

The Platonic tradition and concepts of Freewill

The existence or otherwise of freewill has been the subject of philosophic exploration for as long as philosophy has existed: and if it exists its nature and reach is then widely debated. In modern times the view that freewill is more or less an illusion has enjoyed widespread support in some sections of contemporary philosophy – this is in contrast to both ancient trends in this area of thought, as well as what one might call "common sense and practical views" upon which most people in today's world base their approach to life. What does the Platonic tradition say about freewill, and how can we better our understanding of human agency?

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* begins its article on this subject by stating that "it should be clear that disputes about free will ineluctably involve disputes about metaphysics and ethics." So let's start by considering two different metaphysical paradigms which underlie possible theories of freewill.

The first one is what might be called the "snooker table of reality" (or, to be slightly more technical the implied metaphysics of Reductive Physicalism) - everything arises from material existence and nothing can step outside the concussions of matter. The whole of reality is like a snooker table with an almost uncountable number of balls: some vastly powerful and unexplained single event has set these balls in motion – perhaps the snooker cue of the big bang – and now each ball must head in the direction that its last collision has sent it, until another impact deflects it off into a new direction, and that this will go on until the energy of that initiating event runs down.

Human beings are merely part of this assembly of balls, with no independent agency (because there is no other source of movement from which direction can be derived) but with an unfortunate illusion of self-determination, which hampers our understanding of our place in the scheme of things.

The second possibility is that there are actually at least two orders of things within the whole order of reality: the first is the order of moving materiality, the second is the order of eternal intellect (or, if you like, spirit) – this last being an order of things which are unmoving and unchanging, but which exert an attractive and creative power over the material world of change. If there is anything which has full access to this second order it must share in the dynamic power to exert influence on materiality, and have a nature which is not moved by material concussions. On the other hand if there is anything which has a *partial* access to this eternal order, the question of self-determination becomes complex and needs to be thought through carefully.

Before we go into the Platonic view of this problem, let's try to get a feel for the contours of the modern debate around freewill:

Compatibilism / Incompatibilism

Compatibilism says the kind of freedom that we want and which is required for moral responsibility is compatible with a physical determinism. They usually identify this kind of freedom as a counterfactual – e.g. I could have decided differently if things had been different.

Incompatibilism says the kind of freedom that we want and which is required for moral responsibility is incompatible with physical determinism. Incompatibilists insist the kind of freedom we need for moral responsibility is factual: given the same set of circumstances, I could have decided differently. Usually their conclusion is that because the world is fully determined, freedom is an illusion, although some reject this kind of determinism, arguing instead for some kind of ‘swerve in the atoms’ (locating freedom in quantum indeterminacy) or incorporeal hand ‘interfering’ with the usual order of the physical world (agent causation)

What kind of freedom is required for moral responsibility?

Compatibilists say the kind of autonomy that allows us to choose freely involves a certain set of constituent abilities:

MacIntyre suggests:

- 1) A symbolic sense of self
- 2) A sense of the narrative unity of life
- 3) The ability to run behavioral scenarios and predict the outcomes.
- 4) The ability to evaluate predicted outcomes in light of goals.
- 5) The ability to evaluate goals themselves in light of abstract concepts.
- 6) The ability to act in light of 1-5.

Frankfurt suggests that when we are able to make our 1st order volitions (the things that we want that move us to action) comport with our ‘higher level’ volitions, we can act freely.

What about the neuroscience?

Some of you will have heard about recent neuroscientific results which seem to show that some of our decisions seem to be pre-determined by activity in the brain, and read the conclusions (mainly by neuroscientists, but also some philosophers) that conscious thought (and therefore conscious decision-making) must be ‘epiphenomenal’ – not causally active in the system to cause action. The same underlying unconscious process causes the decision, and then the conscious awareness of the decision. Therefore our decisions are not really ‘ours’ and they can’t be considered free.

