

Is free will just another chaotic process?

"rationalist" rather than "subjectivist" qualifications. He insists only on the unavoidability of some "unqualified" thoughts in thinking or inquiring into anything. And those thoughts must be assessed in their proper setting on their merits, not on their personal or social provenance. If that is right, it is enough to render unacceptable any completely general form of relativism or subjectivism. There need be no set of unrevisable or foundational or universal truths – no board of directors that can't be fired – to constrain or direct all human thought. It is enough that "in any process of reasoning or argument there must be some thoughts that one simply thinks from the inside".

In this and other respects, Nagel is perhaps not best served by his title, *The Last Word*. For one thing, it carries the unfortunate and no doubt unintended suggestion that this is the last word on philosophy we are going to get from Thomas Nagel – a depressing prospect. But it also suggests that in matters of both theoretical and practical human concern, Nagel thinks there is a last word – something that settles the question once and for all – and, what is more, that something called "reason" delivers it.

That is just what I think those who gravitate towards relativism and subjectivism fear most. When they hear phrases like "the last word", "the universal authority" or "validity" of the dictates of "reason", the "dominance" of certain thoughts over all others, or the indispensability of beliefs we simply "cannot avoid having", they feel threatened. They are afraid that somebody or something is going to impose on them specific beliefs or rules or directives to which they are told they must conform. And they resist. But that is not the point, or the aim, of Nagel's insistence on the unavoidability of thinking something or other "straight", or "from the inside". That requires only that, at each point of any process of thinking, there be something that is being put forward, and is up for assessment, on the basis of the evidence or considerations then available. What is relied on at one time can be brought into question in turn by further, overriding considerations. There is, in that sense, no final word. Any resting-place can be reconsidered if necessary, and further efforts made to arrive at an even better judgment as to what is so.

That, I believe, is Thomas Nagel's final view in this book, but it must be said that the chapter on ethics or "practical reason" also leaves some doubt. He stresses the sheer inescapability of some moral or evaluative thought or other in determining what one should do. One's verdict can always be challenged by further evaluative thought, but it cannot be supplanted by an external description of one's psychological state, or its origin. But he goes on to argue that "practical reason" is completely general and "impersonal", and requires that the same answer be given to the question by anyone to whom the same data are presented. From this, he sees the prospect of "universal standards for determining what we should do", which will yield the conclusion that "each person has a noninstrumental reason to consider the interests of others" and so require of each of us "some kind of impartial consideration for everyone".

The doubt is not whether these are acceptable, even admirable, moral views. The question is whether this substantial morality can be extracted from, and so mandated by, nothing more than the idea of "reason", or even "practical reason", alone. You don't have to be Protagoras, or Nietzsche, to wonder how such a robust, demanding creature can be drawn fully formed out of that insubstantial-looking silk hat.

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Aristotle nicely expressed a common conception of human agency in remarking that the origin of voluntary actions – those for which people are responsible – lies in the agent, so that it is up to the agent to do them or not to do them (*Nicomachean Ethics*, iii 1). Philosophers, however, have argued ever since about just what this notion of being "originators" of our actions comes to, and about whether finite agents such as ourselves, subjected to myriad influences of nature and nurture, could possibly satisfy it. So much so, that it is tempting for some to suppose that the whole discussion rests on a deep confusion or illusion in our ordinary ways of thinking about freedom of action ("free will") and the responsibility it confers. Richard Double succumbs to this temptation in *Metaphilosophy and Free Will*, his second book on the topic. According to Double, the dispute is irresolvable, because philosophers accept different metaphilosophies – views of what philosophy is, what it can do, and (especially) what it is *for*. The examples he gives are *Philosophy as Worldview Construction*, *Philosophy as Conversation*, *Philosophy as Praxis* and *Philosophy as Underpinnings* (of, for example, common sense or religion). Part of the importance of metaphilosophies is supposed to be that they largely determine the position one has on specific philosophical issues (such as what freedom of will consists in and whether or not we have it). The other part lies in their "radical unprovability". Metaphilosophies, on Double's telling, have an evaluative as well as alethic aspect. One cannot support one's favoured view merely by arguing that its procedures are most conducive to finding the *truth*. For perhaps the truest picture of things is not the best one to hold (for moral or broadly aesthetic reasons). And there are familiar reasons to suppose that one is not going to be able incontrovertibly to *prove* the objectivity of one set of basic values as against its rivals.

