

What is *the* Problem of Freedom of the Will?

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Abstract. I argue in the paper that the problem of freedom has been misconstrued. There is no *one* problem of freedom but *many* problems concerning individual agents' responsiveness to principles and reasons. The problem of free will results from attempts to incorporate the notion of freedom, which belongs to the order of guiding action, into a determinist framework of explanation. My view could be seen as compatibilist because it denies the existence of a fundamental conflict between freedom and determinism. However, since libertarian accounts of local indeterminism are pointless on my view, it cannot be easily placed with the compatibilism/libertarianism distinction. Instead of entering the hopelessly unproductive metaphysical debates about freedom and determinism, I propose to turn attention to the domain of ethics. Problems of freedom are questions about the deliberative processes that terminate in action and about reasons and principles on which they are based. To say that an action is free is not to claim that it is independent from causal determination; rather, it is to say that it has been decided upon.

David Hume was right when he famously remarked that the problem of freedom and necessity is “the most contentious question of metaphysics, the most contentious science” (1995, p. 104). I do not hope to solve the problem of the freedom of the will. My purpose is rather to explain why the issue is so contentious. Mainstream discussions of the problem of the freedom of the will simply misconstrue it by treating it as a metaphysical topic. This is not to say that there are no problems with the freedom of the will. Certainly there are serious difficulties in this area but they should not, I believe, be seen as metaphysical.

Most discussions of free will are theoretical. They are based on the assumption that the question of whether the human will is free is essentially a question about the structure of being and a human agent's place in it. Accordingly, freedom of the will is treated as a metaphysical concept. The answer to the question about such freedom becomes then a cognitive enterprise, where discussions of determinism and indeterminism are seen as capable of deciding, or at least as central to, the question. It is usually assumed that the truth of determinism leaves no room for metaphysical freedom; alternatively, the truth of indeterminism (and soft determinism) would make room for such freedom. On this basis, it is suggested, one can decide whether human agents can be held responsible for their actions.

These conclusions about the relationship between determinism and responsibility are not, however, that obvious. On the one hand, it seems that if agents are not metaphysically free they cannot be held respon-

sible because they cannot act otherwise than they do, i.e. they are items in infinite causal chains. But the lack of causal responsibility can make it possible to hold agents morally responsible for their actions as long as attributions of responsibility are seen as part of chains of determination to which actions belong. On the other hand, if agents are free in the sense of being independent of determination, both kinds of responsibility seem intelligible because agents can act otherwise than they do: they can initiate new causal chains. However, if actions are not determined, how can one attribute them to agents in the first place? Either way, freedom seems to be unintelligible and mysterious (van Inwagen 1998; cf. also 1983).

The theoretical approach to the freedom of the will may seem natural and intuitive. Yet, as the history of philosophy attests, attempts to explain the freedom of the will in this way have failed. I am going to argue that the key reason for the failure lies precisely in the fact that the question of freedom is seen as theoretical, that is, as a question about certain facts or states of affairs rather than as a practical question, i.e. a question about a deliberative process that terminates in action and about the reasons and principles on which it is based. To say that an action is free is not to say that it is independent of causal determination; rather, it is to say that it has been decided upon.

1. The theoretical perspective on freedom

Freedom is problematic within a theoretical perspective which does not allow for non-determined events. If the right way to understand the natural world is to assume a determinist framework and if humans are part of nature, human actions must also be seen deterministically. This conclusion conflicts with the common sense view that humans are free and hence responsible for their actions. If the determinist view of nature is correct, the belief that humans are free is either mistaken or must be re-interpreted in a way that will make it compatible with determinism.

The simplest approach is to re-interpret freedom in a compatibilist way. Actions of individuals belong to causal chains that are rooted in the past and extend beyond the present, which is only seemingly in the agent's control. Agents are seen as determined to be what they are by events that took place before they were even born and by circumstances which are beyond their reach. Since such a determinist thesis seems to conflict with the belief in the agents' authorship of their actions,

compatibilists often argue, as M. Schlick (1939)¹ did years ago, that freedom is not opposed to determination but to impediments to action in the form of physical or psychological inability, coercion, manipulation etc. This form of compatibilism rejects the metaphysical “problem of freedom” by denying that there is metaphysical freedom, but it does not make responsibility attributions pointless.

