CAN THE WILL BE CAUSED?

TWO views of the problem about freedom of the will that occur frequently in philosophical literature, and elsewhere, can be stated in terms of their questions about the two propositions: (I) The will is caused. (II) The will is free.¹

One view naively assumes that these propositions are logical contradictories and that there is no important difficulty about the meaning of either. It simply raises the question: Which is true? A familiar argument for (II) is based on an appeal to introspective evidence that (I) is false. The case against (II) is often argued by claiming that science requires (or confirms) a general deterministic postulate that entails (I) or by supporting (I) directly with talk of how a person's past determines his motives and his motives determine his voluntary acts.

Another, I think more penetrating, view takes as fundamental the question whether the two propositions are indeed logically incompatible. Most philosophers raising this question have (through suitable explications of what "free" means) answered it negatively.² This is not surprising because the question has nearly always been prompted by the feeling that there are good reasons for accepting both propositions: (I) seems to be supported by the common practice of explaining choices, decisions, volitions, as due to certain psychological attributes of the agent (his desires, beliefs, and the like; (II) seems to be supported by the common practice of appraising choices and agents' reasons for

¹ I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor John Rawls, who gave me the initial suggestion for the argument of this paper and help with its development. None of the thoughts here, however, should be attributed to him.

² For example: Hobbes, Hume, Mill, Moore, Schlick, Nowell-Smith. Some have argued that (I) and (II) are logically incompatible on the basis of their own examination of the senses of the predicates involved. See, for example, C. D. Broad, "Determinism, Indeterminism, and Libertarianism," in Ethics and the History of Philosophy (New York, 1952), esp. pp. 201-211; and C. A. Campbell, "Is Free Will a Pseudo-Problem?" Mind, LIX (1951), 441-453.
from seeing this, however, by the fact that certain utterances appear to make such a claim and yet are susceptible of intelligible interpretation.

For example, consider an utterance of the form “I know now that I shall later decide to do...” There is more than one thing a person might mean by such a remark: he might mean that he has made his decision as to what he will do and so knows what decision he will later announce; or he might mean that he has made his decision as to what he will do and so knows what decision he will later pretend to make; or he might mean that he has made his decision but thinks he will later forget his present intention and make the same decision again. But his meaning anything at all by it depends on the fact that the locution “I know now that I shall later...” is commonly used to express a present decision concerning future action. Any attempt to understand the remark above must rely on this fact and regard the remark, not as a claim to know what a decision not yet made will be, but as the expression of a decision already made about future action.

The remark must be so regarded because any expansion explicitly denying that the speaker was making this decision-expressing use of “I know that I shall later...” also reduces it to absurdity. Consider: “I already know (am quite certain) that I shall later decide to do..., but I have not yet decided what I shall do, that is, I’ve not yet made up my mind what I shall do, that is, I do not yet know what I shall do.” Now this utterance clearly makes two inconsistent claims: on the one hand, that the speaker knows what he will decide to do, hence, what he will at least try to do; on the other hand, that he does not know what he will try to do.

For a person to claim that he knows what he will decide to do, hence, what he will at least try to do, and then to begin the process of making up his mind what he will do—trying to persuade himself one way or another by offering himself reasons for and against the various alternatives—would surely be a procedure of which we could make no sense. Either his undertaking to make a decision belies his prior claim to knowledge, or his prior claim makes a farce of his undertaking to make a decision.

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8 For example, Bertrand Russell in Our Knowledge of the External World (Chicago, 1926), pp. 254-255, imagines “a set of beings who know the whole future with absolute certainty,” who “would not have to wait for the event in order to know what decision they were going to adopt on some future occasion,” and says that they would not regret this knowledge because “human actions are the outcome of desire, and no foreseeing can be true unless it takes account of desire.”
If he does already know what he will decide to do, then he cannot by the process of making up his mind persuade himself of anything that he does not already know. Yet the whole point of making up one's mind is to pass from uncertainty to a kind of knowledge about what one will do or try to do. To believe that someone already knows what his future attempted action will be is to refuse to regard anything he does as having the point necessary to its being his deciding that he will attempt the action. (Analogously, if someone knows already how the pieces of a puzzle go together to form a required shape, then nothing he might do, while knowing that, can count as his figuring out how the pieces go together to form the required shape.) Thus it is unintelligible to describe someone as undertaking to make up his mind and as knowing prior to this undertaking what the outcome of it will be. In other words, the concept of a decision does not allow the possibility of a person's knowing what his decision will be before he makes it.\(^4\)

\(\text{(B)}\) I shall try to reduce to absurdity just one of several interpretations that might be given to the proposition that decisions are caused. This particular interpretation is important because it is one common to many philosophical discussions of the free will problem.

To think of a decision as caused (in the sense that interests me here) is to think of a decision as a specific, discriminable event whose occurrence is ascertainable independently of inquiry as to how it was caused, and to think of its being caused as consisting in the fact that there is a set of events and circumstances preceding and accompanying it to which it has a certain relation—the causal relation. This relation is understood to be defined for an indefinite variety of events and circumstances—including even physical events remote from human influence—and, hence, it is in its conception quite independent of any peculiar kinds of events and circumstances that might stand in such relation to each other. It applies just as well to decisions and desires as to explosions and temperatures. This view of the causal relation is Humean to the extent that the relation holds between a particular event \(A\) and a certain set of its antecedents \(B\) only if it is a true generalization that an event of the same kind as \(A\) will always accompany the occurrence of a set of circumstances sufficiently similar to \(B\).

