

Free Will and the Perfection of Consciousness

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Spiritually speaking, free will or the ability to make meaningful choices is a critical concept for the perfection of consciousness or enlightenment. The panentheistic principle of the *primacy of consciousness* and its expression through the quantum monad, which was discussed in an earlier piece (Goswami's Quantum Philosophy, Part II), is assumed. Implicit in this view is the necessity of multiple physical manifestations in the material world for the perfection of consciousness. Multiple manifestations or reincarnations serve the purpose of allowing one the opportunity to overcome karmic errors and limitations as well as to develop talents and abilities using the experiences made possible by the material world. Thus, acceptance of the above construction of the nature of reality requires the ability to make meaningful choices or *free will*. How then might the requirement for free will be construed in a manner that meets the necessary conditions for the perfection of consciousness?

Simple determinism asserts that everything we do is predetermined and therefore our apparent choices are really an illusion. From that point of view, we have only what appear to be choices and all the outcomes that follow from such imaginary choices are predetermined and beyond our ability to influence. In short, the chain of causality that began in the distant past, perhaps with the origin of the material universe, set in motion a chain of cause and effects that still continues and will continue into the future. That chain of causality passes through us and determines what we think, feel and do. Clearly, there are no real choices that might allow for the operation of free will in such a dismal conception of life. Further, such a conception renders impossible any meaningful conception of moral responsibility. If one's behavior is wholly determined and outside of one's ability to influence, how can an individual be held accountable for his or her actions? Finally, if simple determinism governs everything then a spiritual vision that entails the perfection of consciousness (or the soul if you prefer) cannot be valid.

Absolute free will (a.k.a. indeterminism) is the opposite of simple determinism, which means one can by choice affect an outcome that is not predictable from its antecedents. In short, one can do things that violate the principle of causality as it is commonly understood (a.k.a. magic). For example, someone walking on water would both violate the principle of causality and demonstrate affecting an outcome by choice that is not predictable from its antecedents. Interestingly, the principle of causal determinism has, at the quantum level, been experimentally demonstrated to be untenable. This suggests that reality almost certainly does not rest upon simple determinism. The quantum world appears, however, to be governed by statistical determinism, which includes all possible outcomes and even some that might be considered "magic." However, those outcomes, while possible, are extremely improbable. It is clear that no mere mortal is likely to ever observe or experience one of these highly improbable outcomes. Thus, indeterminism is not suitable for our purposes because meaningful choices leading to systematic consequences are not possible and such choices are necessary for the perfection of consciousness.

The libertarian philosopher Richard Taylor proposed an alternative to simple determinism that he calls complex determinism, which recognizes that human agency is a primary factor in causation. That is, human agency or in the case of an individual self-agency can alter a chain of causality and initiate a new branch in an unfolding sequence. This brings us back to free will. In this view, free will is no longer absolute but rather is probabilistic, which is similar to the statistical determinism of quantum physics. Complex determinism suggests that in any given situation there are usually multiple possible outcomes, none of which require magic; i.e., they have a basis in antecedent events. Each of these possible outcomes is more or less probable than another. The most common outcome is the one with the highest probability. This is what is sometimes described by the phrase "the path of least resistance." Recall the example about the collapse of a wave of probabilities discussed in an earlier piece (Goswami's Quantum Philosophy, Part I).

When one arrives at a meaningful decision point in life, the complex and tangled web of antecedents that have led to the decision point generally allow for more than one possible consequence or outcome. Suppose that the decision point contains five possible outcomes or choices. Each has a probability of expression. If the path of least resistance is followed, the choice made will be the one most closely associated with one's habitual and conditioned pattern of behavior. This default choice, in fact, is not really a choice so much as it is an acquiescence. Default responses that follow the path of least resistance are very common and give the appearance of following from simple determinism.