D. Dennett (1984a, 1984b) holds that the view that there is no metaphysical freedom does not undermine moral practice. A proof that willings are causally determined by prior events and present circumstances provides no reason to change the practice of responsibility attribution. According to Dennett, when agents in their capacity of judges (whether moral or judicial) and decision makers ask about the possibility of acting otherwise they are interested in the lack of coercion, compulsion etc., and not in the agents’ metaphysical independence from causal chains. The question of freedom is about (immediate) authorship of action rather than about the causes of this authorship.

Dennett may be right in saying that a solution of the metaphysical problem of free will would have no practical significance. However, it does not follow from his conclusion that, from the theoretical perspective on freedom, there is no reason to try to establish whether agents are metaphysically free. Dennett holds that the real reason for which the question of freedom is asked are mistaken philosophical and not-so-philosophical beliefs from the point of view of which the lack of metaphysical freedom seems to threaten responsibility, morals, etc. Dennett tries to convince his reader that these philosophical bogeymen are not scary. Things remain as before, despite the alleged fact that we are not metaphysically free. Dennett seems to forget, however, that the best way to cure someone from fears of bogeymen is not to explain them that they are not harmful but to show that they are not real.

Both Schlick and Dennett apply the strategy of dismissal, whose goal is to explain that the metaphysical “problem of freedom” is no problem at all. As a result, both of them—in a clearly Hobbesian style (1991, p. 146)—rephrase the problem. They re-interpret (or substitute) the question of freedom of the will as one of freedom of action. The question of a possible determination of willings is dismissed as based on misunderstandings and philosophical prejudices. However, in this way the problem is not solved, but merely avoided. Not simply by choosing one of the many meanings of “free” but by addressing a different question, the answer to which is trivial.

¹ Naturally, this view of the problem is not new and was accepted by such figures as T. Hobbes, D. Hume, and J.S. Mill.

This strategy is shortsighted. Assuming the construal of “free” as “unimpeded”, one can dismiss “the free will problem” only if one is interested in the agent’s immediate control of action. Since, however, determinism is a universal thesis (and it is only as such that it is a threat to freedom), the psychological processes that lead agents to do what they do must be seen as determined. As a result, to say that an agent is in control of his or her action is only to locate the immediate initiator (or the immediate cause) of the action, without attributing independent efficacy to the agent. The psychological processes are just a link between prior events and the action. Actions are then ultimately determined by events and circumstances that are beyond the agents’ control. If agents can be free in action in the sense of freedom from impediments to action, one has to reject the general idea of freedom as the agents’ ultimate control of action.

From a different perspective, one could rephrase this argument by asking: How different is manipulation by other agents from causation by preceding events and present circumstances? If to be free is to be the immediate cause of action there is no metaphysical difference between a cause like the agent’s past that causes him to be in certain psychological states that cause him to perform a particular action and another agent’s coercion or manipulation that causes the agent to be in psychological states that cause him to perform this action. In both cases the agent is free in the compatibilist sense, and yet from a moral perspective the two look different. The explanation of “freedom” as “freedom of action” does not eliminate the need to explain “freedom of the will”.

To explain freedom of action as stemming from freedom of the will, one needs to do more than just focus on action. A libertarian move might be to reject determinism, at least locally, and hold that there is a kind of determination that does not need preceding causes. This determination can be initiated in the agent, which leads to the notion of agent-causation (e.g. Chisholm 1976) as different and independent from event-causation. The basis of this notion are common moral beliefs about action and responsibility.

An obvious advantage of the agent-causation approach is that it does not identify the lack of determination with randomness, which for many, as van Inwagen’s argument from “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom” shows, is the only alternative to determination. Equally obviously, however, this view makes freedom completely removed from empirical investigation of facts and postulates mysterious and unanalyzable non-events. Willing that is understood as a non-event provides no explanation of action of “agent-cause” and is simply a meaningless substitute for the compatibilist “random”.

A more promising alternative to agent-causation seems to be Robert Kane's elaborate theory of teleological intelligibility, which makes use of indeterminist events that take place at the sub-molecular level in the human brain (1995; cf. also 1985). By their very nature such indeterminist events cannot be explained by appealing to preceding events, and so, Kane holds, the only possibility of understanding action is by appealing to an agent's intentions. Actions are free because they are not causally determined, and yet they are intelligible because they are rooted in what the agent intends to do. Teleological intelligibility theory does not identify lack of determination with randomness and, at the same time, does not make free action mysterious in the way agent-causation theory does.

