

# Standpoints and Freedom

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1. Introduction: I am presenting a piece from the second chapter of a book manuscript, and so I will begin by briefly stating where we are in the book. The book is about free will and moral responsibility, and its first two chapters are meant to isolate what I take to be the intuitive problem of free will.
  - a. Chapter One:
    - i. Difficulties that do not present vexed philosophical problems about freedom or agency: threats to our freedom posed by interfering agents, such as meddling neuroscientists, powerful gods, and oppressive political regimes, as well as hinderances to and defects of agency, such as diseases or drugs... These are problems in life, not in theory.
    - ii. Contrast these threats... with the threat posed by deterministic physics, or mechanism. ...
      - 1) determinism is not... analogous to a powerful god or meddling neuroscientists.
      - 2) It is rather a scientific claim..., one which implies that our own actions, as well as the processes that underlie and explain our agency... unfold strictly from earlier states.
      - 3) But the processes that underlie and explain the usual operation of our agency could not be interferences with, hinderances to, or defects of it.
    - iii. And yet, it seems, when we think about the processes that underlie and explain our agency, and when we imagine that they unfold strictly from earlier states and events, we feel our freedom is threatened—in fact, we feel we are not really free at all.
      - 1) Moreover... we feel the same threat if we imagine that our actions and decisions unfold from earlier states and events in a merely lucky or probabilistic way.
      - 2) A philosophical problem:
        - a) we cannot understand an event as an action, at all, unless we are able to explain it by appeal to psychological facts,
        - b) ...psychological facts emerge, in their entirety, from... nature or nurture, working in some contested combination, along with some luck.
        - c) But, once we see our own actions as a part of the unfolding history of the natural world... it seems to us that we are not free.
      - iv. Reply: the psychological emerges from the physical and cannot be reduced back to it.
        - 1) Counter: This fails to appreciate the strength of the intuitive problem... If we were bothered by Newton, Freud will do just as well.
      - v. The intuitive problem of free will: when we explain free action, we seem to explain it away.
    - b. Chapter Two: Addressing the intuitive problem: why does focusing on the processes that explain our activities make them seem unfree?
  2. The “Two Standpoints” Approach
    - a. The two standpoints... distinguished by the activities undertaken from them:
      - i. “practical,” “deliberative,” “first-person,” “subjective” point of view from which we decide, act
      - ii. a “theoretical,” “explanatory,” “third-person,” “objective” point of view, from which we observe, describe, and explain.
    - b. When we occupy the first point of view, we take ourselves to be free. But when we occupy the second... our agency does not appear. We seem to ourselves mere machines...
    - c. A form of compatibilism: we are not entitled to conclude, from the fact that our freedom does not appear when we theorize ourselves as empirical subjects, that our freedom is only an illusion.... This illicit conclusion could only be reached by improperly privileging the theoretical over the practical, when neither could be given priority. ... They are *so* incompatible, they cannot genuinely conflict.
      - i. More is needed: Simply appealing to distinct “standpoints” is a compelling way to *describe* the intuitive problem.
      - ii. If we are going to do more than provide a gripping metaphor in which to state the problem, we need to know more about the points of view—what constitutes them, why we occupy them, etc.
      - iii. Further, a *mere* appeal to distinct “conceptual frameworks” or “levels of description” will not do justice to the intuitive difficulty: cf. music and pain
  3. Examining the labels [cut for time] quick example: “theoretical” and “deliberative” (or “practical”)