To many, this will have a familiar, post-modernist ring. But it would be inaccurate to understand Double's thesis in this way. As a clear-eyed analytical philosopher, Double separates the question of what *is* the case from how or whether we may come to *know* it (the confusion of which is the original sin of all that goes by the banner of "postmodernism"), but he seems to share with the postmodernists the notion that giving up the quest for objective certainty has dramatic ramifications for intellectual inquiry.

But why make such a fuss about our views' lacking certainty? Let us ignore the evaluative feature of "bestness" that we're supposed to care about – something Double never makes a case for – and simply focus on the rational justification or warrant we might have for believing a given view is *true*. It hardly needs arguing that we cannot give an argument for any such view that will satisfy all theorists, no matter what their broad intellectual orientation. So what? Why suppose that my *being justified* in holding a particular view requires that I be able to *justify* it to the satisfaction of all comers? All argument has to come to an end somewhere. Isn't it inevitable for all of us, when faced with an opponent holding different basic convictions, to suppose that, however fair-minded and intelligent they may be, they are simply failing to see something they ought to see? Doesn't Double think that, with

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Richard Double

METAPHILOSOPHY AND
FREE WILL
176pp. Oxford University Press. £30.
0 19 510762 4

Thomas Pink

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FREEDOM
284pp. Cambridge University Press. £35.
0 521 55504 3

Robert Kane

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FREE WILL
268pp. Oxford University Press. £35.
0 19 510550 8

respect to those of us who reject his own metaphilosophical views? (If not, why does he bother writing a book that attempts *inter alia* to persuade us of those views?)

Even if I am right that Double's worries over the consequences of permanent uncertainty are misguided, the practice of elaborating and debating conceptions of free will would be pointless if, as Double contends, particular conclusions become inevitable once one makes very general, contentious assumptions about how best to proceed. But he does not make a convincing case for this claim. Consider Double's own general outlook, a version of world-view construction that sees philosophy as continuous with science. On this approach, philosophy should follow the same general procedures and constraints of science by being frugal in its posits, seeking theoretical unification of a wide domain of phenomena, adopting the simplest hypothesis adequate to the task, and so on. Such a broad approach, says Double, *inevitably* leads to "free will subjectivism" – the view that the concept of free will does not apply to any objective feature of reality (or even of *possible* reality), but expresses a subjective evaluative judgment instead. Double offers a number of quick arguments for this conclusion, none of them very plausible. I'll briefly note two.

First, he suggests that *all* the main positions on the nature of human freedom of will appear true to a person with his methodological proclivities, depending on how one frames the question. When we ask, for example, whether our acting freely is consistent with those actions, being a logical consequence of states of the world in the remote past together with impersonal laws of nature, the answer seems to be "no". So free action must be causally undetermined. But things appear differently when, instead, we consider the idea of behaviour that issues from non-deterministic (that is, merely probabilistic) causes that constitute our having reasons for acting in various ways. If we frame the matter this way and ask whether *any* of the possible outcomes, no matter how improbable, is explainable by citing the relevant causal factor, the answer again seems "no". For surely, Double

suggests, a satisfactory explanation requires that the factor cited makes the outcome at least *more likely than not*. But this will not be possible if free will requires, as it seems, that my free actions be explainable whichever way I choose (the probable or the improbable). But then free action is not consistent with causal indeterminism either. So either it is simply a contradictory notion – inconsistent with both determinism and indeterminism – or it is non-objective. (Double goes on to argue for the second of these unhappy alternatives.)

