




Think

by Simon Blackburn

Chapter 3e Free Will

The video *Free Will and Neurology* attempts to provide scientific evidence that




-  A. our free will is the result of a single free will neuron.
 -  B. our sense that our decisions cause our actions is actually an illusion.
 -  C. some individuals have more free will than others.
 -  D. freedom of the will is an essential aspect of every healthy human mind.
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The research described in FWN treats free will
as

-  A. an empirical problem
-  B. a conceptual problem



The specific conclusion suggested in FWN is that:

-  A. our conscious decisions probably do cause our actions.
 -  B. our conscious decisions may not actually cause our actions.
 -  C. our conscious decisions are caused by the conscious decisions of others.
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Problems for compatibilism

- Blackburn now wants to show you how the simplest versions of compatibilism can be criticized, and how a more sophisticated version of it might avoid those criticisms.
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Mini-Martians

- Blackburn asks you to imagine the invasion of the mini-Martians. (p.98). Mini-Martians are microscopic beings that can actually crawl inside your brain and hijack your decision modules to make them do whatever they like.
 - People who have mini-Martians can't tell, because the mini-Martians are in total control. They don't just throw the switches that make you behave differently than if they weren't there, they throw the switches that make you want to behave differently. Basically, they hijack your evaluator.
 - So you actually feel completely in control when you have mini-Martians, but you are not.
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The point of mini-Martians

- The point of mini-Martians is:
 - First, a person infected with mini-Martians is clearly not free in any significant sense of the term 'free.'
 - Second, a person infected with mini-Martians seems to satisfy the compatibilist version of CDO.
 - But if a compatibilist agrees to both of these points, then she is agreeing that compatibilist interpretation of CDO leaves something to be desired .
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The mini-Martian example is intended as

-  A. a criticism of compatibilism.
 -  B. a defense of compatibilism.
 -  C. a defense of incompatibilism.
 -  D. a criticism of incompatibilism.
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The argument formalized

- So the formalized rebuttal of compatibilism is:
 1. According to compatibilism, someone infected with mini-Martians is free.
 2. But someone infected with mini-Martians is obviously not free.
 3. Therefore, compatibilism must be false.
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Rejoinder

- Defending the compatibilist perspective requires revising the definition so that someone who is infected with mini-Martians is not free.
 - To do this, the compatibilist notes that what makes the mini-Martian problem a difficult one is this:
 - Even if the mini-Martians allowed you to have the thoughts that would ordinarily cause you to act otherwise, you will still only act the way the mini-Martians want you to act.
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A revised compatibilist definition of CDO

- So Blackburn takes this into account in a revised compatibilist definition (p.102):
 - “Could have done otherwise” means
 - (1) one would have done otherwise if one had chosen differently, and
 - (2) under the impact of other thoughts and considerations one actually would have chosen differently.
 - This definition is no longer subject to the mini-Martian criticism because now, according to the 2nd criterion, a person infected with mini-Martians is not free.
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Review

- Notice that Blackburn's compatibilist strategy is to think of freedom in terms of the conditions under which it is rational to hold a person responsible for his actions.
 - His revised definition shows that the compatibilist can agree that there are all sorts of cases in which a person lacks free will, but without having to agree that free will involves the denial of determinism.
 - In other words, from the compatibilist point of view, some determined actions are free, others are not.
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According to Blackburn, someone whose brain is compromised (as when infected by mini-Martians) so that s/he has no capacity to carry through on her conscious decisions is:

-  A. free on the second definition of compatibilism, but not on the first.
 -  B. free on the first definition of compatibilism, but not on the second.
 -  C. free on both definitions.
 -  D. not free on either definition.
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Knowledge

- The last significant challenge to compatibilism concerns the question whether it makes sense to say that people acted freely when they lack some essential knowledge that might have caused them to act differently.
 - Blackburn gives you the example of someone slipping arsenic into your coffee cup when you aren't looking. If you drink it afterwards, do you do so freely? It seems obvious that you don't.
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On the other hand...

- Suppose that if you knew your philosophy class were going to be so difficult, you wouldn't have taken it. Did you take it freely?
 - This is a tough question. The two examples seem very much the same.
 - But if you are tempted to say that you didn't take your philosophy class freely, then it look like you are on the road to have to saying that any action that you choose while lacking certain important information is not free.
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Freedom and knowledge 1

- Blackburn points out that people often do incredibly stupid things simply because they don't take time to think, and that we typically do continue to hold them responsible under those conditions.
 - In other words sometimes "I didn't know" just doesn't cut it. But how can we justify this view from a determinist perspective?
 - Basically, we do so by pointing out that there are times when the information is perfectly available to the agent, and a little more care and attention would have produced it.
 - Since holding people responsible can have the affect of resetting people's modules so that they exercise this care in the future, it can make sense to do so for actions of this kind.
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Freedom and knowledge 2

- So this is how we can make a distinction between the choice to drink coffee that happens to have arsenic in it, and the choice to take a philosophy class that happens to have symbolic logic in it.
 - In the first case (unless you are training to be a spy) holding you responsible for knowing something like that just isn't likely to help you improve matters in the future. (Of course, this is made even less likely by the fact that you are dead after the first time.)
 - In the second case, however, we can reasonably say that maybe you should learn to do some research into what the class requires before signing up. The knowledge was available when you did it the first time, you just didn't think to acquire it.
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According to Blackburn, if you choose to do something but are missing some essential information that would have made you choose something else:

-  A. your choice was not free and you can not be held responsible.
 -  B. your choice was free and you absolutely must be held responsible.
 -  C. your choice may or may not have been free depending on whether you could be held responsible for knowing the information.
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Objectifying people

- Blackburn considers the question whether the compatibilist account of free will is complicit in a morally culpable objectification of human beings. (P.107)
 - “Objectification” can mean many things, but there are two senses of it that should be distinguished.
 - In one sense, objectifying humans means thinking of them as physical objects. There is no question that compatibilism is guilty of that, since that is what humans are from a perspective that denies that that humans are part physical, part ghostly presence.
 - In another sense, objectifying humans means treating them as mere means to an end, and failing to respect them at a moral level. Blackburn believes that compatibilism does not imply anything like this, but it’s possible he is wrong.
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Beyond responsibility

- Blackburn has tried to show us that compatibilism has the means to make sense of moral responsibility within a deterministic framework.
 - But what he has not been emphasizing is that compatibilism also has the capacity for going beyond it.
 - On p.107 Blackburn notes that some philosophers, like P.F. Strawson thinks that to avoid objectification we must think of ourselves in irreducibly moral terms. But Blackburn acknowledges that compatibilism has no such commitment.
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Responsibility vs. treatment

- For example, the compatibilist should be willing to say that if holding people responsible for their actions is effective at resetting their modules properly, then holding people responsible makes sense. BUT, if there are even more effective ways of resetting people's modules, then these would make even more sense. (p.108)
 - For example, suppose that we had the medical technology available to simply reprogram the brain of a child molester so that he never behaved that way again. Surely this is better than punishment? What good is accomplished by having him spend years in prison when methods like this are available?
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The lazy sophism 1

- People who claim to accept a deterministic outlook often speak in tautologies like “Whatever will be will be,” by which they often mean that since all events are determined there is no reason to worry about or try to affect the future.
 - Blackburn calls this the “lazy sophism” and he points out that it really doesn’t make any sense.
 - One way of understanding the problem with this way of thinking is to note that it actually makes no sense. This is because it attempts to infer from the fact that determinism is true that we should decide to act in a certain way (namely, stop worrying about or trying to affect our future.)
 - But if you really believe in determinism, then you could not say anything like this and mean it, since you are basically counseling people to freely stop pretending to be free.
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Fatalism

- People who commit the lazy sophism are often confusing determinism with fatalism.
 - There are lots of famous stories about man's tragic struggle with fate. Blackburn briefly relates the famous Islamic parable of Death in Samarkand and the Greek tragedy Oedipus Rex. (p. 111) These stories are similar in that the tragic hero has learned of his fate, and struggles futilely to avoid it
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Teleology

- Fatalism is a teleological view, which basically says that some ultimate result (or end) is a foregone conclusion, but not necessarily the particular path by which it is achieved. Oedipus or the Sufi's disciple may do everything to avoid his fate, but it is going to happen one way or the other.
 - Determinism is not a teleological view, but a mechanistic one. It essentially holds that even though from our first person perspective there seem to me a multiplicity of paths our lives might follow, in reality there is only one which is, in effect, entirely laid out already.
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The lazy sophism 2

- Blackburn makes this point in another way. He relates a story about soldiers who refused to wear their helmets because in their view “if a bullet has your number on it” it’s going to kill you no matter what you do.
 - But Blackburn points out that the soldiers who won’t wear their helmets don’t know their fates. So even if it is true that whether or not a bullet is going into your brain is already determined, they should still pay some attention to the fact that bullets tend to go into the brains of soldiers who don’t wear their helmets more often than soldiers who do.
 - Put differently, even if whether or not a soldier put on his helmet is already determined, if he does happen to notice himself putting on a helmet, then that still constitutes a reason for thinking their number is not quite up.
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Rejection of fatalism

- The distinction between determinism and fatalism is important, because determinism may be true, but fatalism is simply a religious/literary invention.
 - Blackburn asserts that fatalism is more a psychological outlook than a philosophical position. It is the feeling that you are simply a spectator on your own life, and that you are powerless to influence your future.
 - It may be understandable that some people in dire situations adopt a fatalistic outlook. But anyone who seriously thinks that it doesn't matter whether he studies for the exam because it is already determined whether he will pass or fail is just giving us evidence that he is determined to fail.
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According to Blackburn, the soldiers who committed the lazy sophism

-  A. subscribed to fatalism, not determinism.
-  B. subscribed to determinism, not fatalism.



Flexibility

- Blackburn finishes this chapter by noting that the compatibilist perspective is often disparaged as reducing humans to “mere” machines.
 - The problem, he thinks, is not with compatibilism, but with our pejorative stereotype of what it means to be a machine. Some machines, like thermostats and automobiles are “mere” in the sense of being simple and fairly predictable. Others, like us, are spectacularly complicated and infinitely subtle and interesting. Unlike thermostats and automobiles, humans possess a cognitive and behavioral flexibility that we so far have not observed in any other kind of thing.
 - We do not need to see humans as being absolutely unique in kind in order to see them as special. Humans are no less special from a compatibilist perspective than a dualistic one. Compatibilists just do not believe that our specialness consists in being made of a special mind stuff or of a magical ability to operate outside the causal order.
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