4. Transition to Questions
  - a. In the end, I do not think the intuitive problem depends on a distinction in standpoints or points of view—even though it arises naturally when we reflect upon ourselves... I think the source of the intuitive problem lies in the thought or feeling that our own wills are not in our control, and that this thought or feeling arises when we reflect upon ourselves, due to our impoverished sense of what controlling our own will would require. The goal of this chapter is to arrive at that diagnosis.
  - b. However, before moving there, I would like to think more about the “two standpoints.” I think we can do a better job identifying the “two standpoints”... and I do think that those two “standpoints” can sometimes come into conflict. By laying out them out more precisely... I hope to support my claim that we will not find neither the source of nor the solution to our problem here.
5. The Truth in the Standpoints Talk: Questions, not Points of View
  - a. The ordinary notion of control... representing some change and causing the change you represent.
    - i. ... leads us to think of ourselves... as a power to effect changes in the world.
    - ii. ... also allows us to ignore ourselves as we make a decision... The particular features of your will that explain your decision can remain... behind the lens, out of view, as you decide...
      - 1) You are occupying what it would be natural to call a “first-person,” “practical,” “deliberative” perspective, looking out at the world... from your will...
    - iii. But... you are not barred from considering the features of your own mind, even from your own point of view.
    - iv. A relatively simple point: even if you fully understand the operation of your mind... you cannot exercise control over your future simply by understanding, observing, describing, or explaining it. To exercise control over your future, you have to make something like a decision. And, if you are going to make anything like a decision, you need to *make* it.
  - b. Examine more closely: Decisions and predictions
    - i. Two routes to a view of your future:
      - 1) Prediction: Whether *you will go* for a walk (about anyone)
        - a) Considerations you use to settle this question (if any) will be those you take to show it likely that you will walk
      - 2) Decision: Whether *to go* for a walk (not about anyone)
        - a) Considerations you use to settle this question will be—*in virtue of* your so using them—considerations you take to count in favor of (or against) walking.
    - ii. Importantly, predictions and decisions regularly interact (will you forget the password?)
      - 1) What is distinctive about the standpoint of decision-making is not concepts employed, but rather the question addressed.
    - iii. So... I suggest we understand the “two standpoints” by appeal to two questions... the predictive question, of whether you will do something, and the practical question, of whether to do it.
6. How the questions do and do not interact or conflict
  - a. Predictions sometimes thereby change *which* practical question we ought to address.
    - i. Example: the dominating opponent
    - ii. I can’t sensibly address the question of whether to win... because whether I win does not depend on my decisions, etc... so I can’t sensibly represent winning as a change I shall bring about.
    - iii. I should instead adopt what I will call the *fatalistic attitude* towards winning: I should set aside the question of whether to win, and instead address some other question: whether to do my best...
  - b. Tempting thought: the inevitability of my loss makes it unreasonable for me to address the question
    - i. It is not the *inevitability* of my loss that renders the practical question unreasonable. It is rather the fact that... whether I win does not depend on my decisions, planning, skills, or effort.
      - 1) The fact that an outcome does not depend on my decisions, etc., is, by itself, sufficient make it unreasonable to address the question... It will do so even if the outcome is *not* inevitable.
      - 2) Maybe: if an outcome is inevitable, that fact alone makes it unreasonable to decide?
        - a) Notice how odd: the inevitability of an outcome makes a decision unreasonable, *even if* the inevitable outcome depends on your (admittedly inevitable) decision.
          - i) Perhaps it is inevitable that you will take the more attractive offer. Now the fact that it is inevitable renders the decision unreasonable?

- ii. Decisions are never inevitable. So an outcome that depends on my decision is not inevitable.
  - 1) Why can't decisions be inevitable? (Or, as inevitable as anything else we take into account, when making our way through the world.) As noted in the last chapter, opening a decision to chance does not render it more free or more securely up to me.
- iii. A retreat: I cannot sensibly *see* an outcome as inevitable, as I make a decision about it.
  - 1) After all, when you address the question of whether to walk, you are addressing the question of whether *or not* to walk.
    - a) And so, in addressing it, you must, in some sense, take there to be two possibilities: you could settle it positively or negatively.
    - b) And, further, if you settle, positively, the question of whether to walk, you should, and usually will, work into the rest of your thinking and planning the fact that you will walk, while, if you settle it negatively, you should, and usually will, work into the rest of your thinking and planning the fact that you will not walk.
    - c) And so... you are... contemplating two contrasting futures, each of which depends on your decision.
    - d) Thus, it might seem, to address this question you must regard the future as open.
    - e) And thus, it might seem, if you accept the inevitability of a given outcome, you cannot sensibly address the question of whether to bring it about.
- iv. Reply: Not so.
  - 1) First, it is not obvious that... you must... contemplate... the possibility of not doing it.
  - 2) Nonetheless... grant that... you are contemplating two contrasting futures.
    - a) You are also acknowledging that which future is realized depends on your decision.
    - b) You are considering whether or not to bring about some change.
    - c) You have not *yet* decided the question.
    - d) You also you believe you will certainly decide the question one way and not the other.
  - 3) There is no bar to contemplating a future that *would* occur if you *were* to make the decision you believe you will certainly not make, nor any unreasonableness in doing so.
  - 4) Examples: I will decide to accept a certain long-desired opportunity, tell the truth when asked in court, feed my children.
- v. Counter: If I know, that is because I have already decided. I have *practical* knowledge.
  - 1) Reply: not always
- vi. Counter: return to standpoints. To make my decision, I enter a different point of view.
  - 1) Reply: No, I must address a different question, but it does not require a new point of view.
- vii. Even more extreme example: the neuroscientists.
  - 1) Caveat 1: I am not now arguing that inevitability is no threat to *freedom*
  - 2) My narrow point: a confident prediction does not, itself, render addressing and answering the practical question impossible or even unreasonable
  - 3) Caveat 2: I have granted that the meddling of the scientists is a threat to freedom.
  - 4) Suppose I... have no objection to walking...
- c. The unhappy cases: I predict I will do something I would not have myself do.
  - i. Final position: If believed inevitability is not a problem in the happy cases, it does not, *in itself*, make it impossible or unreasonable either to address or to settle the practical question. Rather... in the unhappy cases, certain *sources* of inevitability present hinderances to or interferences with agency. But these hinderances and interferences are, once again, problems in life not in theory.
  - ii. First case, one that poses no threat to freedom: 9:23 comes, and you just don't want to walk
    - 1) The scientists have failed. The prediction was inaccurate.
    - 2) I need not assume that the neuroscientists are omnipotent or that you are infallible.
  - iii. Second case: Professor Procrastinate
    - 1) It seems sensible for Procrastinate (unlike the ill-fated competitor) to *address* the question of whether to write the review—in fact it seems he is required to.
    - 2) How he is to answer the question he must address?
      - a) Like any of us, Procrastinate cannot sensibly agree to write the review unless he can be reasonably confident that will do it... he needs to have... a plan

