

TOPIC 1

The problem of choice and freedom has long occupied philosophy due to concerning the very possibility of human agency. Are we truly the authors of our actions? Are we merely products of causes beyond our control? How can we define the concept of choice?

Throughout the whole history of philosophy, different perspectives have attempted to answer these questions. Empirist Thinkers, such as David Hume, emphasized the role of passion and desires in human action, while rationalists, like Immanuel Kant, argued that freedom must be grounded in reason.

The topic I have chosen states that every human action originates from an agent's choice. The origin of choice is understood as desire and reasoning with a view to an end. Also, it further claims that both good and bad actions demand a combination between a logical approach to our desires (intellect) and a moral state (character), while choices in general only demand one of these factors.

In this essay, I will mostly defend the view presented in the topic, while creating a distinction between free choices that leads to free actions and conditioned choices which leads to not free actions, as in my view the topic's origin of choice concerns only the ones who are free, while the necessary factors that produced choice (reason or moral states) characterize all forms of choice. I will argue first that freedom of choice cannot be defined by the mere absence of constraint, secondly, that purely inclination driven actions cannot produce free choices since they are causally received, and thirdly, that reason is necessary to ground freedom since it provides universal endorsable principles of action.

In first place, we must first clarify which dimension of freedom does the choice referenced in the topic belong. There are three distinct dimensions: physical freedom, which asks "Can I act?", moral freedom, which asks "Am I the author of my action?", and metaphysical freedom, which asks "Could I have done otherwise?". The formulation of the topic, which refers to the internal determination of an action, belongs to the dimension of moral freedom.

I defend the view that moral authorship requires a rational reflective endorsement. By rational reflective endorsement I understand the combination between reason and intellect and moral values. It is reasonable to accept this due to responsibility presupposing that actions can be attributed to subjects as reasons-responsive, not merely causally produced events, and, without a rational reflection, actions turn into impulses, not agency.

All actions originate from a free or not free choice made by the agent. The individual receives a stimulus from his environment and internally produces a response to the stimulus, which he then can choose to follow or not follow, act or not act. Free choice understood in a superficial way as the absence of constraint leads to a problematic conclusion. On this view, one could not be the author of one's action is the presence of external or internal constraint and one would necessarily be the author in the absence of constraint. However, both implications are false.

On the one hand, a rational agent may act under constraint while still having freedom of choice, insofar as he rationally indorses the principles underlining the action. For instance, when an individual willingly follows a law that he sees as justified, the presence of constraint does not undermine authorship of action, but rather expresses it. Similarly, when we resist our impulses because we morally judge them to be wrong, our action is structurally constraint by reason, yet we remain its true author.

On the other hand, the absence of constraint does not guarantee freedom of choice. For example, when a subject randomly “chooses” between two options, his action did not originate from a rational reflective endorsement and, because of this, he can’t claim authorship of action.

The idea is close to Harry Frankfurt’s distinction between first-order desires and second order volitions. An action is fully authored by the agent if he reflectively identifies with the desire that it produces. Otherwise, even in the absence of constraint, the action remains unowned.

In second place, a will driven only or mostly by inclinations cannot be considered free, since it is external caused, rather than a product of rational self-legislation. This can be proved due to the fact that inclinations are not self-given but received. By inclinations I understand impulses, emotions and pure desires of the self that weren’t rationally evaluated. We do not choose our inclinations, they arise from factors that we have no control over, like our biology and the environment.

Following this logic, acting only or mostly by inclinations means we did not evaluate the desire or have a rational justification to follow it. The action is merely caused by the agent, not justified by him. This doesn’t imply that individuals shouldn’t be punished by wrong inclination driven actions, but that their action did not originate from a free choice and, because of this, they weren’t morally free when they acted.

This line of reasoning finds support in Baruch Spinoza, who argued that humans often think themselves free simply because they are conscious of their desires, while remaining ignorant to the causes that determine them. For Spinoza, actions driven only by passions aren’t expressions of freedom, but of necessity, due to resulting from external causal chains acting upon us.

Although reason is necessary for free choice, it is not necessary for all choices. Blind faith or imposed objective morality leads the agent to make choices based on a set of moral values that did not originate from reason. I argue, here disagreeing with the topic, that good and bad actions demands also either intellect or character, not necessarily their combination. My action can produce objective good even if it wasn’t rationally endorsed by me. For example, I can have an impulse to protect children and follow this impulse without rational evaluating it first. Although I can’t claim authorship of the action, based on the majority of objective ethics including the virtue ethics, it produced objective good.

In third place, moral freedom is the capacity of reason to give itself its own law and to transform mere impulses into rationally endorsed desires. Unlike inclinations, which vary from individuals to individuals, reason operates through universal principles that can be shared and recognized by all rational agents. Universalization concerns the form of rational judgment, not necessarily the substantive content of every moral value. When an action is driven by reason, the agent does not merely follow what he was given, but acts according to principles he can justify and rationally endorse. Therefore, it provides both justification and authorship of action.