With this interpretation (as far as it goes), if \((I)\) does describe a possible state of affairs then it must be at least logically possible that someone should know what a decision of his will be before he makes it. For if this interpretation did make sense and a decision were caused, then the decider would know his decision in advance if both the following conditions were satisfied: (1) The decider knew prior to his decision the causal law that circumstances of the kind that were going to cause it are always accompanied by a decision of that kind. (2) The decider knew prior to his decision that circumstances of the required kind existed or would exist. Under these conditions, the decider would watch a series of causally connected events and circumstances produce a decision of his, knowing all the time what decision would be produced.

The common interpretation of "Decisions are caused" that was explained above excludes all grounds from which one might deduce the conceptual possibility of such a situation. How could the possibility of the first condition be excluded? If a completely universal proposition can be known by anyone then it can be known by everyone; and surely there is no sense in the idea of a true causal law that could not be known by anyone.

How could the possibility of the second condition (that the decider knows prior to his decision the existence of its causal circumstances) be excluded? One can, of course, describe a set of circumstances that it would be logically impossible for the decider to know in advance of his decision. (One need only

\(^4\) Some of the conceptual truths on which the argument above relies have been stated by Stuart Hampshire and H. L. A. Hart, "Decision, Intention, and Certainty," Mind, LXVII (1958), 1-12. They say (pp. 2-9): "'He has not yet decided what he will do' entails 'He does not yet know what he will do.'... If a man does claim to be able to predict with certainty his own future actions, basing his prediction on induction, then he is implying that the actions in question will be in some sense, or to some degree, involuntary... If it is up to him to decide what he is going to do, then he must still be uncertain what he will do until he has made a decision or until his intentions are formed... The certainty comes at the moment of decision, and indeed constitutes the decision, when the certainty is arrived at in this way, as a result of considering reasons, and not as a result of considering evidence."
include in the set the circumstance that the decider remains ignorant of certain other circumstances in the set at least until the time of the decision. It might be imagined, for example, that an agent’s having a certain set of desires, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes was always sufficient to produce a certain decision provided also that the agent was not aware at the time of some of those attitudes.) And a set of circumstances would not be a less plausible candidate for the cause of a decision merely because it had this feature. But neither could a set of circumstances be ruled out as a candidate for the cause merely because it lacked this feature.

Part of the idea being considered is that the notion of the causal relation is a perfectly general one, applicable to all kinds of events, physical and mental. And this surely means that the notion of the causal relation, whatever it does include, cannot include grounds for deducing that in the special case of a decision it is impossible that any set of its circumstances should both have the causal relation to it and be knowable by the decider in advance. Thus we cannot appeal to the meaning of “are caused” in the proposition “Decisions are caused” to rule out the embarrassing situation outlined above.

The other part of the idea important to this consideration is that a decision is a specific event which, like a flash or a bang, can be identified independently of inquiry into its causes. It is not supposed that one needs to know what causal law an event falls under before one can identify it is a decision. Rather, as with other kinds of events, the knowledge that one is inquiring about a decision is supposed to guide the causal inquiry, to tell one what sort of causal circumstance to look for, not to await the outcome of the inquiry. The meaning of “decisions” proves then to be of no more face-saving value than that of “are caused.”

And thus this common interpretation of the proposition that decisions might be caused leaves just as much logical room for the discovery that the set of circumstances to which a decision has the causal relation is one that the decider could have known in advance as it does for the discovery that it is not.

In short, if the concept of a decision were such that one could ascertain that an event fell under it and then independently ascertain that that event had the causal relation to a certain set of its circumstances, then the concept of a decision would allow one to think of (1), (2), and, hence, of someone’s knowing what his decision will be before he makes it, as genuine possibilities. But in section (A) we saw the absurdity of admitting this latter possibility. I conclude that the concept of a decision makes it impossible that any event be both indentified as a decision and said to be caused; and, therefore, that proposition (I) is necessarily false.

Two comments should be made on the import of this argument: If we accept the conclusion that (I) is necessarily false we must be prepared to say one of two things about the explanations that we commonly offer for our own and others’ decisions—explanations that certainly seem to be in terms of events or circumstances preceding and accompanying those decisions (desires, beliefs, and the like). Either we must say that these explanations are all, not merely false, but guilty of conceptual absurdity in implying that decisions are caused; or we must say that they do not imply that decisions are caused but are explanations of a quite different kind, involving a relation quite different in conception from the causal relation defined in the Humean way. I choose the latter alternative but shall not elaborate it here.

From my argument it does not follow that there are decisions (or choices or volitions). I have shown only that if there are decisions, they are (necessarily) not part of the causal order, that explanations of them must be of a different kind. The argument above only removes another of the confusions obscuring the free-will-determinism problem. The real question, it seems to me, is whether a vast addition to our knowledge about the physical causes and effects of the minuter internal processes of our bodies could possibly turn out to be incompatible with regarding any of the behavior of those bodies as expressing wills (decisions, choices, volitions). If the answer to this is yes (and there are considerations that can incline one to think it is), then it is an unsettled empirical question whether wills (necessarily free) are attributable to human organisms at all.

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