Despite much of its originality the general structure of the teleological intelligibility approach is not especially novel since the discoveries of the indeterminacies of quantum mechanics. This is not the place to debate whether these indeterminacies are epistemic or ontological and whether their existence is of consequence for the freedom of the will. One should note, however, two general worries caused by the teleological intelligibility view. First, why the micro-level indeterminacies of the workings of the brain, which may be indiscernible on the macro-level of decision making and action, do not occur in other (including inanimate) objects and their behavior. If a teleological intelligibility view is to be plausible and free will is to be endemic to humans, there should be a clear difference between the actions of agents and those of other objects. The explanation that micro-level indeterminacies are transferred to the macro-level of decision making due to the structure of the brain cannot be accepted unless appropriate scientific data is available. Secondly, since on Kane's view events are explained teleologically when determinist explanations fail, such explanations seem to be temporary (until correct determinist explanations are found) and/or substitutes for "real" determinist explanations. In effect, either the indeterminateness of decision making and action is identical with randomness or action is ultimately determined and such indeterminacies have to be seen as epistemic anomalies. In either case there remains no room for an agent's control of action and, consequently, for attributions of responsibility.

The above discussion is not intended as a criticism of compatibilist and libertarian theories. Its purpose is to show that such theoretical approaches to the freedom of the will encounter difficulties which seem to stem from the conceptual apparatus of those very theories. Difficulties of this kind suggest that these explanations may be due to the nature of the approach rather than by the nature of the question of the freedom of the will.

A clue to discovering the source of the difficulties of the theoretical approach to the question of freedom of the will may be provided by framing the question in terms reminiscent of behaviorism and by the disappearance of practical deliberation that terminates in decision and action. The key concepts here are those of actions and causes (broadly understood). Far less attention is paid to decisions and choices. Choice or decision is usually understood as falling under the rubric of action: choices are another (even if peculiar) kind of action. This suggests that the “choice” or “decision” to do something is viewed as behavior that consists in doing it (in much the same way in which preference is defined in decision theory) and deliberation is presented in psychological terms, that is, as another kind of event. The theorists mentioned above assume that actions are a subcategory of events and decisions, which are described psychologically, and are another subcategory of action.

This view of choice as action and of deliberation as a psychological process makes it necessary either to include choice and deliberation into a causal chain or to invent alternative ways of making sense of action by recourse to agent causation or teleological intelligibility. In the former case there is no room for freedom of the will and responsibility attributions; in the latter, a theory of action cannot be supported by available knowledge. As a result, the only alternative for those who are ready to view freedom of the will as incompatible with determinism is to see freedom as essentially mysterious or obscure (van Inwagen 1998; Kane 1995).

The theoretical approach to the question of the freedom of the will, which is characterized by the disappearance of practical deliberation, suggests an observer’s perspective on agents, which may, at least in part, explain the behaviorism-like terminology and the limited resources for the explanation of action. Since agents are seen as of the same kind as all other objects, the only available type of explanation is causal (i.e. in terms of determinations that are external to the object determined) and from an observer’s perspective, in which no room is left for deliberation. The discrepancy between the observer’s and the deliberative perspectives is clear. What is accessible in the observer’s perspective is not deliberation, but an account of psychological processes that are or have been taking place. Looking at agents from an observer’s point of view, on the one hand pre-empts a first-person access to the process of deliberation that terminates in action and, on the other, includes knowledge that is beyond the reach of the deliberating agent. Such an observer’s perspective on agents is characteristic of behaviorism, which *assumes* (rather than proves) that processes like deliberation are mysterious, obscure or inaccessible to inquiry.

The removal of deliberation from the picture of decision-making and action precludes accounts of freedom that do not employ the deterministic vocabulary of events and deterministic laws. The thesis of determinism holds that the occurrence of an event is explained if one can point to a law that links it to a preceding event of the appropriate kind. Once this conceptual framework is applied to actions, which are seen as subspecies of events, explaining a person's acting in a certain way consists in pointing to a deterministic law that links this action to a preceding event, whether it be an action or some other subspecies of event. If there is no law that links the two events, the subsequent event has to be seen as indeterministic and the way to make sense of the event is to appeal to agent-causes or teleological intelligibility, both of which speculatively postulate an indeterminism for which evidence is lacking.