Every will that drives an action either comes from heteronomous sources (inclinations) or an autonomous source (reason). This can be justified due to the fact that every determinant of an action being either empirical (didn’t go through a rational filter) or rational (did go through a rational filter). Although there are factors that seem to not fall into neither of the labels, for example habits, in a closer inspection we can identify that every will that humans have is either in a pre-rational evaluation state, we can call it S0, or in a post-rational evaluation state, we can call it S1. Even habits or actions driven by faith have to be in either S0 or S1, there is not an in-between state. What does exist is different quality levels of S1 between different agents. This hierarchy of post-rational

evaluation states is determined by how logically rigorous, coherent and consistent is the rational evaluation.

This distinction gains force from Kant's claim that the will stands at the boundary between nature and rationality. Insofar as the action is determined by inclinations, it falls into natural causality. Insofar as the action is determined by reason, it belongs to the domain of moral freedom. Here's a formalized version of my argumentation:

- P1) An agent was free when he acted only if the action was authored by him
- P2) Authorship requires that the determining principle of action be rationally endorsed by the agent
- P3) Every factor that drives a will is either an inclination or reason
- P4) Inclinations are not rationally endorsable in themselves, since they are externally received
- C1) Therefore, inclinations alone cannot ground moral freedom
- P5) Reason, by contract, provides universal principles that can be rationally endorsed by the agent
- C2) Therefore, only action driven by reason can be considered truly free

One possible objection would be to suggest that my perspective is too restrictive, since it assumes that only universal principles can support moral freedom. However, some philosophers defend that this excludes important aspects of human agency such as authentic spontaneity and self-expression. From this perspective, what matters is whether the action follows the agent's own motivational structure. This line of reasoning can be associated with David Hume, where reason is seen as the slave of the passions and inclinations are not external to the self, but part of him.

While a strong objection, it rests on an ambiguity between inclinations and motivations. Inclinations are the immediate psychological states that didn't go through a rational filter. Motivations are inclinations that have been subjected to a rational evaluation and endorsement, this last part extremely important. In this sense, the agent does not merely experience the desire, but acts according to reasons he can justify. Only at this level does the desire cease to function as a blind causal force and becomes integrated with the rational structure of agency.

From this perspective, Hume's claim that reason is the slave of the passions can be seen not as a denial of rational agency, but as a description of the psychological origin of motivation. Even if every action is ultimately triggered by some desire, it does not follow that all desires have the same authority within agency. The crucial distinction is not between reason and passions as competing forces, but between mere causation by desire and endorsement of desire as a reason for action. What truly matters is whether the agent can take a reflective stance towards his desires and thereby distinguish which ones can count as his reasons.

Universal rational principles do not necessarily imply that all individuals should have the same set of moral values or ways of life, rather it functions as a structural condition of choice. In this sense, morality may remain subjective in its content, while maintaining basic objective conditions such as coherence and consistency. The objectivity comes from the form of moral evaluation, not necessarily the content, and this form should be available to all rational agents for societies to emerge and function. If the form was also subjective, then every action, rationally endorsed or not, could be seen as subjectively free based on the agent's own views, even if this view is contradictory, hypocrite or not logical in any way.

If one does not defend subjectivism, my framework is also very compatible with objectivism. Reason can be seen as our one path for becoming “perfect”, even if the goal is unreachable, the journey and growth is what matters. This can be justified by all our abstract ideas of perfect coming from reason. One can imagine a perfect circle or a perfect square in the abstract mental world of ideas, even if these concepts do not and cannot exist in our imperfect practical world. The abstract circle and square are perfect in the sense that they cannot be perfected without breaking their own definition, they are truly complete and immutable. This comes from the Aristotelian idea of pure act, where the perfect does not have potentialities to upgrade and, therefore, its immutable.

We can take this idea and apply it to moral values, where through reason we could discover the objective perfect values and try our best to replicate them, even if they are impossible to be completely assimilated in an imperfect world, just like the perfect circle and square are distorted into imperfect circles and squares in reality.

When I argue that inclinations are external to the self, it's not in a practical or biological sense, but rather in an identity sense. Here's a thought experiment: imagine a man who lived his whole life without being able to control his impulses. In his mind, he knows they are wrong and provoke great harm, but his body does not respond to his judgement and acts almost independently. When he sees someone eating a food he wants, he takes it, or when he's angry he reacts unproportionally to his discomfort. Even if all of his actions originate from a biological impulse or desire of his, would it be fair to include these comportments in his identity, even if he judges them wrong but can't control them? In my view, his identity should include his rational psychological states, reflections and moral values, but not the uncontrollable expressions of his impulses, since inclinations are seen by me as externally caused. If one wants to defend that inclinations are also a part of our identity, then following his own criterion, he should judge the man also based on his actions that lack free choice.

In conclusion, the analysis of freedom of choice and authorship of action developed in this essay demonstrates how moral freedom is dependent on the combination between reason and intellect and character and moral values. The distinction between inclinations and motivations preserves the role of human desires in agency, since motivations result from desires and reasoning with a view to an objective or goal. Ultimately, reason is what separates us from primitive actions, it provides rights but also responsibility and consciousness, but, in my opinion, it is a fair price for achieving freedom and building an identity.