

## The Embarrassment of Punching Puppets: An Argument from Conversation for Freedom

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### Introduction

While walking across campus one day, a friend stopped me to say that Eminem had gotten into a fight with a puppet the night before. Though Robert Smigel was standing just off camera, Mr. Mathers had attacked Smigel's puppet—Triumph the Insult Comic Dog—instead. My friend and I shared a laugh, but I never double checked his story till I began teaching Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, years later.

In Book III of the *Ethics*, Aristotle uses origins, rather than modality, to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary action. If an act originates within the actor, it is voluntary,<sup>1</sup> but if it originates outside the actor—and thus the person simply is “acted upon,” or used like a tool—it is involuntary.<sup>2</sup> Thinking the Eminem–Triumph fight would be perfect for illustrating this distinction, I set off in search of the video.

What I found, sadly, is that Mr. Mathers had only punched Triumph in a later self-parodying replay, not in the original event. If I wanted to make the difference between voluntary and involuntary action memorable for my students—drawing on the fact that getting into fights with puppets is naturally shameful—then I would have to use the parody. But why could I expect performers-punching-puppets to be memorably ludicrous?

If you attack a puppet for insulting you, you are trying both to pay it back for what it did, and to get it to shut up. In doing so, however, you are showing that you have fundamentally

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<sup>1</sup> *Nic. Eth.* III.1, 1111a22–23, Ross/Brown trans.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1110a1–4.

misunderstood who was acting on you and how to respond appropriately. The puppet, after all, has done nothing; it is the puppeteer who has insulted you through the puppet. In attacking the puppet, furthermore, you would not silence the offending mouth. Though you set an understandable goal, the means you chose would not help you achieve it.

The embarrassment of punching puppets, then, stems from showing yourself to be mistaken both about what is going on and how to respond. But this boils down to being mistaken about the origin of the puppet's actions. Though you think the origin is the puppet itself, it is actually something outside the puppet, which we call its "puppeteer."

The fact that Eminem's response to Triumph was violent, in other words, is not what made it embarrassing. Even if he had replied more philosophically—with an argument—the same shame would have ensued. Take, for example, a debate between you and a friend, during which you realize your interlocutor is actually a puppet. Upon seeing this, the origin of the speech acts you have heard, and the hand movements and facial expressions you have seen, seems to shift from the being in front of you, to wherever that being's puppeteer is located. Your interlocutor's acts of speaking and moving now appear not to have belonged to your interlocutor, but to have originated with a being outside him. Realizing he was caused to make those sounds and movements, rather than making them himself, you now feel embarrassed about arguing with him. He was not arguing with you, after all; his puppeteer was arguing with you through him. His puppeteer was using him to engage you, and not only did you not realize this, you responded in ways that now seem infelicitous. You thought it best to look him in the eye, in order to be more convincing; to use the language of business, because he was wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase; and to speak slowly, because he looked fatigued. But now you realize your real

interlocutor was not the being before you, and you have no idea how it is dressed or whether it is tired.

The embarrassment you feel upon realizing your interlocutor is a puppet, then, has to do with origins, not modality. The issue is not that your interlocutor could not have said or done anything other than he did, but that he was not the origin of what he said or did. Those acts originated outside of him, and thus were done through him by something other than him.

## **I. Varieties of Determinism**

On the view being developed here, determinism is the belief that everything we do is just a link in some causal chain that originated in something other than us. While most determinists have traditionally thought this “something other” was outside us, the idea that it could be something inside us (though still other than us) has recently been gaining ground.

### **A. The Internal Puppeteer Account**

The internal puppeteer account of human action derives its support from experiments by neuroscientists like Benjamin Libet, as well as from research by evolutionary psychologists. The former seem to show that our actions originate in some part of our brain beyond our control, while the latter seem to show that our actions originate in our very DNA. To interpret this to mean that human action is determined, however, is to rely on a flawed mereology.

