

Philosophical Conversations

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Philosophical Conversations is designed to stimulate thought and discussion, and keep you philosophically active. The format will be the presentation of a brief position paper to which responses are encouraged. In the subsequent issues selected responses may be published in addition to a new position paper. We invite you to respond to this position paper either by contacting the author or the Department. (Address, mail and e-mail, and phone numbers and fax numbers are provided at the end of this issue).

How Do You Choose?

Professor Kenton Machina*

Life is full of choices. What to have for dinner, which project to work on first, whom to marry, how to treat the guy at work who bugs you. Some choices are more important than others; some we deliberate about, some we do not. But how do we go about making our choices? In particular, when we make a choice, is there some causal process going on inside of us that causes us to make the choice we do?

Many people feel strongly that the answer to that last question must be "no". They believe that our personal worth and dignity require that when we make a choice, the process of choosing not be controlled by causes. They believe that if there were causes at work within us when we choose, determining the outcomes of our choice-makings, then that would mean we are under the control of the laws of nature, and are therefore not free to make our own choices. After all, causal processes must be governed by the laws of nature—that's how causal processes always work. If our choice-makings are controlled by the laws of nature, those laws constrain what choices we will make under any given set of circumstances. If we are constrained by the laws of nature when we choose, then those laws determine what our choice will be, and it appears that in a sense we really never have any genuine choices. Everything we do will be brought about by causal forces acting within us according to the laws of nature. That, it is claimed, would destroy our personal responsibility, our dignity, our worth.

As might be expected, an issue such as this one, which goes to the core of our being, has political and religious connections. Politically it has become popular to push "individual responsibility" in a way that suggests that each person is a kind of island, perfectly capable of making the "right" choices regardless of social background, regardless of educational background, regardless of personal circumstances. The philosophical picture which makes this kind of politics possible is the picture of the completely autonomous chooser, standing outside the causal stream, able to author his or her life in a completely uncaused way. Religiously it is popular to believe that each person has "free will", which explains why there can be so much evil in the world even though there is a perfectly good, all-powerful God who created us. If our choices are not subject to the laws of nature which were designed by God, but we are free to author our own choices independently of the laws of nature, then it may seem that God is not responsible for our evil.

But caution is in order. After all, it used to be politically popular to burn witches at the stake, and it was not too long ago that people insisted the Earth had to be at the center of the universe in order that the central place of humans in God's creation be maintained. Some political and religious ideas simply don't stand up well to the advance of scientific knowledge and moral sensitivity.

The more we come to understand about why people are the way they are, the more we should come to question whether people really do stand outside the causal stream. The more we come to believe that we are physical beings, with brains that work according to the laws of physics, and that our choice-makings are completely determined by what goes on in our physical brains, the more we should question the idea that somehow our choices are uncaused. We are not like little gods, standing outside of nature, determining how nature should be. Rather, we are part of nature, and everything that goes on in us is a natural process, governed by the same laws that govern the rest of nature. So, our scientifically-based understanding of ourselves is at odds with the picture of us as deriving our dignity from contra-causal free will.

Does this mean that the scientific understanding of ourselves destroys the fabric of morality, religion, civilization, and human dignity? No. Rather, the scientific understanding of ourselves as natural, causal beings should shape our moral and religious understandings. It should alter the ways we think about individual accountability for choices made. It should, in fact, strengthen in our minds the importance of education and the social fabric.

Let me illustrate again with an example from current social thought. We hear much these days about the importance of the family for imparting values to children, the importance of parents in producing children who are socially constructive, the crucial role of schools in shaping our children as useful citizens, the destructive effects of the media on young people, and so forth. Notice that these ways of talking emphasize the *causal role* of environmental conditions in producing people who will make certain kinds of choices. If people really were not caused to make the choices they make, then what role is left for parents and educators? Why bother training people to make the "right" choices if in fact people make choices without being caused by anything to make those choices?

Our thinking about these matters tends to be muddled. In popular culture we talk glibly about the "influence" parents, schools, friends, the media, etc., have on people. And yet we often want to pretend that people nevertheless are free of causal processes when they make choices. What could these "influences" be if not causal influences? How can people be free of causal processes and yet be "influenced"? The answer is that they can't. People genuinely are influenced, causally, by their environments, by the way they were brought up, by their experiences, by a multitude of unknown things. We know this is true. We don't know how to sort through all these influences to be able to explain completely why people choose what they choose. But we know the influences are there. It would, in fact, be terribly frightening if that were not so. If it were not possible to causally influence people, social cohesion would be impossible.

So, does this mean that we are not after all capable of making our own choices? Are we merely pawns, being shoved around by causal forces outside of ourselves? No. We obviously make choices, every day, all the time—thousands of them. Any philosophical or scientific theory that said we don't make choices would be obviously wrong. But our choice-making is the result of a process which is at least largely causal. What we really should want, I think, is for that causal process to make *rational sense*. That is, when we make a choice, we want the causal process to work inside us in a more or less rational way. We don't want our choices to be caused by random forces that make no sense. Rather, we want our choices to be caused by factors that *ought* to cause them, such as logical reasoning, good desires, and the like. If, when I'm trying to make a decision between A and B, I come to think that for various reasons A is by far the better choice, I *want* that thought to cause me to choose A. That's how good thinking works. It works by having the right thoughts cause the right choices to be made. In order for that to happen in me, my brain needs to be caused to develop in the right ways. That's where education and training come in.

I'm arguing that personal dignity, personal authorship of one's own choices, *requires* that causal processes be at work internally in the choice-maker. Without those processes, choice-making becomes an event which is brought about by *nothing*. I don't see how choice-makings that are brought about by nothing could be anything other than random, inexplicable events. I don't see how human dignity can rest on such a thing as "free will" where that means no causation, or why anyone on reflection would want their choices to be free of causation. When we seek "freedom" for our choice-making, what I think we really want and need is for the immediate causal antecedents of our choice-making to be within us, not external to us. We don't want to be caused to choose things by some kind of direct manipulation coming at us from outside. But neither do we want our choice-makings to be brought about by nothing at all. Rather, we want our choosings to be caused by our own mental processes, and we want those processes to be caused to occur in a reasonable way. That is the kind of freedom we really want, and that kind of freedom is compatible with the idea that our choice-makings are all caused.

It would be good if the way we thought about these matters in our society would become less muddled. We need to think through our attitudes toward people who make choices that are criminal, religious people need to give up on the "free will" theory for why God allows us to make bad choices, voters need to stop supporting political policies which are based on the fairy tale that people stand outside the causal influences of their environments. The implications are large, complex, and important. This little essay has only touched the surface.

*Kenton Machina received his Ph.D. from UCLA in 1968 and taught at Indiana University before coming to Illinois State University in 1973, where he is now Professor of Philosophy. His articles on vagueness, Kant, on the semantics of and on moral accountability have been published in leading philosophical journals.

We received responses to the previous Philosophical Conversations article, "The Death Penalty: Punishment or Emancipation" by Professor Rosenbaum. Unfortunately, they have been misplaced during some office moves. If you did respond please forward that response to us again. We apologize for any inconvenience.

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