There are a few issues with this:

It assumes that it is incompatibilist freedom that is the only type of freedom that we really want.

For experimental design reasons, very discrete decisions and actions are selected. These types of actions are therefore ones where there are no stakes, and no moral content, and have no real deliberation required. The experimental subjects in the most famous of these experiments are told to note the point when ‘they become aware of the urge’ to act – it’s specifically telling people to ‘look’ for a passive mental state rather than deliberate and decide.

If one believes that every physical event has a sufficient physical cause, this is exactly what one would expect to see!

Metaphysics of causation is central to discussion of the free will problem. Many of these discussions look to Aristotle’s schema of causation. It has been common since the scientific revolution for thinkers (like Jaegwon Kim in the contemporary debate) want to narrow the concept of causation to ‘generative’ ‘initiator’ causation, (in Aristotelian terms, material and efficient cause) tied intimately to energy transfer. But many other thinkers expand the taxonomy of causation to include some other Aristotelian concepts, like formal or final causation.

Here’s Aristotle’s schema:

The material cause: ‘that out of which’, e.g., the bronze of a statue.

The formal cause: ‘the form’, ‘the account of what-it-is-to-be’, e.g., the shape of a statue. (Later Platonists split the formal cause into the paradigmatic and the natural formal causes: the paradigm being the eternal unchanging pattern of a thing, the formal being a more mutable form which adapts to changing environments – something held in Nature rather than the Eternal realm)

The efficient cause: ‘the primary source of the change or rest’, e.g., the artisan, the art of bronze-casting the statue, the man who gives advice, the father of the child. (Again, later Platonists again split this cause into the efficient cause proper and the instrumental cause: the efficient cause is identified with the unchanging thinker who thinks of the eternal paradigm "all at once"; the latter being closer to the material realm which in some way is effected by its experiences in that realm – in other words it involves "thought in process").

The final cause: ‘the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done’, e.g., ‘health is the end of walking, losing weight, purging, drugs, and surgical tools.

Here’s how an expanded view of causation helps us understand mental causation / the causal story of conscious thought: We can explain mental causation by positing some kind of downward causation by the ‘higher level’ processes (e.g. us and our conscious thoughts) on the lower level parts/ processes (unconscious neural processes) via a kind of formal causation.

The Platonic tradition

To go back to the two broad metaphysical systems we looked at first, the Platonic tradition subscribes to the second of these, recognizing that the two orders of reality are distinct but linked. Human beings have, in this paradigm, a *partial* access to the unmoved, eternal and dynamic order which transcends the lower order, that of the material percussions. And thus in some way they are involved in the impacts which give external direction to their activities, and in another way they transcend those impulses, and therefore have some power to self-direct. The actual balance between these two sources of direction needs to be understood, and the possibility of transforming oneself in order to obtain a greater degree of self-direction also needs to be explored.

While the tradition embraces this complex paradigm, none of its ancient authorities actually use the term freewill, but they do speak about what in Greek is called *ep'h' hemin* – which translates into "what depends on us" as well as *proairesis* – "choice" or "pre-election".

Before we begin to look at specific extracts from the Platonic writers, we do need to make a distinction between freedom of choice and freedom of action: many decisions we make and put into action mean that our subsequent freedom of action is restricted. Once I have jumped onto the Olympic ski jump ramp my journey downwards is almost certainly going to continue and I am going to be launched into the air, no matter how radically I change my mind and however much I would like to revise my previous choice, as the speed and height of the jump reminds me that I have no idea about how to make the jump. Internally, of course, I do still have a choice as to my attitude to my coming flight.

