

BB READING #3 CRITISIMS OF MATERIALISM

A. THE WILL AS CAUSED (CARL GINET)

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. 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. 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 them, in which it is assumed that the agents could have chosen otherwise.

Although this second approach to the problem does question one assumption of the more naïve approach, it overlooks another important point. For it still shares with the naïve view the assumption that both (I) and (II) share meaningful descriptions of possible states of affairs. Challenging this assumption in the case of (I) should lead to a better understanding of the problem. To this end I shall argue that (I) is *necessarily* false, that it is conceptually impossible that the will should be caused. The idea that it can be caused is a philosophical mistake, based on notions that cannot be reconciled with our actual concept of deciding.

I take it that (I) can, without argument, be translated to read: All volitions, choices, and decisions are caused. Thus to argue that (I) is not conceptually possible it will suffice to argue that it is not conceptually possible that a decision should be caused.

This conclusion follows directly from the following two propositions:

- (A) It is conceptually impossible for a person to know what a decision of his is going to be before he makes it.
- (B) If it were conceptually possible for a decision to be caused, then it would be conceptually possible for a person to know what a decision of his was going to be before making it.

I shall argue for each of these separately.

(A) This proposition goes counter to the thinking of some acute philosophers, but the following considerations should make it convincing.

No one can be intelligibly described as knowing what his decision will be before he makes it because the claim to possess such knowledge is implicitly inconsistent. One may be prevented 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 had 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-expression 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 – trying to persuade himself one way or another by offering himself reasons for and against the various alternative – 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. 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 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 as knowing prior to this undertaking what the outcome of it will be. In other words, the concept of decision does not allow the possibility of a person's knowing what his decision will be before he makes it.

(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 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 impossibility 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 of 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 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 as 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 identified as a decision and said to be caused; and, therefore, that the 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 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.

The argument:

If Materialism is true this implies that the will is caused (that is, determined); but it makes no sense to say that the will is causally determined since the will is necessarily free; hence materialism does not imply that the will is causally determined. Ginet is not a materialist, but he does not think his argument defeats materialism, it only clarifies the concept of the will.

B. “DETERMINISM AND PREDICTION” ALVIN I. GOLDMAN:

Suppose that Sam invents the corkscrew at time t . In the intended sense of “invent,” this means (a) that Sam thinks of the corkscrew at t , and (b) that no one ever thought of the corkscrew before t . Cranston argues that no one could have predicted Sam’s inventing the corkscrew. In order for him to make this prediction, he would himself have to think of the corkscrew. And had he thought of the corkscrew, it would be false to say that Sam “invented” the corkscrew. Yet Sam *did* invent the corkscrew. Using the terminology of “logical impossibility,” we can formulate Cranston’s problem by saying that the three events, (a) Sam thinks of the corkscrew at t , (b) no one ever thought of the corkscrew before t , and (c) someone predicted Sam’s inventing the corkscrew, are logically impossible.

Carl Ginet claims that it is impossible (“conceptually” impossible) for anyone to predict his own decisions. The argument begins by defining “deciding to do A ” as *passing into* a state of knowledge (of a certain kind) that one will do A , or try to do A . Suppose now that Sam, at t , decides to do A . Had Sam predicted that he would make this decision – and had this prediction involved *knowledge* – he could not have decided later to do A . For if, before t , he had known that he would decide to do A , he would have known then that he would do A , or try to do A . But if, before t , he had known that he would do A (or try to do A), then he could not, at t , have *passed into* a state of knowing that he would do A . Thus, according to Ginet, Sam could not have predicted that he would make this decision.

Of course, Sam might make his prediction and then forget it. If so, he still could have decided to do A at t . However, if Sam not only knows, before t , that he will decide to do A , but also *continues* to know this up until t , then Sam cannot, at t , decide to do A .

In other words, the following three events are logically impossible: (1) Sam decides, at t , to do A , (2) Sam predicts (i.e., knows) that he will decide to do A , and (3) Sam continues to know this until t .

What do these two logical impossibilities prove? Do they prove that decisions and inventions are undetermined? Do they prove that voluntary actions, including the decisions which lead to them, have a special immunity to prediction? The answer is “No,” I believe, to both questions.

Our examples of logical impossibilities do not establish any special status for human behavior, for precisely analogous impossibilities can be produced for physical phenomena. Let the expression “a tornado strikes x by surprise” mean: (1) a tornado strikes x at a certain time, and (2) before that time nobody ever thought of a tornado striking x . Now suppose that, as a matter of fact, a tornado strikes Peking by surprise. Then it is logically impossible for this event to have been predicted. That is, the set consisting in the tornado striking Peking by surprise and a prediction of the tornado striking Peking by surprise is a logically impossible set. In general it is logically impossible for tornadoes striking places by surprise to be predicted. For if anyone were to predict these events, they could no longer be described as “tornadoes striking places by surprise.” Nevertheless, there certainly are (or could be) events correctly describable as “a tornado striking x by surprise.”

