

Free Will in a World of Cause and Effect

I. Acting freely

You do what you do of your own free will whenever you do what you most want to do and you do it because you most want to do it.

We often do what we most want to do because we most want to do it; therefore, we often do what we do of our own free will.

That our actions are entirely a mechanistic product of our personalities at the moment that we act does not entail that we don't act freely
for in this mechanistic world we often do what we most want to do because we most want to do it.

—Who could deny that this is true?

II. An argument to the conclusion that free will cannot exist in a mechanistic world

Let's suppose that a piece of behaviour is an action just in case it aims at the satisfaction of some want and, moreover, was caused by that want.

Let's call the totality of a person's beliefs, wants, and desires, patterns of emotional reaction, and goals, values, and ideals, that person's personality.

1. For any action that a person performs, if that action is entirely determined to be the action that it is by that person's personality at the moment he acts, then that person could not have acted otherwise than he did in fact act in performing that action.
2. For any action, if that action was performed freely, then the person who performed it must, at the moment of acting, have been able to have acted otherwise than he did in fact act.

Therefore:

3. For any action that a person performs, if that action is entirely determined to be the action that it is by that person's personality at the moment he acts, then that action was not an action that that person performed freely.

So: To do what you most want to do and to do it because you most want to do it isn't to act freely. On the contrary.

Given that you did it because you most wanted to do it, you couldn't have done otherwise. Since being able to do otherwise is a necessary condition of acting freely, you didn't do it freely.

III. A first criticism of the above argument

Statement 2 is false.

It is no part of what it is to do something freely that at the moment of choice one be able to do something other than what one's personality brings one to do. An action can be performed freely even when the person acting could not have acted otherwise.

What makes an action an action freely performed is that the action aims at what the person who performs it intends to aim at by it.

You act freely whenever you do what you (most) want to do.

You remain in the room of your own free will just so long as you want to remain in the room, though the door is locked against you so that you could not leave the room even if you wanted to.

We are unfree only in regard to those things we want but are unable to secure. Given that there is nothing I can do to bring a just and lasting peace to the Middle East, I am not free to bring a just and lasting peace to the Middle East, no matter how much I desire that justice and peace reign forever in the Middle East.

IV. A second criticism

Statement 1 is false.

A person at the moment of acting can act otherwise even in a mechanistic universe. To say that Sally could have done otherwise than she did is nothing other than to say that Sally would have done otherwise had her values at the moment of her acting been different than they were.

What does it mean to say of a person that she could have done otherwise than she did?

Sally had tea rather than coffee.

To say that Sally could instead have had coffee rather than tea is to say:

If she had wanted to have coffee rather than tea, Sally would have had coffee rather than tea.

So, it is entirely possible for a person to be able to do otherwise even though they are entirely determined by their personality to do what they in fact do.

Is this right? Does "could have done otherwise" simply mean "would have done otherwise had she wanted to do something else instead"?

Consider:

“This piece of iron can rust.” This sentence means simply that if this piece of iron is exposed to water for some period of time, it will rust.

“This piece of iron could have rusted.” This sentence means simply that if something different had happened to this piece of iron than what did happen, this piece of iron would have rusted. (Say, had it been exposed to more water than it was, or had it not been dried quickly after having been exposed to water.)

If Sally acted freely in pulling the cord, then:

- 1) Sally pulled the cord because she wanted to pull it, and
- 2) Sally could have done otherwise than to pull the cord.

But 2) simply means that if Sally had wanted (more) not to pull the cord (but to have done something else instead), Sally would not have pulled the cord. So:

If Sally acted freely in pulling the cord, then:

- 1) Sally pulled the cord because she wanted to pull it, and
- 3) Had she wanted to do something other than to pull the cord, Sally would not have pulled the cord.

Since one can have the ability to do otherwise than one does even though one's doing it is caused by one's personality, one can act freely even though one's action is entirely determined to be the action it is by one's personality.

V. A critical response to the contention that “could have done otherwise” means would have done otherwise had one wanted to

If we are free only in that we would do otherwise were we to want to do otherwise, then we are not free in a way that supports our being morally responsible for our choices and actions.

We are morally responsible for an action only if we could have refrained from performing that action, given our psychologies as they are (and not as they might have been).

The interpretation of “could have done otherwise” as “would have done otherwise had one wanted to” cannot support the idea that we are morally responsible for our actions.

If she is morally responsible for pulling the cord, then Sally could have refrained from pulling the cord even though she most wanted to pull the cord.

“Could have done otherwise” simply means could have done otherwise. Since being able to do otherwise is a necessary condition of acting freely and we cannot do otherwise whenever we do what we do entirely because of our personalities, we cannot act freely if our actions are the mechanical products of our personalities.