At the end of the *Republic*, Socrates tells a tale of how things might be in the afterlife, including (because he was, it seems, a believer in Orphic teachings on reincarnation) how we go about choosing the external circumstance of our coming life. In the tale the souls who are about to choose are addressed by the prophet of the Goddess Necessity, mother of the Fates, who says that each soul is required to choose a life and, in so doing, will be given a divine guide (a daemon, or in modern terms a kind of guardian angel) who will ensure that their choice is carried forward. But, the capacity to make choices in that life is not surrendered, and therefore we do not become mere automatons trapped entirely by the coming arrangements of externalities. The prophet-spokesperson says,

"Souls of a day! The beginning of another period of men of mortal race. The daemon shall not receive you as his lot, but you shall choose the daemon: He who draws the first, let him first make choice of a life, to which he must of necessity adhere: Virtue is independent, which every one shall partake of, more or less, according as he honours or dishonours her: the cause is in him who makes the choice, and God is blameless."

Our choices and the radical transformative effect of those choices and the actions which may arise from them is described in Plato's *Timaeus*:

"In him, therefore, who vehemently labours to satisfy the cravings of desire and ambition, all the conceptions of his soul must be necessarily mortal; and himself as much as possible must become entirely mortal, since he leaves nothing unaccomplished which tends to increase his perishable part. But it is necessary that he who is sedulously employed in the acquisition of knowledge, who is anxious to acquire the wisdom of truth, and who employs his most vigorous exertions in this one pursuit; it is perfectly necessary that such a one, if he touches on the truth, should be endued with wisdom about immortal and divine concerns; and that he should participate of immortality, as far as human nature permits, without leaving any part of it behind."

If freewill, as commonly understood, exists what do we need to make this supposition?

Clearly life must present us with options for some kind of action which can produce different effects; we must have some way of recognizing those options; and we must have some power to reflect upon the likely effects of choosing one option rather than another. Finally we must have freedom to genuinely choose the preferred option – and that freedom must spring from some element of the self which transcends the percussive nature of material causation.

Proclus, in his treatise *On Providence, Fate and That which is in our Power*, writes to Theodorus the Engineer, who it seems has suggested that the whole universe and all its parts, including human beings, can be seen as similar to one of his machines, wheel turning wheel, cog turning cog, with negative implications for human agency. The philosopher in his response requires that we recognize three important things:

Firstly, that there are the two orders we have spoken of: an eternal order which takes as its organizing principle Providence; and a temporal order which is coordinated by Fate. This latter principle weaves all the complex causes and effects of the manifested world together, but nevertheless it is ruled by Providence so that the higher principle not only orders immaterial and eternal causes and effects, but also temporal ones, albeit through the intermediary of Fate.

Secondly, that the human self is not merely an outcome of material complexity – indeed it is not essentially of that order at all, but rather its *powers and activities* extend into the mundane order, and insofar as it identifies with the body it shares in some of the percussions of material life. In technical terms, the self is a separable soul – that is to say it is something which can direct its powers and activities towards the immaterial realities which are separate from the body and the material world in which the body moves and responds. Since these separable realities include the soul's own essence, the self is thus self-constituting – in other words we are ultimately responsible for our own internal state, even if our external conditions are less controllable.

Taking these distinctions into account, Proclus writes "Did we not agree that what depends on us [i.e. freewill, or the faculty of choice] is not a force ruling over

external events, but only collaborating with them? If so, it is reasonable that it arranges what is internal according to its power, but not what is external, since it also needs other factors not within its power to dispose those things. . . we are in the middle, having been fixed in the faculty of choice and we are capable of moving in one direction or in another, but wherever we move, we are dominated by the universal causes, and receive what we deserve; if we move towards the better, we act as intellect, if towards the inferior, [we act as sense] perception. . . What is outside the soul does not depend on us. The virtuous people have much that depends on them, for due to their virtue they also make moderate use of the things which do not depend on them . . . but with the majority, there is much more that does not depend on them; for they follow external things, not having an internal life powerful enough to assimilate those externals. Hence the virtuous are said to be free and are indeed free because their activity depends on them and is not the slave of what does not depend on them. The other people, however, cry out necessarily, burying that which depends on them together with that which does not, and so have nothing which depends on them." (Proclus, *On Providence*, 55 & 60)