

It's not up to me

If our behaviour is no less the mechanistic result of prior causal factors than is the behaviour of turtles or the weather, then no action we perform is an action we perform freely.

I. The not-up-to-me principle:

If it is not up to some particular person whether such and such happens, and it is also not up to that person whether if such and such were to happen, this and that would happen, then it is not up to that person whether this and that will happen.

So: If it was not up to Sally whether the last non-avian dinosaurs died out 64 million years ago, and it was also not up to Sally whether the extinction of the last non-avian dinosaurs 64 million years ago would produce a rapid increase in species of mammal, then it was not up to Sally whether there was a rapid increase in species of mammal.

If event q is entirely a mechanistic product of event p and it was not up to Sally whether event p occurred, then it is not up to Sally whether event q occurs.

So: If Sally's preference for loud company and fast times is entirely a mechanistic product of her physiology and early environment and neither Sally's physiology nor her early environment were up to Sally, then it was not up to Sally that she prefers loud company and fast times.

II. The hypothesis of mechanism:

Any particular piece of a person's behaviour is a mechanistic product of prior causal factors. It is because things were as they were that Sally is now doing what she's doing.

For any particular piece of a person's behaviour, there is some set of circumstances that obtained previously such that that set of circumstances was causally sufficient to bring about that particular piece of behaviour.

Moreover, for any set of circumstances that obtains, there is some prior set of circumstances the obtaining of which was causally sufficient for that set of circumstances to obtain.

III. A key idea in what it is to perform an action freely:

If Sally set out of her own free will to party hard until tomorrow, then it was up to Sally whether she would set out to party hard until tomorrow.

It's being up to one whether to X is a necessary condition of one's Xing of one's own free will.

If it was not up to one whether to X, then though one Xes, and Xes because one wants to X or loves to X or prefers to X or intended to X or whatever, one does not X of one's own free will.

IV. The argument that if the hypothesis of mechanism is true, then no one ever acts freely:

Assume that: 1. For anything any person does, there obtained prior to what she does some set of circumstances that was causally sufficient for her doing it.

Assume also that: 2. For any set of circumstances that obtains, there obtained some prior set of circumstances that was causally sufficient for the obtaining of that set of circumstances.

With these two assumptions, we are simply assuming the hypothesis of mechanism. (See part II.)

3. For any three events p, q, and r, if p was causally sufficient for q and q was causally sufficient for r, then p was causally sufficient for r.

Therefore: 4. For any piece of anyone's behaviour, there is a set of circumstances that obtained before that person's birth that was causally sufficient for that piece of behaviour.

5. Nothing that happened before a person was born was or is something that is up to that person.

6. If it was not up to one whether some event p occurred, and not up to one whether p's occurring would produce another event q, then it is not up to one whether q occurs.

Statement 6 is the not-up-to-me principle. (See part I.)

Therefore: 7. No piece of anyone's behaviour is something the occurrence of which was up to that person.

8. A necessary condition for one's performing an action freely is that it is up to one whether one performs that action. (See part III.)

Therefore: 9. At least one condition necessary for one's performing an action freely can never obtain.

Therefore: 10. Nothing anyone does is ever something that that person does freely.

Now statement 10 is still under the scope of the assumptions stated in the first two premises. Nothing in our argument above asserts that the hypothesis of mechanism is true. Our argument assumes but only assumes that hypothesis. So our final conclusion must contain the assumption as a condition.

Therefore: 11. If the hypothesis of mechanism is true (if, that is, statements 1 and 2 are true), then nothing anyone does is ever something that that person does freely.

If this argument is sound, the truth of the hypothesis of mechanism rules out our possessing free will. A person who thinks that at least sometimes we do what we do of our own free will must deny, on pain of contradiction, the hypothesis of mechanism. A person who affirms the hypothesis of mechanism must deny, on pain of contradiction, that we possess free will.

If this argument is sound, the world is such that either we don't possess free will or the hypothesis of mechanism is false.

V. Responses:

1) That what one does is up to one is no part of the concept of acting freely. Sufficient for acting freely is simply doing what one wants to do because one wants to do it.

2) Relations of mechanistic causation hold only between actual events, that is, between events that have in fact occurred. What one is about to do, though, is not an event that has occurred, and so no event that has occurred is sufficient for its occurrence. Thus, that event can be up to me.

3) Actual events are concrete particulars; they are not conditions or circumstances or any other sort of universal. One event can be related to another as cause or effect, but neither event can be related to the other as either a necessary or a sufficient condition. The not-up-to-me principle is false, then, as it presupposes that events are conditions.

4) It's up to me whether to X if both Xing and not Xing are within my power and whether I X or not is contingent on the state of my desires or preferences with regard to Xing. Thus, the not-up-to-me principle is false, for something can both be entirely a mechanistic product of events not up to me and yet be up to me.