I wish next to argue that the invention and decision impossibilities do not show that these human phenomena are undetermined. Notice first that the tornado case, though it has the same logical structure, does not bear on the question of determinism. Although it is logically impossible for anyone to predict the tornado striking Peking by surprise, I am in no way inclined to suppose that this event is not determined. And hence the presence of impossibilities sheds no light on the question of whether there are laws and antecedent conditions which entail inventions or decisions.

Suppose that Sam’s thinking of the corkscrew at t is deducible from laws and antecedent conditions. And suppose that the fact that no one ever thinks of the corkscrew before t is also deducible from laws and antecedent conditions. Then, the event consisting in Sam’s *inventing* the corkscrew at t would be determined; but it still would be logically impossible for it to have been predicted under that description. The lesson to be learned here is not that inventions are undetermined actions, but that the alleged entailment between determinism and predictability is not an entailment at all. At any rate, the fact that an event is determined under a given description does not entail that it is *logically impossible* for it to be predicted under that description.

Food for Thought

If Materialism is true then everything is causally determined; but if some things are not causally determined then Materialism is not true; and some things are not causally determined because if everything is causally determined then everything is predicable in principle; but since some things are not predictable in principle (according to Goldman; inventions for example, or any novelty or surprise) then some things are not causally determined. Hence it looks like we have an argument that shows that materialism is false. But Goldman denies that his claim that some things are not predicable in principle entails

that materialism is false. How can he hold that some things are not predictable in principle and yet remain a materialist and a causal determinist?

C. THE CHINESE ROOM (JOHN SEARLE)

To illustrate this point I have designed a certain thought experiment. Imagine that a bunch of computer programmers have written a program that will enable a computer to simulate the understanding of Chinese. So, for example, if the computer is given a question in Chinese, it will match the question against its memory, or database, and produce appropriate answers to the questions in Chinese. Suppose for the sake of argument that the computer's answers are as good as those of a native Chinese speaker. Now then, does the computer, on the basis of this, understand Chinese, does it literally understand Chinese, in the way that Chinese speakers understand Chinese? Well, imagine that you are locked in a room, and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese symbols. Imagine that you (like me) do not understand a word of Chinese, but that you are given a rule book in English for manipulating these Chinese symbols. The rules specify the manipulations of the symbols purely formally, in terms of their syntax, not their semantics. So the rule might say: "Take a squiggle-squiggle sign out of basket number one and put it next to a squoggle-squoggle sign from basket number two." Now suppose that some other Chinese symbols are passed into the room, and that you are given further rules for passing back Chinese symbols out of the room. Suppose that unknown to you the symbols passed into the room are called "questions" by the people outside the room, and the symbols you pass back out of the room are called "answers to the questions." Suppose, furthermore, that the programmers are so good at designing the programs and that you are so good at manipulating the symbols, that very soon your answers are indistinguishable from those of a native Chinese speaker. There you are locked in your room shuffling your Chinese symbols and passing out Chinese symbols in response to incoming Chinese symbols. On the basis of the situation as I have described it, there is no way you could learn any Chinese simply by manipulating these formal symbols.

Now the point of the story is simply this: by virtue of implementing a formal computer program from the point of view of an outside observer, you behave exactly as if you understood Chinese, but all the same you don't understand a word of Chinese. But if going through the appropriate computer program for understanding Chinese is not enough to give *you* an understanding of Chinese, then it is not enough to give *any other digital computer* an understanding of Chinese. And again, the reason for this can be stated quite simply. If you don't understand Chinese, then no other computer could understand Chinese because no digital computer, just by virtue of running a program, has anything that you don't have. All that the computer has, as you have, is a formal program for manipulating uninterrupted Chinese symbols. To repeat, a computer has a syntax, but no semantics. The whole point of the parable of the Chinese room is to remind us of a fact that we knew all along. Understanding a language, or indeed, having mental states at all, involves more than just having a bunch of formal symbols. It involves having an interpretation, or a meaning attached to those symbols. And a digital computer, as defined, cannot have more than just formal symbols because the operation of the

computer, as I said earlier, is defined in terms of its ability to implement programs. And these programs are purely formally specifiable – that is, they have no semantic content.