But the argument here is simply not cogent. Statistical, indeterministic explanation is a familiar feature of contemporary science. Few philosophers of science (including many that share Double's broad outlook) would suppose that citing a cause that made an effect, say, 70 per cent likely is explanatory, while citing a cause that made it 20 per cent likely is not. For, either way, we explain the effect by identifying a mechanism that generated the effect. Whether that mechanism was *likely* (or in the limiting, deterministic case, *certain*) to have generated that particular effect is beside the point. Double urges that the rationality of free choice, however, requires a higher standard on explanation. But he fails to defend this claim other than by appeal to intuition, one that, apparently, other philosophers of his own theoretical outlook do not widely share. So much, then, for the *ineluctability* of specific philosophical theses given one's broad orientation.

A second basis Richard Double offers for free-will subjectivism is that the "free" in "free choice" serves no explanatory purpose. We can explain features of the world by reference to the notion of "choice", but not by appeal to the putative "freedom" of those choices. *The Psychology of Freedom* by Thomas Pink suggests otherwise. It is an essay on the "folk psychological" understanding of the role of freedom of choice – the understanding implicit in our shared, pre-theoretical conception of the nature of the mind and its capacities. According to Pink, we understand freedom of choice as the capacity whereby people both *resolve indecision* due to conflicting desires and *stabilize the strength of their desires*, committing themselves to acting on the basis of certain ones. Doing so makes possible rational planning for the future. (If I thought it as likely as not that I would change my intentions before carrying out a plan, it would be pointless to bother making plans in the first place.) We exercise freedom of choice at critical junctures that determine broad plans of action that will structure subsequent behaviour. The central explanatory role of *freedom* of choice, then, is to explain why choices have the general character they do (such as why they take place in certain kinds of contexts and why they have the characteristic effects of structuring agents' desires for significant periods of time).

Pink plausibly argues this basic thesis (though at much greater length than necessary; in general, Pink tediously repeats central themes). Less plausible, however, is Pink's *restriction* of the role of freedom of choice to fixing aspects of one's plans. We do not experience most of our everyday actions as flowing determinately out of such comparatively rare previous decisions. It seems open to us to modify them "on the spot",



A still from Rebecca Horn's 1990 film *Buster's Bedroom*; from *Rebecca Horn: The glance of infinity*, edited by Carl Haenlein – a monograph which encompasses Horn's performances, films, sculptures and installations (400pp. Scalo/Thames and Hudson. £47.50. 3 931141 66 7)

independently of any new information that might have come our way. It is enough for Pink's thesis that plan-determining choices result in a fairly stable ranking of our desires and purposes, making it more likely than not that our future actions will conform to those plans. But if our folk understanding is correct, final determination of how we shall act comes when we put the rubber to the road in practical action.

So what might this "final determination" – Aristotle's "the origin is in us" – amount to? On this matter of the intrinsic nature of free choice Thomas Pink is mostly silent. But it wholly occupies the attention of Robert Kane. His complex and carefully argued book *The Significance of Free Will* is the culmination of twenty-five years of thought on the matter. Kane's burden is to reconcile a robust understanding of human autonomy with a picture of human beings as wholly enmeshed in the natural world the causal structure of which physical theory seeks to describe. He criticizes much previous philosophical theorizing on just this score, claiming that appeals, for example, to a fundamentally personal form of causation ("agent causation") are irreconcilable with such naturalism about human nature. Throughout, he emphasizes that though his own suggestions are necessarily speculative, they turn on notions that are already present in contemporary physical theorizing.