2. The practical perspective on the freedom of the will

The absence of practical deliberation in theoretical approaches to the freedom of the will and the deficiencies of such approaches are conspicuous in the discussions about free will that focus on responsibility and alternative possibilities. Such discussions assume the seemingly intuitive idea that agents who could not have done otherwise than they did cannot be held responsible for their actions. This assumption is questioned by Frankfurt's examples of agents who, because of the situation in which they found themselves, would have done what they did even if they had decided otherwise. The examples present an agent who, having decided to do something, is prepared to change his decision under certain conditions, but an intervention by someone else would prevent him from following the new decision if he made it, and so he does what he previously decided to do, whether he changes his mind or not. The agent could not have acted otherwise and yet is held responsible for this action (Frankfurt 1969).

This is not the place to analyze Frankfurt's examples. One should note, however, that their plausibility depends crucially on the perspective from which the possibility of acting otherwise is considered. There are at least two perspectives on that possibility. Firstly, the possibility refers to what the agent believes is possible for him; secondly, it refers to what is possible from an external point of view, i.e. from the perspective of an observer who knows *both* the thoughts, the psychological (physiological?) state of the agent *and* the agent's situation. From the agent's perspective it is his belief about what he can do that occupies a central place. It is the belief in the possibility of acting otherwise that

makes decisions, even if it were to turn out that the decisions were pointless. Accordingly, what makes the agent responsible for his or her action is the decision to act in a certain way.

Frankfurt's examples seem persuasive because they assume a perspective that is not available to agents when they make their decisions. This is the external perspective. If it were available to them it would become part of their view of the situation. They would not believe that they could have done otherwise (this is exactly the content of the external perspective) and so they (and, perhaps, anyone) would not believe they were responsible for their actions to the extent that having no option to choose from, they would be unable to make any decision. Another peculiarity of these examples is that the external perspective is available to the observer who does *not* decide what to do and yet they are designed to test our judgments about the responsibility of those who do not have access to this perspective and who *do* decide what to do. To test judgment about responsibility, an example must presuppose that from the decision maker's perspective there was a decision to make. Once we learn, from the external perspective, that the agent could not have acted otherwise, our view of the situation changes: we know that the decision was pointless but not that it was not made. Since a decision was made we can hold the person who made it responsible for the choice of action.

To accept the conclusion of the preceding paragraph one needs to assume that it is the agent's decision that makes her responsible for the action. Frankfurt's examples do not seem to accept this assumption. The mediation of decision between the agent and her action is simply ignored. The external perspective relies on seemingly more complete knowledge that is gained from a privileged point of view, whose goal is to establish what happens, whereas the agent's perspective is (relatively) limited and practical: it includes beliefs which are limited to her point of view, and its goal is to determine what should happen. The observer's theoretical view of action is in terms of adequately described events; the agent's practical view sees her actions as stemming from her decisions.

The internal and external perspectives are not to be taken as available only to the agent and the observer, respectively. Agents can take the external perspective on their own actions when they view their actions retrospectively (with a kind of wisdom of hindsight) and when they have knowledge that was not available to them when making decisions. Similarly, observers can take the internal perspective and visualize the agent's understanding of her situation and the available courses of action. Observers can attempt to leave out of the considerations some elements of their understanding of the agent's action that

is available to them now and which was not available to the agent; they can also include elements that are not readily available to observers. Observers can reflect on what a decision and the ensuing action look like to agents and agents can reflect on what their actions look like to others who have different information. In actual situations the two perspectives need not come separately. The distinction between the two perspectives is between two types of understanding of action with their different contents, concepts, orientations and standards.

It is this heterogeneity of the understanding of action, I would submit, where the external perspective is combined with the internal one, that leads to the question of the freedom of the will and the problem with a plausible answer to it. As described above, the theoretical approach, which is characteristic of the external perspective, relies on the concept of event and on a deterministic law. Every attempt to find room for freedom of the will in such a framework seems doomed to failure exactly because of the deterministic nature of the framework. Whether this deterministic perspective takes the form of physical or psychological explanations, the deterministic character of the law that links events makes it impossible to talk intelligibly about freedom. If, however, one attempts to assume a form of indeterminism for some types of events, freedom dissolves in randomness. In this deterministic and theoretical perspective the concept of freedom—if it is understood as different from randomness—is simply a foreign body. It is a concept that does not belong to the external perspective. The *problem* of the freedom of the will emerges exactly because of the combination of the two perspectives. Freedom is attempted to be made intelligible in a framework in which it cannot be made intelligible.²

