Bara Zraik Word Count: 1588 On Compatibility and Necessity

In this paper I will first examine the views of Hume on Compatibilism. More specifically, I am interested in that form of compatibility between a determined Universe and a free will. I will then consider some objections to this theory of compatibility before turning to Nietzsche’s skepticism, in search of a more solid determination. What I have in mind, in assessing the truth of Compatibilism is this: if the Universe is determined, then it seems that it should likewise be determined that one will, and even feel certain things. But if the Universe is not determined, then one is capable of altering not just their own feelings, wills, and actions, but they are also capable of altering other events in that Universe too.

Paul Russell begins his account of Humean freedom, or what Hume terms “liberty” by distinguishing between “liberty of spontaneity” and “hypothetical liberty”. The former is said to belong to anyone that is not in chains; with the power to act as the mechanisms of one’s mind disposes them to act, while the latter is that belonging to anyone able to pursue what they themselves freely will (Russell, section 1). Russell also goes into explaining why liberty of spontaneity does not secure hypothetical liberty in a lot more detail than I will here. But this is basically because while one may decide, spontaneously, to leave a room, their physical means of doing so may be blocked, thus while their liberty of spontaneity is not restricted in this case, as they are still free to act out of spontaneity, the hypothetical, and I think the actual, liberty of actualizing said spontaneity is restricted.

One objection to liberty of spontaneity is, as Kant points out, that alone it seems to reduce the workings of a free mind to the sorts of a determined machine; where the outcomes are a

result of some determined programming, and where the machine lacks both the intelligence to alter said programming and the power to act outside the course ascribed it by that very programing. “Kant, famously, describes this account of moral freedom as a “wretched subterfuge” and suggests that a freedom of this kind belongs to a clock that moves its hands by means of internal causes (Russell, section 1).” That if the power of acting in accordance with one’s own disposition is the only power available to them, this seems to leave out their power over what they choose to dispose themselves to act towards in certain situations, and what they choose to refrain from in other situations. Taken alone though, I don’t think Kant’s objection is enough to refute neither moral responsibility under liberty of spontaneity alone, nor does it refute the possibility of liberty of spontaneity’s being the only liberty available to everyone. This is because, while a mechanical watch, for instance, doesn’t decide, freely, to tell the right time, we can still attribute inaccuracy to a watch that doesn’t keep time accurately. And this is also due to said liberty’s importance in relating certain actions to their specific agents; for if the agent wasn’t free to spontaneously pursue what they willed (whether willed freely or not for that matter), this leaves no link between the actions themselves and the willings and desires of an agent.

We hold an agent responsible because it was his desires or willings that were

the determining causes of the action in question. Action caused in this way is voluntary and involuntary when caused in some other way. There is, therefore, no incompatibility between an action being causally necessitated and it being a free action for which the agent is responsible. (Russell, section 1)

The distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions allows for the compatibility between causally necessitated actions and their being actions of an agent, to whom responsibility may be

ascribed. In this way Hume is also saying that the mechanical watch, from earlier, can be held responsible for it’s inaccuracy, as it is the desire and the willingness of it’s flawed mechanism to which the inaccuracy may be ascribed. In this way also, the liberty of spontaneity allows for the ascription of responsibility for the actions of a child to that child, just as it does the actions of an animal to that animal, and of the broken clock, to that broken clock.

“Responsibility,” the incompatibilist claims, “requires categorical freedom to choose otherwise in the same circumstances (Russell, section 1).” This other attempted objection to compatibilism by the incompatibilist, I think, has already been answered by my account of the freedom of spontaneity as having already accounted for said responsibility itself. Just as we can ascribe the responsibility for the inaccuracy of a watch to the mechanisms driving that watch to tell time inaccurately, we can likewise also ascribe responsibility for the actions taken by someone to the mechanisms driving them to take said actions. Speaking of someone addicted to a harmful substance, for instance, Russel says:

Although it may be true that in these circumstances the agent is acting according to his own desires or willings, it is equally clear that such an agent is neither free nor responsible for his behaviour. It would appear, therefore, that we are required to acknowledge that some causes “internal” to the agent may also be regarded as compelling or constraining. (Russell, section 1)

This blurs the line between the internally and the externally compelling (or constraining) for an agent towards action and is, for me, the real downfall of compatibilism. This is because it seems impossible to tell one form of compelling-ness from the other, even if one puts themselves in the mind of said agent at the moment the decision is being made. For the action, say, a robbery, to be

carried out, not only needs the robber be internally compelled to act in a certain way, this internal compulsion must also be met with his external compulsion in recognizing his to be victim as a well-known and wealthy jeweler who has just closed shop for the night, and is thus at his utmost vulnerability to victimization. The two forms of compulsion, therefore, go hand in hand and are one and the same drive for action. As without the internal compulsion of the robber to rob, the robbery wouldn’t have taken place. And without the aforementioned external compulsion, the robbery might have turned out less, or even more successful, but it wouldn’t have been the same robbery either way. Lastly, my portrayal of Hume’s compatibilism leaves out any interpretation where the robber could have freely decided not to carry through with that robbery, had the circumstances of that night been the same. The robber does, however, retain the freedom, and power over his willingness to commit a robbery that night at all.

That was my interpretation of Hume’s philosophical position, which is one that is, unfortunately, still far from being my own. This is due to the necessity with which the events of that night of the robbery had to have turned out. In this simple, yet determined Universe, I cannot bring myself to realize a point where the determined chain of the unfolding of the events of this Universe could have been broken, let alone to have had been done so by the free will of a human being. Thus I am left with Skepticism about the Freedom of the will. Luckily for me, Friedrich Nietzsche seems to share my sentiments about that idea of a free will in stating;

The longing for “freedom of the will” in the superlative meta-physical sense (which, unfortunately, still rules in the heads of the half- educated), the longing to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for your actions yourself and to relieve God, world, ancestors, chance, and society of the burden – all this means nothing less than being that very

causa sui and, with a courage greater than Mu ̈ nchhausen’s, pulling yourself by the hair from the swamp of nothingness up into existence. (Hortsmann, 21)

This translates, for me at least, to the responsibility of the robbery’s being equally shared by the robber as it is by all those circumstances which lead up to the robbery, and which enabled it to take place, including the robber’s own willingness to rob, and the very presence of his victim. No assumption of a free will seems necessary after one truly grasps the sense in which anything which might appear to have been chosen freely really is as determined as anything else is. Speaking of a Frenchman who lost his son to atheism, Nietzsche says; “he saw that enormous bloodsucker, the spider of skepticism, in the background, and he suspected the incurable misery of a heart that was no longer hard enough for evil or for good, of a shattered will that no longer commanded, that was no longer able to command.” (Hortsmann, 102) For grasping that everything is really as determined as one’s own wills and desires leaves no room for the regret of certain things, or for the applaud of others. Little room does this grasping also leave for one to want to alter the course of the universe, rather their wanting to find repose, and comfort in, the necessity with which their own lives unfold.

Works Cited

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