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Mind, New Series, Vol. 90, No. 357. (Jan., 1981), pp. 99-101.

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Is Determinism Self-refuting?

PATRICIA SMITH CHURCHLAND

Mind-body dualism has been in the doldrums for some time, but a pair of ennobled and colourful champions of the doctrine have undertaken the task of its revitalization. I speak of course of Sir John Eccles and Sir Karl Popper, who are keen redeemers of the thesis, and whose work has engendered considerable notice not only in philosophy, but also in psychology and neuroscience.¹ Central amongst their defences of dualism is the conviction that man has a free will. In the familiar vein, it is argued that determinism is incompatible with free will, and since physicalism implies determinism, then physicalism is false. They favour the free will hypothesis over its deterministic competitor on several grounds, prominent amongst which is the claim that determinism is self-refuting. The determinist, allegedly, can expect to be taken seriously just in case his theory cannot be taken seriously. A pretty fix for any theory, and, apparently, a certain doom for determinism. Here is Eccles' version of the argument²:

... I state emphatically that to deny free will is neither a rational nor a logical act. This denial either presupposes free will for the deliberately chosen response in making that denial, which is a contradiction, or else it is merely the automatic response of a nervous system built by genetic coding and molded by conditioning. One does not conduct a rational argument with a being who makes the claim that all its responses are reflexes, no matter how complex and subtle the conditioning.

The decisive answer to Eccles is simply this: the argument is a non sequitur. If determinism is correct, it does not in the least follow that we do not reason, that our behaviour is the outcome of compulsion rather than ratiocination. On the contrary, what follows is that our reasoning and our reasoned behaviour is causally produced. So far from denying that humans are purposeful and reasonable, determinism is the thesis that there is a causal network which produces such behaviour. Nor of course is the determinist limited to Skinnerian behaviourism in his conception of the appropriate causal theory. He may, for example, be a cognitivist.³

I See especially, *The Self and Its Brain*, by Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles (Springer International, 1977).

John C. Eccles, 'Brain and Free Will', in Consciousness and the Brain: A Scientific and Philosophical Inquiry, G. Globus, G. Maxwell, I. Savodnik, eds. (Plenum Press, 1976), p. 101.

For example, D. C. Dennett, 'Mechanism and Responsibility', in *Brainstorms* (Bradford Books, 1978), and J. A. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Crowell, 1975).

The anti-determinist proves nothing if he merely appropriates to his side the notion of 'acting for a reason', by insisting that it means 'contracausally produced'. That is begging the question. He needs to show that acting for a reason is uncaused behaviour, and if his anti-deterministic conviction is so strong that he relates 'acting for a reason' to 'contracausally produced' analytically, this only tells us something about the strength of his conviction, and nothing about how reasoned behaviour is in fact produced. That the question is thus well and truly begged can be seen in Popper's approving quotation of Epicurus, and in his accompanying explanatory remarks¹:

He who says that all things happen of necessity cannot criticize another who says that not all things happen of necessity. For he has to admit that the assertion also happens of necessity. (Epicurus, Aphorism 40 of the Vatican Collection)

... if our opinions are the result of something other the free judgement of reason, or the weighing of reasons, of the pros and cons, then our opinions are not worth taking seriously. Thus an argument that leads to the conclusion that our opinions are not arrived at in this way defeats itself.

Determinism does not deny that our opinions are sometimes the result of weighing of reasons. On the contrary, it is a theory concerning how we are going to explain the phenomenon we call 'the weighing of reasons'. Whether the weighing of reasons is or is not an interplay of free, uncaused events in the mind is what the debate between free will and determinism is all about. Popper is no more entitled to assume contra-causal freedom as part of his empirical theory of purposive behaviour than the determinist is entitle to assume determinism.

An analogy might serve to dramatize the weakness of the putatively self-defeating argument. Until quite recently it was believed that the difference between living things and non-living things was that the former was imbued with vital spirit, the latter not. In the event, the theory was challenged and refuted, but consider the following fanciful defence of vitalism, constructed to parallel the aforementioned defence of free will:

The anti-vitalist says that there is no such thing as vital spirit. This claim is self-refuting; the speaker can expect to be taken seriously only if his claim cannot. For if the claim is true, then the speaker does not have vital spirit, and must be *dead*. But since dead men tell no tales, they do not tell anti-vitalist ones either. One cannot reason with dead men.

Here we have the advantage of knowing the outcome of the debate. However, the point of the analogy is not who won but how the argument fails. In this example, it is clear that the attempt to show that antivitalism was self-refuting was simply a *non sequitur*. The argument is a non sequitur because life may be explained by something other than vital spirit, for example by something physical, though the explanation may be much more intricate and complicated than anything envisaged at the time. This was the essential point made against the argument of Popper and Eccles: reasoned behaviour may be explained by something other than the activity of a free will, for example by something physical, though the explanation may be much more intricate and complicated than anything we now envisage. Nor would it have helped the vitalist to beg the question by saying that 'being alive' means being imbued with vital spirit. What it is to be alive, and how purposive behaviour is produced is a matter for empirical investigation.

Now any attempt to criticize a theory which is well entrenched and seems to be obvious will of course have a wrenching effect on those in the grip of the theory. The denial of vital spirit, the denial of absolute simultaneity, the denial of the crystal spheres of the heavens, have all seemed outrageous and contradictory to those who took them as obvious. The assertion that the earth moved round the sun was the occasion for inspired hilarity, to say nothing of casuistry.

Nothing I have said in this paper shows that determinism will win the debate with indeterminism. What I have shown is that determinism is not self-refuting, any more than the thesis that there is no such thing as vital spirit is self-refuting.

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