To see why freedom cannot be made intelligible within the theoretical framework of the external perspective, one needs only to remember that the principle that links events in it is a deterministic law. Freedom, however, is a concept that is isolated from such laws. Attempts to understand actions are not made simply from the perspective of deterministic laws. They are also based on different kinds of principles that “operate” within the internal perspective. In usual cases the explanation of an agent’s action is not based on an appeal to his or her psychological mechanisms, but on an appeal to what is taken to be principles of right action. The “right action” need not mean

² The view presented below is similar to that taken by H. Bok (1998). The key difference between the two views is that Bok’s distinction between the practical and theoretical perspectives is based on the specific human “experience of freedom” whereas the distinction between the theoretical and practical perspectives here is based on an analysis of the kinds of considerations and conceptual apparatus that are employed in the two types of explanation.

“morally right”, it can also be right from a prudential perspective. In this practical approach actions are explained from the point of view of their relation to the principles of action, not to deterministic laws. To understand why someone acted ungratefully (or imprudently) one does not typically talk about the psychological mechanisms that lead to actions characterized as ungrateful or imprudent (unless one is in the grip of psychologism). Rather, one appeals to a principle that requires a certain kind of response to other’s favors, or a certain kind of choice of means to a desired end and claims that this principle was not followed in a particular case.

Of course, we sometimes do appeal to deterministic laws, but we do so when attempts at practical explanations fail or turn out insufficient. Typically, this happens in two cases. The first is when we see some form of abnormality in the agent. We are inclined to view an action in psychological terms if we have reason to believe that the agent could not have acted in view of a principle, either following or violating it. The cases covered by such explanations are extreme emotional agitation and insanity, which are believed to make the agent irresponsive to reasons and unable to consider principles of action and to act on his decisions. In such cases it is believed that the agent could not have acted otherwise but not in the sense of being physically incapable of acting otherwise, or in the sense of being determined by previous events, but in the sense of acting otherwise from the point of view of following a principle. What is diagnosed in such cases is an abnormality in the process of deliberation, not the occurrence of a causal chain. The second case is an extension of the former type of cases. We appeal to psychological explanations when practical ones provide insufficient reasons because the internal perspective is limited in that its content and structure, albeit inherently intelligible, do not explain action sufficiently. The external perspective is believed to provide this missing component at the price of changing the nature of the understanding of action. The cases covered by such supplementation are those in which agents, while not seen as irresponsive to reasons, have certain limitations perhaps caused by moral education that make some types of considerations inaccessible to them or make agents think that some considerations are insignificant or have significance that they usually are not believed to have. Generally speaking, the theoretical external perspective is important as a supplement to the practical and internal perspective. In individual cases, the significance of the theoretical perspective depends on the possibility or sufficiency of the practical perspective.

Explanations of action in the practical perspective are attempts to reconstruct the deliberation that terminated in an action. With the two exceptions just indicated, deterministic (or, in view of the current

state of psychology, *quasi*-deterministic) principles have no place in such explanations. This does not mean, however, that such actions are random. A conclusion of that sort would presuppose a theoretical perspective, and so it would be question-begging. If an explanation of action is to remain practical, it has to rely on principles that are characteristic for it, that is, on principles of action.

Such principles are different from deterministic ones. First, they do not describe what an agent does or did but prescribe what she should do. In short, they are normative rather than descriptive. Their role in action explanations is different from that of deterministic principles in event explanations. As already said, an explanation of an event is based on a principle that links it with another event. In practical explanations, by contrast, the normative principle is part of what is being explained in that such an explanation is an attempt to reconstruct how the agent linked her action to her reasons and what place in it was accorded to the principle. To repeat, the point of a practical explanation is not to link two units (i.e. events) by means of a principle but to give an account of what principle the agent used to link two units (i.e. reasons and action).

An attempt to explain why an agent did a particular thing is a description of the deliberation that led him to the action. This deliberation leads to a decision to follow a principle or not. The point of an explanation of action is therefore to show that the decision was related to a practical principle in a certain way. By itself such an explanation need not be evaluative. To make it more complete and get closer to evaluation one would need to inquire into the agent's reasons for relating to the principle in this particular way. For example, an explanation of John's stealing a watch might be a statement to the effect that John decided not to follow the principle that forbids theft. Of itself, this is not a judgment about John's action, unless one explains his reasons for not following the principle. If the reasons are strong enough we might be prepared to see the action as justified; otherwise, we do not consider it to be justified.