A part derives its identity from the whole to which it belongs; what it means to be a hand, for example, is to be the hand of a body. An organic part derives its very being, furthermore, from the whole to which it belongs; if you cut off a hand, it dies and decays. To be a whole, similarly, is for a thing to be identical in part with each of its parts. The human organism is in

part its head, in part its arm, in part its torso, and so on. To trace our actions back to a readiness potential in the brain, to neurotransmitter levels, or to our DNA, therefore, is simply to trace our actions back to us. It is simply to say that we act as we do because of who and what we are, and thus that it is we who are acting, not something else acting through us.

Living bodies, furthermore, are not billiard balls waiting to be hit, or links waiting to be pulled. They are, instead, like the Tasmanian Devil from *Looney Tunes*, in whirlwind mode; they are circulating centers of energy, continually sucking in wayward links and spinning off causal chains. Living beings are always already in motion, maintaining themselves, healing themselves, and developing or growing themselves. And the same is true of their parts. Thus, even if we could trace our actions back to the activity of one part, it could only get the action into the open by engaging the assistance of other parts. But one does not get a cyclone to move by hitting it with a cue ball; the most one can do is ask politely. Living beings, and their parts, in other words, will not simply react, but they may be convinced to respond.

If we treat one of our parts as an origin, therefore, we must also treat our other cooperating parts as co-origins. Each act would become a collective action between our various parts. But since we as wholes are identical (in part) with each of our parts, and each part derives its identity and being from the whole, each action originates with the person as a whole, not with one part alone.

## **B. Reactions versus Responses**

But what is the distinction just mentioned between reacting and responding? Inspired by Newton's Third Law of Motion, I would appeal to the idea of energy transfer. When a pool cue

strikes a billiard ball, the ball's changes are reactions to the cue's changes. We see this in that the energy expressed by the rolling of the ball was imparted to it by the movement of the cue.

We can also say, however, that one change is a reaction to another if the transferred energy "triggers" the reaction's energy to switch from a potential (or dormant) state to a kinetic (or active) state. Take, for example, the firing of a starter's pistol. The energy imparted to the cartridge by the firing pin triggers the release of the energy dormant within the gunpowder, converting it from potential to active.

But now consider the skin's self-healing response to a paper cut. No one attributes the healing of her finger to the paper—just as no one attributes his recovery to the mugger. This is because the energy expressed by the healing was not imparted to the skin by the paper, nor was it triggered to switch from dormant to active by the energy imparted by the paper. The skin's healing is simply part of the body's continually-restoring its own integrity, its achieving greater self-coordination, or its changing into itself. The healing is a response, not a reaction.

Finally, consider a case in which you are debating a friend. Your interlocutor says, "If what you say is true, you should renounce your citizenship and join the Enemy." You respond, "No; what I say implies that I'm perfectly justified in staying right where I am." Both of you have changed yourselves (by moving your jaws, lungs, and vocal chords) and have changed your environment (by expelling heated air into it and initiating sound waves). Both of you, furthermore, have changed each other, in that you bounced sound waves off each other's ear drums. When making the two statements listed above, you and your interlocutor have acted, and acted on each other. But is your act of speaking a reaction to your interlocutor's, or a response?

The sound waves emanating from your interlocutor do transfer energy to you, but this energy is like a hand opening a door to release the already-frolicking hounds. Or, better, your

interlocutor's statement is like a paper cut, and your retort is like your skin's healing. It is a response that expresses an already-active inner life, and is simply one side of what you are always doing: maintaining yourself, repairing yourself, and developing yourself. Your identity and integrity have been threatened, just as in the paper cut example, and you are responding so as to preserve your identity and integrity.

Two changes, therefore, can be related mechanically, chemically, biologically, or psychologically, and though mechanical and chemical relations may deserve the label "reactions," biological and psychological relations are better called "responses." The catchall term "cause," however, glosses over these distinctions, leading us to think of all changes as related like links in a chain, or collisions between billiard balls. Once life enters the equation, introducing the complexity and dynamism of organisms, a new type of analysis is required, which is why we need biologists and neuroscientists, not just physicists.