On Kane's view, free choices or "willingness" occur in the context of conscious deliberation. He discusses six different kinds of willings (including the oft-ignored phenomena of attentional efforts). Here, I'll focus on his account of moral and prudential choices, which he treats similarly. According to Kane, one exercises freedom of will only in the face of conflict in one's motivations, where one feels a pull towards each of two or more courses of action, reflecting different purposes or preferences one has. (Do I eat the second piece of cake or not?) These conflicts give rise to an effort of will in which the agent struggles to prioritize his purposes or goals. Kane conjectures that this protracted effort of will is a causally indeterminate process. He models his understanding of this on the indeterminacy of position and momentum of an individual particle at the quantum level prior to a measurement (on the standard interpretation of quantum theory), and suggests that this could be true of even complex processes in our brains involving many neuron firings and connections, provided that "chaotic processes" – processes sensitive to minute changes in initial conditions

– occur in the brain that amplify indeterminate events at the micro-level. Persons experience these complex processes as efforts of will they are making to resist temptation in moral and prudential situations. This process culminates in a choice that resolves the indecision.

Now many philosophers object to this on the grounds that quantum-based indeterminacy can inject only a degree of randomness into our picture of freedom of will. We haven't seen how the agent controls the way the indeterminate process happens to go. Kane responds by positing a "self network". He conceives this as a comprehensive network of neural connections representing the agent's general motivational system – his plans, aspirations and ideals. These diverse neural circuits could act in concert by forming a synchronized pattern of oscillations or wave activity of a sort that recent studies suggest. He then supposes that

the neural events corresponding to our efforts and choices would be overlaid by the wave patterns unifying the self-network – so that the wave patterns and the effort or choice events are coupled, causally influencing and interacting with each other. The effort and choice events would occur, so to speak, "within" the self-network whose distinctive patterns of oscillations were superimposed on them. In turn, the superimposed patterns of oscillations of the self-network would be contributing causes to choice, pushing one competing reason-network over the top, so to speak, so that A is chosen for reasons R rather than B for reasons R' (or vice versa) – thus supporting the belief that the efforts and choices are our doings, the products of our selves.

The influencing activity of the self-network, then, is a kind of "naturalistic" surrogate for the ontologically basic, personal form of causation (causation by a special kind of substance – persons) posited by some other philosophers.

How successful is Kane in providing an account of freedom of the will that is both adequate to our pre-theoretical understanding and yet consonant with physical theorizing? In my judgment, he has gone farther than any other philosopher working within the constraint of making no basic ontological posits concerning only persons and their capacities. (And other frameworks can easily appropriate a number of important points Kane makes on subsidiary matters.) But why exactly do Kane and so many other contemporary philosophers feel this constraint is necessary? Clearly, we have ample

reason to suppose that everything that happens at the macroscopic level of chairs, clouds and people is causally sustained in existence by microscopic processes of the kind investigated by basic physics. But it is an open empirical question whether, at certain critical junctures in nature, complex systems of microscopic particles give rise to "emergent", holistic features that

exert a non-derivative form of causal efficacy, introducing a new fundamental causal factor that interacts with basic physical forces. (This is not to suppose the appearance of a new kind of entity or substance, such as the "entelechy" of vitalism.) Perhaps this is true of certain properties in chemistry, in relation to the "dissipative structures" in non-equilibrium thermodynamics studied by the Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine. Perhaps it is true of features connected to the hierarchical control exhibited by biological cells and organs. Or perhaps it is true only of systems such as ourselves that enjoy conscious awareness and a rich array of intentional states (beliefs, desires, hopes, intentions, and so on). Who can say, at this stage of the game?

It is plausible that elaborating Robert Kane's picture will already require his making some such emergentist assumption connected to the indeterminacy of intentional states, though I haven't space to make good on this contention here. If so, why not go further and continue to suppose – given our interpersonal commitments, and failing convincing evidence to the contrary, as opposed to mere rhetorical bluster – that human persons, while wholly natural, have capacities that are not merely a function of the activity of underlying microphysics? Certainly, such a robust picture of the metaphysical underpinnings of free will (on which the category of persons is basic) is more likely to satisfy than a reductive one that accounts for the freedom of persons in terms of the activity of the subpersonal.

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