This role of practical principles in the explanation of action is due to their normativity. Since they are not "designed" to provide descriptions of actions but to guide decision and action, an explanation of an action must give an account of what role a particular principle played in the agent's decision and such explanations of action are not anomic, as C. Ginet suggests (1995, p. 81). They are law-based but in the sense of "related to a normative principle in one of the two ways: of following it or not". Such an explanation has to answer the question of what principle guided the agent's deliberation that issued in this action.

Looked at from this perspective, practical explanations are narratives which make an agent's decision and action intelligible as a whole.

This is not to say that every decision and action is guided by just one principle. It is also doubtful if there is any decision or action that is guided by one principle. In typical situations agents try to satisfy many principles, or as many as possible, and only some of them are mentioned in action explanations. John, who violates the prohibition of theft, may at the same time violate many other principles and satisfy still others. He may be violating the principle of loyalty (if the owner of the watch is his friend) and following the principle of parental care (if the theft is the only available way to take care of his children). Explanations of action usually focus on principles that seem most salient in a particular situation.

Once one appreciates the normativity of practical principles, their second characteristic feature becomes visible: they are "carriers" of responsibility and responsibility attributions. At the most primitive level, the normativity of a practical principle refers to the requirement that an action be guided by this principle.³ An agent is responsible for what she did to the extent to which she did or did not follow the principle for a particular reason. If there are good grounds for believing that some reasons were not accessible to the agent, or that she did not know the normative principle, she is absolved from responsibility. If, however, there are good grounds for believing that the agent had access to appropriate reasons and knew the principle that should guide her action, she is held responsible for following or not following the principle for the reasons that she chose to support her decision. In short, responsibility is based not on an account of the causal chains that led to the agent's action, but on an answer to the question of how the agent related to a practical principle and for what reasons.

3. What *is* problematic about the freedom of the will?

The two characteristics of practical principles and their role in explanations of actions make it possible to rephrase the question about the freedom of the will. If the question is not to be begged, it should not be seen from the theoretical perspective. Instead, one should see it as asked with reference to the practical perspective in which the normativity of principles is in the foreground. Normativity refers to a principle's action-guidingness, which presupposes an ability to choose whether one's action will take the form required by the principle or not. To ask

³ I am using the term in the sense explained by Ch. Korsgaard (1996, pp. 8–9).

whether a kind of agent or a particular agent is free is to ask whether they are responsive to the requirements of principles and to reasons for acting in agreement with or in violation of those principles. This question may have different answers on different occasions. When it is asked with reference to human agents it may be given a straightforward answer: Yes, humans *can* be free, that is, they can be responsive to principles and reasons. This answer does not, of course, imply that they are free because, depending on the case, some of them are metaphysically free in some situations and some are not. An answer to this question, when applied to individual agents, would require an investigation of particular situations and agents.

Thus modified, the question of the freedom of the will ceases to be particularly perplexing. A being is free to the extent to which it is reason-responsive and capable of acting on a principle. At this point one might suppose that reason-responsiveness and the ability to act on principles need an explanation of how freedom so understood is metaphysically possible. One might demand a theoretical explanation of reason-responsiveness and the ability to act on principles. This demand, however, would locate freedom back in the field of theoretical explanations where there is no room for it. An attempt to balance the theoretical and practical perspectives would be similarly misguided. On this proposal a conflict of theoretical and practical claims should be solved by looking for a kind of equilibrium, in which the two types of claims are mutually balanced to achieve an acceptable and both philosophically and pragmatically workable position. And again, whatever the details of such an approach might be, it would remain a theoretical enterprise to which freedom is foreign. No better prospects seem to be available to the approach that proposes to assume the primacy of practical reasoning.⁴ In a case of conflict of theoretical and practical claims, it is the theoretical ones that should be rejected or modified first. This, however, seems to be an invitation to a total rejection of the theoretical perspective.

The three approaches point in the direction of a general problem with the freedom of the will as a concept which belongs to the practical, and not to the theoretical perspective. The key difficulty seems to be that of separateness: Are we to believe that there are areas of investigation which are fundamentally isolated from each other? It seems difficult to understand how we may be in possession of concepts and conceptual frameworks that cannot be unified into one systematic whole. In response to this doubt two considerations should be mentioned.

