They are the consequences of previous value judgements. We programme our own emotional life as we grow up: firstly, according to the values we choose; secondly, according to the choices we thereafter make in pursuit of those values. Our emotional responses do indeed become automated, but this fact does not imply that emotions are determined.

To conclude here, as Brian Caplan observed in the LA's Philosophical Notes No. 46,³ matters of scientific causality are largely irrelevant when discussing free will.

4. AN ILLOGICAL ATTACK ON MACHAN

Paul labels as "incoherent" and "feeble" an argument of Tibor Machan's to the effect that attempting to persuade people of the truth of determinism implies the ability of the audience to change their views. But Paul's remark constitutes an *argumentum ad hominem*. Name-calling of this kind, while a popular tactic in debate, is logically invalid and, in philosophy, carries no weight at all.

Since in attempting to rebut Machan Paul then proceeds to employ ambiguity —what the late Ronald Merrill called a "meaning switch cheapo", i.e., he uses different senses of the word 'force' to pretend that an argument is an attempt to force — Paul's rebuttal is also invalid. It is thus rather *his* argument which is feeble.

5. DETERMINISM IS SELF-DEFEATING

The argument for determinism is self-defeating. If thought is determined, the case for determinism must itself be determined. Therefore all theories of determinism, whether Hobbesian, Marxian, Freudian or behaviouristic, are confined to the person who expounds them: they cannot have any universal validity.

This definitive and insuperable argument against determinism (an argument which also defeats relativism, since any relativistic theory must itself be relative) has been around at least since the time of Epicurus. It has been restated frequently, and in recent times has been published in well-known works by writers such as Ayn Rand (*The Objectivist Newsletter*), Nathaniel Branden (*The Psychology of Self Esteem*), Brand Blanshard (*Reason and Analysis*) and Lionel Ruby (*Logic: An Introduction*).⁴ There is little excuse for not knowing it, and no excuse for remaining a determinist after reading it.

6. HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS OF CHOICE

Conceptions such as 'conjecture' and 'incentive', which Paul uses freely, assume freedom of choice. A conjecture is chosen by its proponent from amongst alternatives, while an incentive spurs him to act in one way rather than another; it is designed to influence choice.

This, point demonstrates the genuine strength of Tibor's argument. In order to communicate his views, Paul unconsciously employs concepts which contradict his thesis. As Blanshard said of the Logical Positivists, their hidden assumptions constantly burst the bounds of their theories.

7. APPEALS TO AUTHORITY DON'T WASH

Saying something has been refuted by "Frankfurt *et al.*", as Paul does, is an *argumentum ad vericundiam*, an appeal to authority. The claim has no validity unless Frankfurt's case is demonstrated (i.e. shown to be sound) there and then. Paul doesn't do this.

8. A STOLEN CONCEPT

Determinism depends for its existence as a theory upon the prior concept of free will. Proponents of determinism have only been able to expound their thesis because free will exists to contrast it with. Take away free will and you take away the possibility of explaining determinism.

In the Objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand this form of faulty reasoning is called 'the fallacy of the stolen concept'. It was defined by Ayn Rand, and comprehensively described by Nathaniel Branden in an article in *The Objectivist Newsletter* in 1963.⁵

9. ESPOUSING DETERMINISM IMPLIES FREE WILL

Every normal human being is aware that he or she has free will. We choose chocolate or vanilla flavoured ice-cream, or none at all; we choose Givenchy or Rochas aftershave or, like myself choose not to wear it; we choose sexual partners, or abstain from sex (well, some do).

Determinists deny what we all know exists, but they can only effect their denial because free will does *in fact* exist: otherwise a) no-one would know what they were talking about; and b) they would not be able to choose to advocate determinism.

10. POPPER OPPOSED DETERMINISM

Paul claims to be a Popperian. But Popper was a very determined *indeterminist*. To espouse determinism is therefore to reject Popper's philosophy of Critical Rationalism, or fallibilism, which Popper explicitly founded on our ability to criticise; that is, on our ability to choose *not* to accept things on authority.

I could probably say more, but I have other things to do. And just about anything one chooses to do is more worthwhile than discussing a theory as untenable as determinism.

NOTES

1. Paul Coulam, *Do We Choose To Do What We Do? Freedom, Determinism, The Taste For Homosexuality and The Preference for Chocolate Ice-Cream*, Philosophical Notes No. 53, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1999.
2. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1993. My account of Dennett is taken second hand from John Searle. See *The Mystery of Consciousness*, Granta Books, London, 1997.
3. Bryan Caplan, *Some Arguments for the Existence of Free Will and Some Objections Answered*, Philosophical Notes No. 46, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1997.
4. "The Contradiction of Determinism" (authored by Nathaniel Branden but content by Ayn Rand), *The Objectivist Newsletter*, Vol. 2 No. 5, May 1963; Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, Nash, Los Angeles, 1969; Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis*, Open Court, La Salle, Illinois, 1964, p. 39, p. 41; Lionel Ruby, *Logic: An Introduction*, Lippincott, New York, 1960, pp. 331-337, pp. 499-502.
5. "The Stolen Concept" (again, authored by Nathaniel Branden, content by Ayn Rand), *The Objectivist Newsletter*, Vol. 2 No. 1, January 1963.