Agitating for munificence[1] or going out of business: Philosophy's dilemma

Susan T. Gardner

Philosophy has a dirty little secret and it is this: a whole lot of philosophers have swallowed the mechanistic billiard ball deterministic view of human action—presumably because philosophy assumes that science demands it, and/or because modern attempts to articulate in what free will consists seem incoherent (e.g., that free will might somehow be found in the indeterminacy of subatomic particles[2]). This below-the-surface-purely-academic commitment to mechanistic determinism is a dirty little secret because an honest public commitment would render virtually all that is taught in philosophy departments incomprehensible. Can "lovers of wisdom" really continue to tolerate such a heavy burden of hypocrisy? For it is maximally hypocritical, is it not, to teach ethics, or existentialism, or political philosophy, or critical thinking, or indeed to teach anything at all if one views the bodies of humans as entities determined by forces that are describable entirely under the auspices of physical/ chemical laws. The only option, it would seem, to avoid such hypocrisy is to go out of business. After all, either base metal can be turned into gold, or it cannot. We found out long ago that it cannot, and so alchemy was rightly banished into the dustbin of history. Likewise, either philosophy can enhance the wisdom quotient of its disciples as its name implies, and thus override billiard ball mechanics, or it cannot. And if it cannot, it deserves to follow alchemy to an ignominious end.

Before we go quietly into the night, however, let us reflect upon whether putting on a more finely grained pair of theoretical glasses might yet let us see the possibility of gold in "them there determined hills." The theoretical focus that I have in mind is one that seeks *first* to examine an intermediate mode of movement, namely the behavior of our animal friends. It is my contention that, once we understand how the development of **consciousness** transforms the mere movement of inanimate objects into **animate** behavior, we will be in a much better position to understand how the development of **self-consciousness** and **language** transforms animate behavior into the possibility of cooperative **human** action. And from there, we will be in a still better position to see how reasoning—in particular **impartial reasoning**—can transform the conforming action of self-conscious humans into the possibility of **self-legislating autonomous individuals**. In a nutshell, then, what I am going to argue is that Kant got it right when he argued that autonomy requires that humans rise above their sensuous nature, but that his portrayal was incomplete in that he failed to take into account the nature of *both* consciousness *and* self-consciousness, and therefore failed to see that there were more steps to freedom than just one. More precisely, what I am going to argue is that there are 3 steps to 3 different kinds of freedom, each logically and metaphysically dependent on the step before (as each is freedom from the previous way of being). Autonomy is the pinnacle.

So Let Us Look at Animate Behavior

Pavlov, and after him the entire Behaviorist movement, long ago showed that the configuration of self-propelled animate behavior can best be explained by reference to the geometric sum of environmental appetitive stimuli that elicit approach responses, and environmental aversive stimuli that elicit avoidance responses. This is a seminal claim (seemingly ignored by philosophers) since what Behaviorists are saying is that the behavior of animals, rather than being explained by reference to a push-from-behind mechanistic dynamic requires, instead,

a reference to the quasi-magnetic pull of **perceived** *stimuli* that emerge with the development of consciousness. And what is important here is that, though the resulting behavior is still utterly determined, it is *determined in an entirely different way* than the way non-animate objects are determined, as a dog scampering up hill (thus defying the laws of gravity) to fetch a ball that is (gravitationally) rolling down to it so amply demonstrates. And it is this recognition—that there are **different kinds of determinism**—that, I will argue, ultimately opens up the way to seeing how freedom in the self-legislative sense is possible. So let us begin.

Layers of Determinism

Step one in the evolutionary change in the "dynamic of movement" of entities that populate our world is, as has already been outlined, the development of consciousness whereby animate beings are **freed** from the determining forces of physical/chemical laws by being ensnared by the **determining** perceptual forces of environmental stimuli. Understanding this step is critically important because once we understand step one, step two—or the behavioral impact of the evolution of self-consciousness—becomes readily explainable. That is, if we adopt the model suggested some time ago by George Herbert Mead[3] and Charles Horton Cooley[4], and later empirically supported by Gordon G. Gallop[5], we can describe **self-consciousness** as the capacity to **perceive one's self from the point of view of another** that emerges as a result of a systematic correlation—either in reality or, more importantly and pervasively, in the imaginative space created by symbolic, i.e., linguistic, interaction—between one's own behavior and the reaction of others. Thus, if young Johnny is systematically exposed to his mother's enthusiastic approval of toy-sharing (either through direct experience or through story-telling), in future potential toy-sharing situations, Johnny will generate an image of an approving mother, which, if sufficiently strong, will take control of his behavior. Johnny, in other words, becomes self-conscious when he becomes conscious of the value of his behavior from another's viewpoint, and the behavioral offshoot of the emergence of this self-consciousness is what psychologists refer to as the development of **self-control**.

