

Free will, determinism and suicide

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The problem of free will has occupied the minds of men at least since antiquity. Traditionally, the question doesn't concern whether we *feel* free or not when acting or deciding what to do, but whether we *are* free or not. It's not, stated as an ontological question, primarily a query of *how* free we are, but if we are free *at all*. Since the 17th century, the problem has been formulated as the question *whether there can be any free will if determinism is true*.

Determinism can be defined in many ways. I will stick to this, rather crude, definition: determinism is the hypothesis that everything that happens is caused by prior states in the world. The fundamental point here is that everything that happens is taken to be sufficiently determined by prior states, hence there could never have been any real alternatives to what actually happened. Whether determinism is true or not is still an open issue; we are not, at the present stage of science, able to give a definitive answer.

To summarize the most common types of answers to the question of free will, we can distinguish between three main types of answers:

Compatibilism defines freedom as *the power to act according to one's will*, not being constrained by external or internal pressure to a degree that makes the action compelled. You are free if you did what you did because you wanted to, and not for other reasons. It's a widely held position in the current debate, but this solution does not actually state that our *will* is free: the will is caused by our character, our memories and our mood as well as by our perception of the situation in which we act. Our will, like everything else, is an integral part of an all-encompassing causal web, and even though we did what we did because we wanted to, we could not have wanted what we didn't want. Hence, freedom (but not free *will*) is possible even if determinism is true according to the compatibilist.

Others disagree with this solution. Traditionally free will has often been regarded as excluded by determinism; if determinism is true there never are any alternatives, hence there cannot be any free will, since *free will presupposes real alternatives*. Both *libertarianism* and *fatalism* demands that we, to be free, must have been able to have wanted what we didn't want, in order that we could have done what we didn't do. Libertarians believe we have this sort of freedom, fatalists don't.

So, which answer to the question is the correct one? Well, all the traditional answers have their weaknesses:

Compatibilism seems to leave out an important intuition we actually have concerning our freedom; that we are free only if we could have acted other than we did.

Libertarianism gives credit to this intuition, but fails to explain this autonomous will. The will is said to be undetermined, but can't of course be random since if an act was the result of

chance it wasn't under the agents control any more than if it were determined: it must therefore be caused by the agent, but nothing must cause the agent to produce this will instead of another one – it's an uncaused cause. Labelling this as *self-determination* just puts a name on the mystery, but doesn't solve it.

Fatalism, finally, states that free will is a convincing illusion, resulting from our limited ability to see what causes us to want what we want and do what we do. Sometimes we feel free, sometimes we don't, but in neither case we could have done anything other than we did since determinism is held to be true. But the cost for this answer is high; we lose our traditional justification for moral blame and moral praise, since no one is held responsible for what he couldn't have avoided doing.

But instead of continuing with this age-old quarrel, I want to take one step back, and ask whether there might be a more fruitful way to handle the question of free will. And there is, I believe, a roundabout way to do so. So, in order to get there, let us turn to another problem for a moment: the problem of suicide.

II

Albert Camus once said, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that there is only one really serious philosophical problem: suicide. When one decides whether life is worth living or not, one answers the fundamental question of philosophy. For Camus our existence is held to be *absurd*, but he advocates an attitude of *revolt* against this absurdity; to live *as if* life has meaning, even though it, objectively, is utterly meaningless – a state of affairs we shouldn't try to hide with ideology or philosophy. So, on the final count, Camus rejects suicide: life is worth living.

It might seem that Camus' statement is far too intellectual in its approach to suicide; a person considering or actually trying to commit suicide usually does so out of *despair*, not as a result of *reflection* on whether life is worth living or not. This desperation can be a result of psychiatric disorder, drug abuse or a life crisis, and the circumstances are characterised by chaos rather than rationality. The person can no longer cope with his situation – he has lost his *felt ability for control*. Life has come to a point where it is unbearable.

