

SCHOPENHAUER ON FREE WILL AND FATALISM

Agustin Moreno

Arthur Schopenhauer was a firm believer in and defender of fatalism. He argued that everything that happens happens *necessarily*. By “necessary”, Schopenhauer understood whatever is the consequence of some sufficient reason. It is impossible – argued Schopenhauer – that there exists some sufficient reason for A and A doesn't happen. Likewise, it is impossible for A to occur without some sufficient cause for A's occurrence. It is the principle of sufficient reason, as the general category of thought, that makes necessity absolutely inescapable for our understanding and experience.

Schopenhauer understood the implications of his view for the nature of free will. According to Schopenhauer, free will understood in the libertarian sense – *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae* – is an illusion caused by a superficial understanding of the phenomenon. This illusion rests on a true and self-evident datum of our self-consciousness, which commonly is expressed as “I can do whatever I want”. According to Schopenhauer, this expression is accurate but it is irrelevant as a proof of the *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*. Because it only proves the conditional: *If* I want to do something, *then* I can do it. It only expresses a relation between *wanting* something and *doing* it.

However, the important issue in the debate about free will is deeper and consists, according to Schopenhauer, in the causal relation between what we want and the external world. Are we free to want what we want given a specific set of circumstances? Schopenhauer argues that the answer is definitely “no”. Because free will in the libertarian sense would imply that no sufficient reason for wanting something exists and this is literally unthinkable, namely, impossible for our understanding. It would be an inexplicable miracle, contrary to the principle of sufficient reason and to all of our experience.

Schopenhauer argued that when we want something, what is happening is that a specific *motive* – which is the expression of the principle of sufficient reason, concretely the law of causality, operative in human actions through reason – has won

the struggle between our competing desires and has prevailed. With the motive now in place, our behaviour follows *necessarily*. The connection between the motive and our choices is necessary and inescapable. And since the motive itself, even though mediated by our thoughts and conceptual representations, depends ultimately on and is an effect of external factors, the connection between our motives and what we want is also necessary. We are not free, in the libertarian sense, of wanting what we want. Therefore, free will in the libertarian sense doesn't exist.

Having rejected freedom of the will in the libertarian sense, Schopenhauer rescues some sense of freedom through the phenomenon of moral responsibility. Human actions are not exclusively determined by motives; they are also determined by our character. Motives plus the specific idiosyncrasies of our character fully determine our actions. Despite knowing the necessity of our actions, we still have a sense of moral responsibility because we also know that our actions were partially dependent on our character, which implies the truth of this counterfactual claim: “If I had had a different character, my action had been different”. This awareness of our character and its role on our actions underlies our sense of moral responsibility.

Schopenhauer's account of the problem of freedom of the will is insightful. He argues for fatalism on the grounds of causal determinism, all of which implies that libertarian free will doesn't exist. We could, however, object that causal determinism has been refuted by quantum mechanics, which shows that no sufficient reason exists for certain quantum phenomena, e.g., the radioactive decay of atoms or the emergence of virtual particles out of the quantum vacuum and therefore that the law of causality in Schopenhauer's sense is false¹.

Likewise, quantum mechanics seems to be relevant to refute Schopenhauer's thesis that our choices, which depend on motives, are ultimately dependent on external factors. Even though there are several interpretations of quantum mechanics, some of them like the orthodox formulation of quantum mechanics rigorously articulated by

1 These quantum phenomena refute Schopenhauer's Kantian understanding of the law of causality according to which every event requires of an antecedent and sufficient cause. According to Schopenhauer, it is events or changes which stand in causal relations, causes always preceding their effects and no effect is possible without a sufficient cause. As I've argued elsewhere, these quantum phenomena are compatible with other formulations of the causal principle, see Agustin Moreno, “The Physics of Nothing: Are virtual particles a proven exception to the causal productive principle?”, *Philosophy Pathways*, March 30th 2018, Issue 221.

mathematician John von Newmann², understand the role of human choices as not determined by any physical law, since such choices are themselves the condition for the collapse of the wavefunction of any physical system, including the brain. On von Newmann's psychophysical understanding of quantum mechanics, no physical law determines our choices at a fundamental level. Therefore, they are not physically necessary. If that is correct, then a key premiss of Schopenhauer's argument is false and his conclusion is unwarranted. Freedom of the will in the libertarian sense seems to remain a scientifically and philosophically tenable position.

Schopenhauer's attempt to rescue some sense of freedom through our sense of moral responsibility is unconvincing. For in his view, our character is also causally determined and therefore fixed. Therefore, what any motive plus our character could produce is already causally determined and absolutely necessary. Having admitted this causal deterministic fatalism, then it is hard to see how a mere perception or internal sense of moral responsibility has any implication whatsoever for rescuing some metaphysically relevant and objective sense of freedom, instead of being a mere subjective, psychological illusion of our consciousness.

A concept of freedom of the will in the libertarian sense, whatever problems this position could have or imply, seems to accommodate our sense of moral responsibility much better than a concept of freedom in a compatibilist sense, since the expression “It is up to me”, if it refers to something absolutely fixed and causally determined in me, doesn't seem to make much difference in the overall deterministic and fatalistic scheme of things. It seems sensible to suggest that libertarian free will, which escapes causal determinism and its fatalistic consequences, is a necessary condition for an objective foundation and justification of our internal sense of moral responsibility and provides us with a genuine, ontologically substantive – not merely verbal or rhetorical – moral difference in our lives³.

© Agustin Moreno 2019

Email: philojuris@gmail.com

2 For a recent, philosophically informed and sophisticated defence of this view by a professional quantum physicist, see Henry R. Stapp, *Quantum Physics and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

3 And it seems to be the case regardless of whether libertarian free will turns out to be untenable or unacceptable on other grounds.