D. HAVING IT BOTH WAYS: FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM?

It might seem like it is an argument against materialism to note that if it were true, then human action would be impossible. Many have thought that this incompatibility shows that materialism is incompatible with the way we actually live, that is, with our presumption that we are responsible agents. Those who think so are called incompatibilists. There are two versions of it: Those who deny freedom (**hard determinists**) and those who deny determinism (**libertarianism**). But there is also a view called compatibilism that affirms both freedom and determinism. They are called soft determinists. They do not deny determinism nor do they deny freedom and hence responsibility. Here is how the argument for this third position goes:

On the one hand, a set of very powerful arguments force us to the conclusion that free will has no place in the universe. On the other hand, a series of powerful arguments based on facts of our own experience inclines us to the conclusion that there must be some freedom of the will because we all experience it all the time.

There is a standard solution to this philosophical conundrum. According to this solution, free will and determinism are perfectly compatible with each other. Of course, everything in the world is determined, but some human actions are nonetheless free. To say that they are free is not to deny that they are determined; it is just to say that they are not constrained. We are not forced to do them. So, for example, if a man is forced to do something at gunpoint, or if he is suffering from some psychological compulsion, then his behavior is genuinely unfree. But if on the other hand he freely acts, if he acts, as we say, of his own free will, then his behavior is free. Of course it is also completely determined, since every aspect of his behavior is determined by the physical forces operating on the particles that compose his body, as they operate on all of the bodies of the universe. So, free behavior exists, but is just a small corner of the determined world – it is that corner of determined human behavior where certain kinds of force and compulsion are absent.

Now, because this view asserts the compatibility of free will and determinism, it is usually called simply ‘compatibilism’. I think it is inadequate as a solution to the problem and here is why. The problem about the freedom of the will is not about whether or not there are inner psychological reasons that cause us to do things as well as external physical causes and inner compulsions. Rather, it is about whether or not the causes of our behavior, whatever they are, are sufficient to *determine* the behavior so that things *have* to happen the way they do happen.

There’s another way to put this problem. Is it ever true to say to a person that he could have done otherwise, all other conditions remaining the same? For example, given that a person chose to vote for the Tories, could he have chosen to vote for one of the other parties, all other conditions remaining the same? Now compatibilism doesn’t really

answer that question in a way that allows any scope for the ordinary notion of the freedom of the will. What it says is that all behavior is determined in such a way that it couldn't have occurred otherwise, all other conditions remaining the same. Everything that happened was indeed determined. It's just that some things were determined by certain sorts of inner psychological causes (those which we call our 'reasons for acting') and not by external forces or psychological compulsions. So, we are still left with a problem. It is ever true to say of a human being that he could have done otherwise?

The problem about compatibilism, then, is that it doesn't answer the question, 'Could we have done otherwise, all other conditions remaining the same?', in a way that is consistent with our belief in our own free will.

Compatibilists argue that the libertarian definition of freedom is wrong. Libertarians claim that we can never do otherwise than what we do because we are determined to do what we do. But everything changes if we substitute would for could. The soft determinist argues that we would do otherwise if the causes did not arise from outside of our own desires. This would be coercion. And such action would not be free. If it does originate within our own desires it would be free, even though it is determined by these desires.

Food For Thought What do you think a compatibilists would say about a kleptomaniac?

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENTS AGAINST MATERIALISM

I. Goldman's argument (he is a materialist/determinist)

If Materialism were true, then everything that happens would be causally determined (hence there would be no actions, and no agents, that is, no persons.)

But if some events were not causally determined, then materialism would be false.

So it looks like materialism could be shown to be false if even one thing were not causally determined. Are there events that are not causally determined? Yes if there were some events that were not predictable in principle. Are there such events?

If everything that happens is causally determined then everything that happens is predictable in principle

Some events are not predictable in principle (e.g. inventions, authorship)

Therefore some events are not causally determined

Hence Materialism is false. But Goldman does not accept this conclusion. How does he avoid it?

II. Ginet's argument (he is not a materialist and not a determinist)

If materialism is true then the will is caused
 The will is not caused, since this makes no sense
 Does it follow from this that materialism is false?

Yet Ginet does not think so. Why not?

III. Searle's argument:

If materialism is true then AI is true
 The Chinese room shows that AI is false
 Therefore materialism is false

Materialism takes consciousness really to be a third person phenomenon (nothing but neurons firing); so consciousness only seems to be first-person phenomenon when it is really a third person phenomenon in the way that the sun appears to be setting but in reality it is not. Yet in the case of consciousness, seeming is the reality. I cannot seem to be conscious without being conscious. Hence consciousness is a first-person phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a third person phenomenon.

IV. . The argument of self-contradiction

If Materialism is true then we ought to accept it
 If materialism is true we cannot accept it
 Therefore if materialism is true we cannot accept it as being true. (so if materialism were true nobody could accept it as being true; hence materialists contradict themselves in arguing for materialism.)