### **C. The External Puppeteer Account**

With this in mind we turn to the older, more widespread type of determinism—the external puppeteer account of human action—which is inspired by reasoning about what must be the case given certain laws or principles. This type of determinism sees our actions as links in causal chains originating in God, in the laws of nature, in the Big Bang, or in quantum events.

After we have realized that our interlocutor is a puppet, we see that the origin of our interlocutor's acts is his puppeteer. If we wish to continue our conversation, therefore, we must shift our attention to the true origin of the speech acts we hear. But is this possible, on the external puppeteer account of human action?

Most theistic determinists would say that God is a person, and thus is just the type of thing with whom one could converse. However, if we are all puppets for God, and we contradict each other, God contradicts God's own self through us. God would seem to be a trickster who never studied Grice. Thus, it would be impossible, in the sense of being impractical or ineffective, to converse with a puppeteer deity.

What, then, about the laws of nature? While Socrates imagines having a conversation with the laws of Athens, no such conversation is actually possible. Natural laws, in governing all events, and hence all conversations, furthermore, would be continually contradicting themselves, just like God would if God were the cause of all that happens. Worse still, the laws of nature, cannot initiate events, since they are static descriptions, rather than active persons. How could they participate in the give-and-take required by conversation? How would you speak to an abstract universal law, or get it to see things from your point of view?

The response to this may be that if you have a point of view, it was caused to occur in you, or was taken through you by your puppeteer. But if the laws of nature are all our puppeteers, the laws of nature have already taken all the points of view (through us) that they could desire (through us) to communicate (through us). Thus, actual conversation would be both impossible and pointless.

What, then, of the Big Bang and quantum events? Though these are the only two originating events usually recognized by contemporary physicists, neither are things with which one could converse. How could one have a conversation with an event? And can one event engage in another? (After all, the Big Bang, quantum occurrences, and conversations are all events.) The Big Bang, furthermore, no longer exists, so we could not get our messages back to it, and in being a single origin, it would face the same obstacles to conversation as God and the

laws of nature. And while there are many quantum events, none lasts long enough to maintain a conversation.

#### **D. The Irrationality of Determinism**

If determinists postulate God, universal laws, the Big Bang, or quantum events, as the origins of all our actions, then conversation—and hence social life—either becomes impossible, or becomes an illusion. But this means that determinism is irrational. It is irrational first in that it requires us to see people as puppets even though the only way we have of interacting with them is to treat them as if they were capable of conversation, and hence of doing things, of acting, of being agents. Thus, it requires us to hold a belief even though we must act in a way that expresses the opposite belief. But self-contradiction is the heart of irrationality and any theory that requires its adherents to be irrational is itself irrational.

Second, to avoid self-contradiction, determinism would force us to shift our conversations from puppets to puppeteers. But the puppeteers suggested by determinists are not things with which one can converse. Thus, determinism requires us to do the impossible, and this, once again, is irrational.

Third, determinism claims to give us the truth about ourselves, and thus presents itself as something we should believe. And yet, on determinism, we cannot believe. Beliefs can be caused in us, and thus we can be believed through, or believed with; but we ourselves can believe nothing. Any theory that presents a mental or physical act as one we should do presents it as one we can do. But determinism says we can do nothing. Thus, determinism contradicts itself, and self-contradiction is the heart of irrationality.



Fourth, a being is an agent when the actions in which it participates are free—when it originates its own actions. An agent, in other words, is a self-mover. But experimental psychologists have concluded that infants as young as seven months<sup>3</sup> “recognize that humans are self-propelled while inanimate objects move only after contact with another object.”<sup>4</sup> That people are agents—are self-movers—in other words, is so obvious even babies see it. But determinism would have us deny that humans are agents on the basis not of an opposed experience, but on the basis of a theory. This gets the justificatory relationship between experience and theory backward, which is especially irrational for a theory that claims to be scientific.

