

Second Philosophy

Led by	Sojourna Alexandre
Title	Free Will II
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DISCUSSION:

Sojourna: Ok - first question - if you were to say you had free will, what exactly would it be that you had? I.e. how do you define free will? (This is just to summarise and regroup after last week)

Squish: toughie - it's more than just being able to do what you want to do. Well, consider a heroin addict who wants to get off the stuff; but he also wants heroin; and suppose he's put in a situation where he can have some; arguably, he is not really free in choosing to have the heroin because it's not what he wants to want. Er, nothing more from me atm :)

Sojourna: though according to, can't remember the name, that he can have second-order desires/will that he can change what he wants to want, suggests some form of freedom at that level

Squish: there's a problem w/ that theory too; what if your second order desires conflict? Do you fall back to 3rd order desires? There is an indefinite regress possible

Sojourna: yes I'm not sure where that argument takes us

Marya: if I were to say I have free will it would be in the context that I am aware of some level of an ability to make choices - that I have, in some sense, some control over the direction of my life.

Squish: I was listening to an interesting interview w/ a philosopher named Jennifer Hornsby on free will and human agency last night; she thinks all this determinism stuff is mistakenly applied to the topic of free will

Marya: so for my part, I would perceive it to be some sort of awareness of possible variations of direction

Oswy: I agree with that Marya it has something to do with the ability to originate a choice where that power comes from I don't know. That's if I believed in free will.

Sojourna: ok - so Marya it works for you on a personal level - I'd also like to see then if this personal level of free will causes problems at the social level - because society is in many ways based on the reality of people having free will

Sojourna: (Squish - can we get back to what you said in a sec>)

Sojourna: But you don't Oswy? Believe in FW that is?

Oswy: Before this debate started last week I didn't but I am in a flux now. What I will say is that Determinism isn't as threatening as we sometimes think it is. My problem at the moment is with the issue of the first person feeling we have of Free will and to what extent that is real or an illusion.

Squish: well does society really depend on people having free will? You'd think it actually depends on people's wills cooperating together; free or unfree

Sojourna: OK, Oswy - What I think about illusion is that...

Squish: would you all like a link to the Hornsby interview? It's only a few minutes long, and very interesting

Beezle: yes!

Marya: sure Squish

Sojourna: ...we don't create the illusion, but it is already in place and therefore is a reality in our lives. Our sense of self, our feeling of being free, our sense of responsibility, which are all based on our belief in free will, are very real things in our lives. The illusion only refers to the ultimate level.

Squish: http://cdn4.libsyn.com/philosophybites/Jennifer_Hornsby_on_Human_Agency.mp3

Marya: Yes, I think I could get behind that Soj

Sojourna: Thanks Squish

Oswy: Yes I've met her she is good. Soj the question at hand

Squish: the interview is exceptionally good, even for the Philosophy Bites series :)

Sojourna: However, Eolas last week implied that he could not get behind this view - that knowing he does not have free will he would feel very different about life. But we would need to ask him what he really means when he says free will.

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Oswy: Soj . This is the Smilanki line and I think there is something to be said for it. Its very like Strawson and his Reactive Attitudes, ie he can't envisage a normal human society without accepting FW as a fact.

Marya: I think Eolas probably would or did get behind the idea - but hopefully we can get him to make his point on the new Facebook site

Squish: I think the discomfort from the idea that one's will is free is just anxiety that one might be prevented from doing what one wants

Sojourna: Yes. Because free will is essential to living the civilised lives we lead.

Squish: but it isn't :) Only the illusion is

Squish: if doing what we want to do is not free will, then I think free will is not essential to happiness

Marya: I think the problem that is raised for many people is probably the use of the wording 'illusion', since free will, though it may be illusory at the ultimate level, is still 'real' on the level that we exist and interact with other 'free wills'

Oswy: No the fear is that our moral order would collapse if we didn't accept it as true.

Squish: well I don't believe that at all

Sojourna: Yes, and not just prevented from doing things, but also to claim desert, for example when you do something good, you want praise for it, but if you are not free praise would be pointless because you would have no say in doing what you did

Squish: if you listen to Hornsby, it makes little sense to speak of human will in terms of physical determinism

Squish: she says there is a distinct explanatory method for talking about human agency

Sojourna: Squishy, why?

Oswy: Soj that's right Smilanski is very good on pointing out that to accept hard determinism. Hard determinism puts us all at the level of moral equals whatever we do. There can be no moral heroes with hard determinism.

Squish: which is different from speaking about causal events; she says we shouldn't speak of causal chains when talking about human will; b/c humans are the effectors of causes; not merely the reactors to causes; she says there are obviously plenty of causal influences on human beings

Oswy: What is meant by effectors of causes when applied to humans? Does it mean we are just part of a causal chain or do we have a special power to originate actions?

