

## **A libertarian conception of freedom of choice**

### **I**

The options Sally contemplated:

A: Lie to Roger, thereby protecting her privacy without upsetting him.

B: Tell Roger that it's none of his business, thereby upsetting him and, perhaps, enabling him to figure out the answer.

Sally found each option attractive in some ways, unattractive in others.

Sally chose to pursue option A. She lied to Roger.

### **II**

A central ingredient in any plausible conception of free choice:

If a person's choice of A over B was a choice freely made, then, at the moment of choice, that person could instead have chosen B over A.

So:

If Sally's choice to lie to Roger rather than to tell Roger that it's none of his business was a choice freely made, then Sally could instead have told Roger that it's none of his business rather than lied to him.

But:

If the relation between Sally's personality (her values and desires at the moment of choice) and her choice between the two options is mechanistic or deterministic, then Sally could not have chosen otherwise than she did.

Thus:

If the relation between Sally's personality and her choice between the two options is mechanistic or deterministic, then Sally did not freely choose to lie.

Therefore:

If Sally freely chose to tell a lie to Roger rather than to risk upsetting him, Sally's personality at the moment of choice did not determine that that was the option she chose.

If we ever choose freely among options, then sometimes our choice of one option over the others is not determined to be the choice of that option by our personality.

### III

Do we ever in fact choose freely?

Yes, we do.

Imagine yourself in Sally's situation. You contemplate two options, each attractive to you in some way, unattractive in another way. You can judge neither to be more or less attractive to you overall than the other, for there is no single set of values by which to evaluate both.

Now reflect on the nature of your experience in this situation. Do you feel pulled one way rather than the other? No. Does one of the options, the option you don't go for, feel closed to you? No.

You feel, at the moment of choice, that you can choose the option you in fact don't choose.

Introspection tells us that, in situations of choice between options that appeal to us in different ways, we can choose otherwise than we do choose.

Introspection tells us that, in those situations, we are choosing freely.

### IV

1. If our values and desires, as they are at the moment of choice, always determine which option we choose, then we never choose freely.

2. Sometimes (specifically, when the options we contemplate cannot be evaluated against the same values) we choose freely.

Therefore:

3. Our values and desires do not always determine which option we choose.

Freedom of choice requires escape from the web of deterministic or mechanistic causality. But that's all right, for we sometimes we do escape from that web.

### V

1) We can explain why Sally found the options she contemplated attractive and unattractive in the ways that she did by adverting to Sally's values and desires.

2) We can explain why Sally chose to lie to Roger by noting that she wanted to protect her privacy without upsetting Roger and believed that by lying to Roger she would protect her privacy without upsetting him.

3) We cannot explain why Sally chose to lie to Roger rather than to tell him that it's none of his business.

—We cannot explain this, for there was nothing within or without Sally that determined that Sally would chose to lie to Roger and not instead to tell him it's none of his business.

## VI

“Ah!” someone says, “Yes, we can explain why Sally chose to lie rather than to brush Roger off. She chose to lie rather than to brush Roger off because she wanted to protect her privacy without upsetting Roger more than she wanted to refrain from dishonesty!”

Responses:

1) To say this is to deny that Sally chose freely. To say this is to say that in fact her choosing the one option rather than the other option was determined by some aspect of her personality. It is to say that her preference for the one over the other pre-existed her choice. If Sally chose the one over the other on the basis of a preference, then Sally did not choose the one over the other freely.

2) There is no evidence from introspection that Sally was choosing on the basis of a preference for one option over the other. Sally was not aware that she wanted the one more than she wanted the other. On the contrary: Sally felt she was without a preference.

3) To insist that she must have wanted the one more than the other, for, after all, she chose the one rather than the other, is just to be dogmatic. One is just mechanically applying a form of explanation to a case. One needs a reason for thinking that the form applies to the case. To note that unless she wanted the one more than the other, Sally had no reason for choosing the one over the other, is just to describe the position one rejects, not to argue against it.

## VII

“Why trust the deliverances of introspection?” someone asks. “Why suppose that we have some privileged access to what's really going on in our minds?”

Response:

Actually, no one is either trusting the deliverances of introspection or holding that we have privileged access to what's going on in our minds. Introspection is a source of evidence, just a source of evidence, no better than other sources, and maybe even worse than most.

It has given its evidence, and, so, short of specific evidence given in rebuttal, that evidence stands.

To say that its evidence can be explained away, for *of course* we do not choose one option over another without a reason for doing so, is again to be dogmatic about that which is at issue.

## VIII

“Fair enough,” someone says. “But the contention that sometimes we choose one option without a reason for choosing it implies that we choose randomly. If outcomes were random, though, social life would be chaotic and we couldn’t reliably predict what even the people we know best will do next. And yet social life is not chaotic and we often predict our friends’ behaviour accurately.”

Response:

The objection fails to note a variety of salient facts.

First, not everything we do intentionally we do on the basis of a choice to do it. Second, not everything we do on the basis of a choice to do it is such that we could have chosen otherwise than to do it. Much of what we do is in no way done randomly, then; thus, much of what we do is potentially as predictable as the behaviour of turtles or the weather.

Third, we contemplate precisely the options we do (and not some others) when we choose freely because of our beliefs and values. There is no randomness here.

The contention implies that indeterminism is present only in certain situations of choice and, in those situations, enters at one point only. That freedom sets a limit to predictability is entirely consistent with the existence of a high degree of predictability.

## IX

“An action is not freely performed unless it expresses the personality of its agent,” another person says. “An action that does not express the personality of its agent must appear meaningless to its agent, if she can even recognize it as her action. Since Sally did not choose A over B on the basis of any element of her personality, she must find her choice arbitrary and meaningless. And so she did not choose A over B freely.”

The objection assumes that the only way in which a person can find a choice meaningful is by seeing it as an expression of his existing values or desires. But there is another way in which a person can find a choice meaningful.

A choice is meaningful to the person who makes it if the person sees himself as *creating* his personality through that choice. Choices made freely are choices through which we make ourselves into the persons we become.

Sally, in lying to Roger, made herself a dishonest person. And that is the meaning that her action has for her.