But to die is not just a way to flee despair. Considering (or even trying to commit) suicide can, perhaps paradoxically, be understood as an effort to *regain lost control*: the person cannot bring his life in order, but he can, at least, bring it to an end. He doesn't see any way out of his anguish; all roads seem closed, and the only *real* alternative to his unbearable suffering is to end his life. I've been told by people, who have lived with suicide as a very tangible option in their lives, that the thought of ending it all made life just a little bit more bearable. There were always this cliff, these pills, this knife – if the anguish became too great to live with. This situation – to live with despair *or* to end it all – constituted a *choice*, and affirmed an *autonomy* which prior to this seemed nonexistent. It helped them to make it through the days, one by one, until they found life bearable, worth living again.

This actually confirms Camus' point; suicide constitutes a choice of whether life is worth living or not – but we have to notice that when I'm deciding whether *my* life is worth living for *me*, the choice isn't an intellectual choice, but rather an *existential* one.

Kierkegaard might be of some help in making the point clear. In his reasoning on the dialectic of paradox, he notices that for some phenomena, e.g. fidelity and faith, genuine affirmation by necessity includes affirmation of their opposites as well, but includes these as excluded possibilities. E.g. to be faithful entails that you affirm the possibility of infidelity, but include

this as an annulled possibility. And, he says, faith entails the possibility of both the spiritual and the demonic, but the latter is included as a real but rejected possibility. To summarise, the logic of paradox states that sometimes, to affirm something, (X), you have to affirm the possibility of its negation, ($\neg X$), but as an excluded possibility; it's a real possibility, but one that is rejected. But as excluded it isn't ruled once and for all; it remains *present*, but present *as absent*.

I think this line of reasoning applies to what's happening when a person is considering suicide. When living in severe despair, this actualises the existential question whether life is worth living or not. But affirming life entails considering its alternative, death, as a very real possibility; only in contrast to its annihilation one can evaluate the value of one's life.

III

To return to the problem of free will, I think the approach to suicide I just gave can be applied here as well. The question about free will is also, I think, ultimately a question about control. We all know that there is a *felt* difference between what's up to us, and what isn't. The freedom we *experience* comes in degrees: some things, but not others, are felt to be up to us to a higher or lesser degree. The question is not if I, when willing, deciding or acting, am part of a causal web or not, but whether my actions are *mine* – under my control – or not. Maybe we, when thinking about free will, should refrain from immediately starting to analyse this “mineness” in terms of determinism, chance or self-determination; the main thrust of my comparison with contemplating suicide is that the question primarily is of an existential nature.

We can set our freedom in question in a variety of specific cases. And we can, in a sense, question *our very ability to act* as well, something we might feel inclined to do especially when we feel a substantial lack of control over our lives. In part we define ourselves in relation to what we are *not*. It just might be the case that to affirm our freedom we must entertain the idea that it is *possible* that we utterly and in every situation lack control – that we lack free will. It is a possibility that, for most of us, only can be accepted as *excluded*, but the very act of considering this possibility is what reaffirms our freedom in our own eyes.

If this is the case it suggests why the problem of free will continues to be of interest. Some questions have an existential, not only an intellectual, dimension. The question about our freedom is, in the end, a question about how to relate to our own agency and to our responsibility for what we are doing. Others might present the ground for our reasoning, but they can't answer the question in our place. That, only we can do on our own.¹

¹ This paper was read at the International Congress of Cognitive Psychotherapy (ICCP) in Gothenburg 2005. For further discussions on the problem of free will, see Lorentzon, Frank: *Fri vilja?* (Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Göteborg, 2002). *The Myth of Sisyphus* was originally published in 1943 (Camus, Albert: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Gallimard, Paris). For some basic facts about suicide *Nationalencyklopedin* was consulted (Bra böcker, Höganäs, 1989-99). For a thorough discussion on Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Paradox see Hall, Ronald L: *The Human Embrace* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 2000).