Squish: she says giving causal explanations for human will is a naive approach

Squish: the latter, Oswy; she vehemently denies the former

Sojourna: aha ok so what explanations should we give then

Oswy: So are we something special in the universe a non caused causer of actions?

Squish: Soj - it's very complicated, but basically speaking of "intent" is only one, very incomplete point about one's behaviour

Squish: Hornsby seems to think so :) - but not just humans; sentient beings, it seems

Beezle: she says there's a distinctive source to human agency, and the mistake is to take a view of the world as purely mechanistic. the causes for human agency... (She's just getting to it on my audio stream!)

Oswy: Well if that's what she is saying then she seems open to the attack against dualism?

Squish: heh Beezle will have a fresher sense of the interview

Squish: why dualism?

Sojourna: tell us where she ends up Beez

Beezle: will do!

Squish: do you like it, Beezle?

Beezle: too early to say at the moment!

Oswy: Dualism because she seems to be positing a casual world in which sentient beings act outside deterministic causes that affect everything else but have a special power to originate action.

Squish: that depends on what sort of deterministic stance you adopt

Beezle: Oswy, how does that relate to dualism?

Marya: ~ just listening at the moment ~

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Sojourna: You know, my friends, I've just realised that the term freedom while implying something vast and expansive is actually rather a limited concept and probably only ever makes sense in political and social contexts. Which I guess is again the Smilansky line.

Oswy: Well it goes back to the split between mind and body that Descartes set in place. The mind in his view was a thing in un-extended space that did the actions so to speak. The mind was the originator of FW the ghost in the machine as his critics pointed out. He couldn't give an account of the nature of the ghost.

Beezle: she goes on about the source of intention coming internally, but says nothing (so far) of how that intention comes about....

Squish: if that is the case, Soj, then why must it be an illusion?

Sojourna: In fact, it is totally incoherent at the metaphysical level.

Squish: but perhaps we don't need it at the metaphysical level

Sojourna: Why must it be? I don't know - it just is. Illusions and other constructs etc are fundamental to the human condition.

Squish: well if 'free will' is really a political notion, it can be quite real

Sojourna: (Thanks for the commentary Beez)

Oswy: Can I come back at this word illusion because I think Marya noted it was problematic

Squish: i.e. we don't have to think of it as an illusion

Beezle: Oswy, yeah, I understand the concept of dualism, I just don't see how it relates to what you were alluding to.

Sojourna: Yes, it is real at the socio-political level and at the personal level.

Squish: those sound like the main levels that matter to most people

Sojourna: I think Smilansky posits the term illusion in response to the philosophers who claim we HAVE it.

Sojourna: I agree Squish

Sojourna: Yes, Oswy, please elaborate on the term illusion.

Squish: ...sounds like he's being nit-picky then. We do have it, politically and subjectively, and that's what matters

Oswy: Beez it seems that Hornsby and I haven't heard her talk yet seem to be saying that sentient beings have this power to originate independently of the normal causal chain of thing. This power is the ghost in the machine and it mysteriously gives us free will.

Sojourna: To us, but historically philosophical discourse has maintained we have it for real at the ultimate level and Smilansky and even we should respond to that.

Oswy: Soj I am going to focus on you I am getting a bit lost here.

Squish: I understood her to be saying something that we simply can't describe human agency using scientific terms involving causal laws

Beezle: yeah, but she says nothing about the source of those intentions (as I said, so far). let me listen to the whole interview....

Sojourna: Beez can report back on the interview when we close the discussion.

Oswy: In the first part of the article Smil (Smilanski) talks about how the illusion works. he says it can be used by the elite to administer the moral code although he doesn't put too much weight on that and he says we normal people sort of accept the illusion of FW because we know deep down it makes morals work even if we know in our heart of hearts it false. It's a sort of acceptance if ignorance idea. I don't think that is sustainable I think we have a direct feeling of FW we are convinced by it at a 1st person level its like Qualia. Now to explain this I think we need to say that when we look at these events we are looking at 1st and third person descriptions of the same thing or phenomena. One description the 1st person supervenes on the 3rd person view. In that sense they are both real only described in different ways. To that extent I agree with Hornsby you can't use objective third person language to describe human phenomenal feelings.

Sojourna: Oswy - just to interject - I think he does say that people do not accept the illusion - that it would be impossible for us to live like that. But that free will something we feel and is very real. The illusion only exists at the ultimate level.

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Sojourna: I think we are in agreement but that the term illusion has negative connotations and that is problematic.

Beezle: I agree

Oswy: Soj, he quotes Williams saying that our institution of blame only works coherently to the extent that it attempts less than morality would like it to. There is a sort of nod and wink to free will we accept it because we have to make the moral system work.