⁴ This view is taken by S. Smilansky (2002), when he explains that the illusion of metaphysical freedom is necessary for moral purposes. His position is fully presented in (2000).

First, just as we should not expect the language of physics to be appropriate for a theory of truth (or vice versa), so perhaps it should not be surprising that the language of action cannot be combined in a consistent whole with that of deterministic explanations of events. Since natural languages are contingent systems of communication, it is likely that whole segments in them can be to some extent separated from one another. Secondly, our aversion to the separateness of the two perspectives may be due to our unfounded philosophical expectations for a unified view of nature and action rather than to error. Perhaps philosophers should simply learn not to mix up the two perspectives.

A second general problem associated with the proposal presented above concerns, obviously, the content of principles of explanation of action. How are we to establish normative principles? This is certainly an important question but it does not belong to the topic of the freedom of the will. The proper area where it should be answered is that of ethics, not metaphysics or science. The problem of free will appears, therefore, to be the familiar question about the justification of moral principles. This is not, however, a problem for the view offered here. The view is not about the content of practical principles but about their role in the explanation of action. Different principles may provide different explanations of action but their role remains the same. If one accepts the view that within a theoretical perspective there is no special problem of freedom, whereas in the practical perspective the problem of freedom is that of the narratives to be told about action, one should easily see where the real problem lies. It is the problem of what principles should guide action, not what principles link action to preceding events.

A third general problem is that of the adoption of principles. It could be observed, following G. Strawson (1986, pp. 28–30; a restatement of the argument can be found in Strawson 1994), that for a principle of choice to be a ground of responsibility attribution, it has to be consciously chosen or adopted. Such a choice would be determined by what the agent already is, which, if he is to be responsible for his actions, should be chosen by him, and so on ad infinitum, which presumably precludes true responsibility. This argument is based on the assumption that every lack of control over what one is is equally important for responsibility attributions. Perhaps this assumption is justified if freedom is understood metaphysically. However, if one takes the practical perspective, what one is may depend on some choices to a larger degree than on others, depending perhaps on how long the series of choices is. It is intuitive to assume that agents with longer moral experience can be more self-governed because they have made more choices in their lives. Each decision may remove the agent from

the givenness of his “nature” in the direction of the formation of his self. The choices add up to what one is, and they are not all-or-nothing choices of one’s moral personality. From the practical perspective it means that explanations of action are more and more sufficient, that is, they require fewer and fewer elements of deterministic explanations.

4. Conclusion: is it compatibilism or libertarianism?

I have presented a view that requires the recognition of the separateness of the “language of freedom” from that of determinist explanation. I have argued that the problem of free will appears if one tries to incorporate a notion of freedom which belongs to the order of guiding action into a determinist framework of knowledge. If one recognizes the heterogeneity of the vocabulary of action and that of cognition, one should conclude that *the* problem of freedom is misconstrued and that there are *many* problems of freedom, that is, questions about a particular agent’s responsiveness to principles and reasons. Answers to those question may be different, depending on the case at hand.

This view shares some features with compatibilism. It claims that there is no fundamental conflict between freedom and determinism. But the conclusion that it is a version of compatibilism would be hasty. One of the central claims of compatibilism (and some forms of incompatibilism) is that metaphysical freedom is fundamentally inconceivable and, if real, would be mysterious. The view offered here is compatible with determinism but not by integrating the concept of metaphysical freedom into a conceptual scheme to which determinism belongs but by being silent about such freedom. Metaphysical freedom may be inconceivable but it is not mysterious. It may be inconceivable because it is a misguided concept which cannot belong to a coherent conceptual scheme with determinism and which leads to a misdirected problem.⁵

The thesis that metaphysical freedom is a misguided concept makes it clear that the view offered here should not be seen as clearly libertarian. Libertarians locate metaphysical freedom within the theoretical perspective, allowing for local indeterminism. Since the view presented above does not make use of the concept of metaphysical freedom, but remains silent about it, it does not fit within such conventional divisions. Instead of entering hopelessly unproductive metaphysical debates about freedom and determinism, the view offered above turns attention

⁵ Some reasons for the misdirection in the free will discussions are presented by R. Double (1997).

to the proper domain of ethics, that is to principles and reasons for action.

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