There are three things of note with regard to this dynamic. The first is that the underlying behavioral influence of self-consciousness is similar to the influence of mere consciousness in that what controls action here is a **perceived** stimulus, though in the case of self-consciousness, the stimulus is *self-generated,* and a product of the *social* rather than the physical environment. The second thing of note is that the associational learning, which for animals transpires in reality, can, for linguistically interacting entities, transpire in the imagination, thus rendering inter-human behavior-modification far more precise and pervasive, yet more invisible. And the third point of note is that, though psychologists refer to this as the development of *self*-control, in reality what we have here is the emergence of **social control**. That is, what we have here—if indeed the image of approving Mom elicits a sharing response—is Mommy controlling her child from afar.

So the question is "what now"? If fundamental changes in movement through phylogenetic and ontogenetic development occur as a result of entities escaping lower-level determining forces by being ensnared in higher levels of determinism, where do we go from here? If autonomy is the goal, what is the next step that humans need to take in order to free themselves from the determinism of **social** forces?"

The answer is that, since social determinism results largely because social others plug into one's **practical reasoning** by pairing, through linguistic interaction, an imagined action with an imagined reinforcement (e.g., all good children share their toys), the most effective way to take control of one's own behavior is to take control over one's own practical reasoning. And the only way to do that is to neutralize outside influence, or **bias** by submitting all of one's beliefs, opinions, judgments, and—most importantly—the **vision** of who it is that one wants to become[6], to the objective court of reason and to let the best option, i.e., the one backed by the strongest reasons, win. Autonomy, in other words, requires that humans allow themselves to be **determined by the rules of reason.**

Elsewhere[7] I have argued that, contrary to Kant's internal univeralization test, the best way to ensure impartiality is to reflect upon and "objectively" test one's own viewpoints against those of actual others. And though this

is a critically important issue the details of which will ultimately determine how best to guide others to "think their way to freedom," what is important here is to demonstrate how impartiality fits into the bigger metaphysical picture, which can be summarized as follows.

Freedom and determinism are not the antagonistic, mutually exclusive positions that they are often portrayed to be. Indeed the possibility of any kind of freedom depends, both literally and conceptually, upon the actuality of many layers of determinism. The fact that physical objects move according to physical/chemical laws is the foundational position of determinism, both concretely and conceptually. However, animate beings, precisely because they are also determined by the stimulus environment in which they move, are—to a greater or lesser extent—freed from the universal determining power of physical/chemical laws (e.g., they can move up hill). On still another level, symbolically interacting self-conscious entities, precisely because they are also determined by the values that they introject from symbolically interacting others, are—to a greater or lesser extent—freed from the determining power of behavioral laws (e.g., I can share my chocolate cake). And finally, linguistically interacting self-conscious agents, who strive for impartiality by submitting to the determining rules of practical reasoning, free themselves from the determining power of social influence (e.g., I can override introjected values that seem contrary to the individual I hope to become) and, in so doing, make autonomy, and its existential counterpart, individuality, possible.[8]

"But is this really real freedom?" one might finally ask. "Is flying from conformity into the freedom of impartiality good enough?" The answer I suggest is: "How much better freedom do you want than the freedom to genuinely listen to the merits of opposing viewpoints in an effort to reach an impartial judgment?" From a societal point of view, if a sufficient number embrace this process, Kant's Kingdom of Ends will be within our visionary ideal. And from an individual point of view, we can expect that agents will no longer suffer the anxiety of simply being blown whichever way the winds blow. Since they will recognize that their decisions, judgments, opinions, and overall vision of who it is that they want to become are a product of their own reasoning rather than a result of societal influence, individuals who consistently strive to view and judge impartially will flourish with a sense of dignity that is well deserved.