Marya: I think I made my position on this clear last week - particularly in relation to 'illusion'; happy to repost though if anyone missed it

Beezle: not really! I'm not happy with the interview - there's something missing from the picture and I want to find out what before I give a summary (plus, it's hard to listen to that, take in what is being said and follow you lot! my head is hurting!)

Sojourna: I think he's actually saying that the moral system does work and because it works and because it is based on free will then free will emerges as a new reality because of that.

Sojourna: I think there is a subtle difference? But important difference. We do not accept the illusion so that society will work, but that society does work because free will is already in place at the compatibilist level and this is our reality.

Marya: This is the point I made: We all see our computers in front of us because we are biologically structured to see it in the way that we see it, our computers, the room around us and the world we live in, is not technically structured the way we see it - for example if I was a small, almost microscopic creature I would see the world differently. So, since we all share the illusion of what the world 'seems' to be around us, then perhaps free will is, in the same sense an illusion - though it is a necessary illusion in order for us to function as 'middle world' creatures. So, while it may technically be illusory - it is a specific function of us as humans and is therefore a necessary shared (illusory) reality. So free will could then be just as real as the computer in front of me and it, being illusory in a technical sense, would therefore not cause a problem to each individual's sense of having a free will.

Sojourna: Squish do you want to address Oswy? And the term illusion?

Squish: agreed with Marya, and this is also why I think there's no need to fuss over whether free will is an "illusion" at the ultimate level

Marya: yes, Squish

Beezle: I have something to say on the illusion thing.... if we don't have freewill but the mere illusion of it and we are ignorant of the illusion then that is a fine position to be in because it is similar to other (bigger) problem. This bigger problem is the teleological problem in that there is no ultimate purpose or destination (if you are an atheist, of course). We are, in a way, predisposed to believe that there is an ultimate purpose in life because it helps us get out of bloomin' bed! This is, though, an illusion when the cold harsh reality is that there is no ultimate purpose. So, back to free will. Sure, we can examine the problem and realise that we don't but the illusion is useful in that it help hinge together the moral order of things

Squish: ...I think life has whatever purpose you give it, and you are free to choose it ;)

Squish: don't need an "ultimate" purpose

Beezle: but ultimately without purpose

Sojourna: AH, the absurd condition of man...

Squish: my purpose for getting out of bed this morning: to go sleep in the car while the budget inspectors passed through. Ultimate purpose: my own comfort and peace of mind, b/c strangers discomfort me. I don't really need anything bigger to motivate me to live.

Beezle: sure, life and why there is life is just as difficult a problem as freewill. we may flirting here with discovering something that may have huge implications!

Sojourna: And since Beez touched upon moral order of things, let me know if you want to begin addressing the second question on the board behind me...or if it is too big a question to tackle right now....

Squish: lol I think this really is a huge question; they all are - will take us a semester ;)

Beezle: bigger than that even!

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Oswy: The problem is we are not ignorant of the illusion we all seem to see the threat of hard determinism. In my view we over exaggerate the threat to our lives and morality etc

Sojourna: I agree Oswy, I don't feel threatened in the lightest and at the same time I remain responsible for my choices.

Beezle: yeah, I'm leaning towards hard determinism, but I don't let it occupy my mind, though I am troubled by it!

Squish: lol none of us seem to see it as a threat though, Oswy. It's just some other fussy freaky people who are easily threatened by it

Beezle: exactly!

Marya: Well, I don't see that it 'should' impact on our sense of moral responsibility for precisely the same reasons that I listed in my diatribe above :)

Oswy: No Squish, it's more serious than that hard determinism does seem to threaten desert justice morality responsibility etc these are very fundamental elements in our lives

Squish: but, as you say, it doesn't affect our sense of duty, moral obligation, etc., even if it is an illusion - so I don't see it as a threat at all

Marya: okay - I'm trying to think of a clearer way of saying this ...

Squish: we continue to act morally, think morally, etc., even if we aren't "free" at the "ultimate" level

Sojourna: Yes, I agree that we do.

Beezle: let's say a guy kills a man, he is in court. Judge asks for his defence, he says I was going to do it according to hard determinism. Judge says fine. I'm going to jail you because of hard determinism!

Oswy: If hard determinism says that we are all moral equals that there is a excuse for all our behaviour a sort of it wasn't really my fault approach then that is corrosive to moral behaviour

Squish: in court it wouldn't matter - he's dangerous to society, period

Marya: it would not impact us because: free will exists on the same 'level' as we do - it does not matter whether it is illusory in the same way that it does not matter that the way I see my computer in front of me is illusory

Sojourna: Though there is the looming question of "genuine" moral responsibilitybut even if we do have genuine moral responsibility, we still own our choices and take what is given us.

Beezle: Marya, agreed

Sojourna: I like that Marya - existing on the same level as we do. Well put.

Beezle: yeah, I like that

Squish: whether our responsibility is "genuine" on the ultimate level, it remains pragmatically "real" for us in everyday living