- b) But what if Procrastinate.. is unable to come up with any plan?... He cannot sensibly agree to complete the review. Can he sensibly decline?
  - c) It seems problematic... to decline the review because he regretfully predicts that he will not complete it, when... whether he does so simply depends on his own decision-making, planning, efforts, etc. It can seem to be in some way in bad faith. In fact, I think there are several different problems, in this case, to be distinguished.
- 3) Bad Faith Type 1:
- a) Procrastinate cannot treat the prediction *itself* as settling the practical question.
    - i) Procrastinate's confident prediction... is not yet a decision.
    - ii) If Procrastinate declines, he will have to settle the question of whether to decline.
  - b) You might take your prediction to bear on your decision.
    - i) You might take your confident prediction that you will walk to bear on the question of whether to walk: Perhaps you are impatient and would rather avoid the wait.... Or maybe resistance is futile, and you would like to save your strength.
    - ii) The prediction... can become a consideration in light of which you decide.
  - c) Procrastinate.... might reason, "I am sure not to complete the review, so it will be best for everyone if I decline now."
    - i) In so deciding... he is not pretending that the inevitability settles the matter.
    - ii) So a charge of this first form of bad faith will not stick.
- 4) Bad Faith Type 2?
- a) When addressing whether he *shall* complete the review, Procrastinate cannot treat as given the fact that he *will not*—because that is precisely the matter under consideration.
  - b) As tempting as this response is, I do not think it is quite right: Cf. the happy cases.
    - i) I may be confident that I will care for and attend to my children, and that confident prediction may be part of my reason for deciding to adopt children.
    - ii) I may be confident that I will relentlessly pursue justice, and that confident prediction may be part of my reason for accepting a certain challenging job.
    - iii) So... the difficulty with Procrastinate cannot be that he treats his future decisions as inevitable, nor even that he takes their inevitability into account.
- 5) Bad faith Type 2:
- a) He takes a *fatalistic attitude* toward his own decisions and starts to plan around them.
  - b) Why a problem?
    - i) When you decide, you are committing to a plan that might include sub-decisions.
    - ii) By planning around his future procrastinating decisions, Procrastinates treats them as though they are not up to him. But... they are up to him.
    - iii) It is as though he is counting on something or someone other than he... to shore up the decision to procrastinate, when the time comes.
    - iv) And that other something, whatever it is, is a threat to his freedom... it is an *interference with, hinderance to, constraint on, or defect in* the operation of his agency.
  - 6) Recommending a kind of bad faith: the best he can do.
- iv. Final unhappy cases: The Fates and the Evil Scientists [skipping]

## 7. Conclusion

- a. Our question was: why does explaining agency seem to explain it away?
  - i. Some have thought that we can answer this by appeal to standpoints.
    - 1) The distinction between standpoints is best understood as a distinction between questions.
    - 2) I examined how and why answering a predictive question makes it unreasonable to address or to answer the practical question. Unreasonableness appeared only in unhappy cases...
    - 3) But these are also cases in which you see your agency as subject to some hinderance, interference, or defect.
  - ii. And so I think our original problem remains. I believe I can say what it is.
- b. Our ordinary notion of control will not allow us to see our own will... as in our control. But if our decision-making, concluding, believing, and caring are not in our control, then it seems that nothing really is. That is the problem I propose to address in the coming chapters.