### **E. Summary**

Once we recognize that living beings are more like cyclones than billiard balls, we see that they are always already active, not passively waiting to be pushed. They need not be caused to act by something external, as a ball must be caused to move by being struck. And this is nothing mysterious; the only miracle required is the miracle of life. It does not violate the principle of the causal closure of the physical, unless life itself violates that principle, nor does it violate the principle of the conservation of energy, since the energy expressed in the activity of a living being is energy it has either extracted from its environment, or has received from its progenitors.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan A. Gelman and John E. Opfer, “Development of the Animate–Inanimate Distinction,” in *Blackwell Handbook of Childhood Cognitive Development*, ed. Usha Goswami (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 151–66 (here: 155).

<sup>4</sup> Valerie A. Kuhlmeier, Paul Bloom, and Karen Wynn, “Do 5-month-old infants see humans as material objects?,” *Cognition* 94 (2004): 95–103 (here: 95).

It will not do, furthermore, to say that, in spite of living beings' ability to respond—rather than simply react—to changes occurring here now, we must still trace everything they do back through causal chains to some external origin in the past. Such a requirement, as we have just seen, leads to irrationality when applied to social life, and thus must be rejected as false. Determinism, in other words, can only be sustained if we resolutely ignore what is obvious about life, both biological and social. And ignoring the obvious is neither intellectually responsible, nor scientific.

## **II. Varieties of Libertarianism**

If we are morally obligated to eschew irrationality, then we must reject determinism as false. But what are we to believe in its place? The theory I advocate might be called “Aristotelian freedom” or “eleutherism” (from a Greek equivalent of the word “free”: ελεύθερος). Its definition is as follows.

- (1) *Eleutherism* is the thesis that (a) at least some of the actions in which any given human participates are free, relative to that person, in that (b) the change or changes which initiate said actions are changes to the person her- or himself and are at most responses (rather than reactions) to any other changes.

But this is not the only form of libertarianism about human action available. A much more optimistic form might claim that we are always the origins of every action in which we participate, while a much more pessimistic form might claim that while we are capable of originating actions, it just so happens that we never turn out to be the origins of any actions in the actual world. Only a moderate position, which claims that some—but not all—of our actions are free, however, can genuinely account for our experiences. Optimistic libertarianism is ruled out

whenever a cowboy is thrown through a Wild West saloon window. The act of breaking the window is free for the thrower, but unfree for the throwee. And pessimistic libertarianism is ruled out by the very same example.

Pessimistic libertarianism, however, remains a useful theory in that it helps to make the claims of determinism more precise than they otherwise would be.

- (2) *Determinism* is the thesis that all actions in which humans participate are unfree relative to those persons because humans lack free will (i.e., because there is some deep fact about human nature and/or the universe that requires all actions in which humans participate to be originated only by things other than those persons).

That is, there are no nearby possible worlds in which eleutherism is true because to obtain a world in which humans could be the origins of their actions, significant changes either to human nature, or to the nature of the universe, would have to be made.

What, then, are we to make of compatibilism? It cannot be the case that we are the origins of our actions, if not we, but things other than us, must originate all our actions. Thus, freedom and determinism are logically incompatible. However, the heart of compatibilism can be preserved under the label of “cooperativism.”

- (3) *Cooperativism* is the thesis that, for every action in which a person participates that is free relative to that person, something other than the person is an origin of the action *and* that person also is an origin of the action.

That is, compatibilism should simply assert that each of our free actions has multiple origins, since each is like seeing someone already pushing a car, and being inspired to help. We join all our actions already in progress—since each is begun, or set up, by God, the laws of nature, or what have you—but we still make a genuine contribution.

In the form of cooperativism, then, compatibilism would be consistent with any of the three forms of libertarianism just discussed, though not with determinism. Being inconsistent with an irrational theory, however, is just what one would expect of the truth, and thus compatibilism, in the form of cooperativism, winds up in good company. It and its companion libertarian theories just sketched offer a view of human action based on origins rather than modality—a view that not only accounts for our fundamental experience of ourselves and each other, but also works within the guiding principles of modern science.