Besides, and as somewhat of an aside, through the platform from which this discussion was launched, this is precisely the kind of freedom that is good enough to keep philosophy unhypocritically afloat. This picture of freedom, after all, demonstrates in detail how **vision** matters, and since philosophers speak to vision, since philosophers can prod, poke, nudge and provoke their students to challenge their biases so that they are catapulted into the stratosphere of objectivity, autonomy, and individuality, it turns out that we philosophers can, with integrity, go back to our roots. We can become gadflies for the Good. We can—and we ought because we can—fall inline with the Socratic echo, and agitate for munificence.

An addendum

It is of interest to note that, in a recent experiment[9], social scientists showed that when subjects are exposed to the deterministic message "that free will contradicts the known fact that the universe is governed by the lawful principles of science," those subjects were far more likely to cheat both in a quiz situation and one in which money was involved than those who are not so exposed. What is particularly interesting about this experiment is that it not only makes an even stronger case for the danger of a wholesale commitment to a mechanistic physicalistic view of human action, but as well, in and of itself, it undermines such a viewpoint, and points instead to the fact that we are all in the business of what Daniel Dennett[10] refers to as memetic engineering, i.e., that the pictures that we paint with our words can override physicalistic deterministic influences. The argument that is being presented here goes still further by making the claim that, though in many instances such memetic engineering can lead to social determinism, it can, as well, inspire others to think through beliefs and opinions impartially, and, in so doing, open up the way for individuals to capture their own freedom.

Endnotes

1. Defined as "splendidly gracious; having a generous nature; hospitable to differing viewpoints."

2. In his book *Minds, Brains and Science*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University press, 1984) John Serle writes for instance that: "Indeterminism at the level of particles in physics is really no support at all to any doctrine of the freedom of the will; because first, the statistical indeterminacy at the level of particles does not show any indeterminacy at the level of the objects that matter to us—human bodies, for example. And secondly, even if there is an element of indeterminacy in the behaviour of physical particles—even if they are only statistically predictable—still, that by itself gives no scope for human freedom of the will; because it doesn't follow from the fact that particles are only statistically determined that the human mind can force the statistically-determined particles to swerve from their paths. . . . So it really does look as if everything we know about physics forces us to some form of denial of human freedom. (87)

3. Mead. G. H. *On Social Psychology*. A. Strauss (ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

4. Cooley, C. H. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.

5. Gallup, G. G. "Self-Recognition in Primates: A Comparative Approach to the Bidirectional Properties of Consciousness." *American Psychologist*, Vol. 32, May 1977, 329-338.

6. It is of note that creating a "magnetic vision" of who it is that one wants to become requires self-consciousness, a robust sense of time, and (as existentialists have pointed out) a deep understanding of one's own mortality so that one has a sense of oneself as a finite process to which evaluative defining predicates can be applied.

7. Gardner, Susan T. *Thinking Your Way to Freedom: A Guide to Owning Your Own Practical Reasoning*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.

8. This "evolution of movement" finds parallel empirical support in the work of developmental psychologists such as: Kohlberg, L. "Stages and Sequences: the Cognitive-developmental Approach to Socialization," in D. Gaslin (ed.), in *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*. New York: Rand-McNally, 1969, and Loevenger, J. *Ego Development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1976.

9. Vohs, Kathleen D. and Jonathan W. Schooler. "The Value of Believing in Free will: Encouraging a Belief in Determinism Increases Cheating." *Psychological Science*, Vol. 19, number 1, January 2008. 49-54 (6).

10. Dennett, Daniel C. *Freedom Evolves*. New York: Viking, 2003. According to Dennett, "a meme is an information-packet with attitude—a recipe or instruction manual for doing something cultural"(176). Dennett argues that such "Shared knowledge is the key to our greater freedom from 'genetic determinism'"(166), and that "The issue is not about determinism, either genetic or environmental or both together; the issue is about what we can change whether or not our world is deterministic" (160). With regard to the more traditional libertarian notion of free will, Dennett argues that that kind of freedom (whatever that is) is not worth wanting (136), in contrast to the "incremental character-building that may (and may not) grow out of a lifetime of hard choices taken seriously (that) really does add a 'variety of free will worth wanting'" (126).

Address correspondence to:

Susan T. Gardner
Capilano University
North Vancouver, Canada
sgardner@capilanou.ca