Research has provided evidence that suggests decisions are made at a subconscious level before one is consciously aware of them. This it is argued is evidence for simple determinism. An alternative interpretation is that this research is evidence that habitual or high probability responses are virtually automatic. Fortunately, the research also shows that there is a small delay between the subconscious decision, awareness and action. This delay is the window of opportunity that provides room for free will. Self-agency effected through intention and deliberate choice, based on forethought and anticipation of consequences, can influence and change the probability functions of potential outcomes. Thus, the first step is to prevent the default or habitual response from occurring. The second step is to undertake a deliberate effort to make manifest a possible alternate response. In short, if one is willing to be attentive and make the effort it is possible to exert self-agency and become a causal force in your own chain of causation.

In this conception of complex determinism there are three principle contributors to human action: biological factors, environmental factors and self-agency. It is important to recognize that all three influences operate through predisposition, not predestination. Consider two identical twins with virtually identical biological inheritance who are predisposed to diabetes. Further, suppose that the twins live in an environment that has varied dietary choices but one that includes an abundance of readily available, tasty, high carbohydrate foods. This environment also predisposes one to the development of diabetes. The interaction of the biological and environmental predispositions (what's known as an epigenetic factor) make avoiding diabetes unlikely, especially given the predisposition to follow the path of least resistance. Eventually, one twin develops diabetes and the other does not. Clearly, this would never happen if biological and

environmental causation were predestination. We can ask why did these different outcomes occur?

Very likely part of the answer is the twins created different environments from the choices they had. Suppose that they took a class in nutrition while they were in high school or college in which they learned of the hazards of overeating a high glycemic diet. Let's assume that this was bad news since both had become accustomed to eating a high glycemic diet. One chose to continue eating a diet rich in refined carbohydrates. This twin followed the habitual pattern and took the path of least resistance. The other chose a diet that minimized refined carbohydrates. This choice was clearly available to both but only the second twin exercised self-agency and took the more difficult path of resisting habitual patterns and making healthier choices. Thus, these different choices in lifestyle differentially influenced the possibility of developing diabetes in the twins.

In my view, we do have the ability to make real choices. We can, at least, make choices from among those potential outcomes that are possible given the antecedents. Our choices, reflected in our intentions and actions, influence (but do not control) the probable outcomes available in situations in which we are actors. Self-agency has the potential to carry us to a tipping point that can set in motion a new causal chain. Most of us, most of the time, fail to exercise self-agency and simply follow the path of least resistance and thereby give the impression of being controlled by simple determinism.

Complex determinism construed as self-agency then appears to meet the need for the meaningful choices necessary for perfecting consciousness. Accepting self-agency as essential for perfecting consciousness leads to recognition of personal sovereignty as a natural right. A sovereign individual is a free agent engaged in self-determination. Free agents set their own goals and choose the means to those goals. Further, a community of sovereign individuals represents a diversity of goals and methods for achieving those goals. Perfection of consciousness can only be achieved by freely taken choices. This means that it is incumbent upon anyone who accepts the primacy of consciousness, implicit in panentheism, to avoid interfering with other people's choices to the greatest extent possible. This is important because it is the intent behind choices, not the acts in and of themselves that is important for the perfection of consciousness.

There are several ways in which one individual might attempt to affect the choices of another individual. First, one can use force to impose choices on another person. Second, one can use threat or intimidation to impose choices on someone else. Third, one can use contrived incentives to influence another person's choices. Finally, one can use persuasion to influence the choices of another person. Clearly, the first two options are coercive and inconsistent with self-determination. However, the third method is also coercive but in a more subtle way. The use of contrived incentives to influence someone's choices is an effort to manipulate them and therefore represents a soft form of coercion. The final method may be the only method that is consistent with self-determination and the perfection of consciousness. Persuasion, properly conducted, appeals to the reason of another person. Successful persuasion convinces a person of the correctness of a particular choice and is thereby most likely to affect intention as well as action.

Persuasion is not coercive but educational and is the only ethically acceptable method of influencing others in a society of sovereign individuals. Thus, sovereign individuals in their exercise of self-agency must accept some limitations on personal behavior. Specifically, they must accept a prohibition on the use of force or coercion directly or indirectly against others in the pursuit of their goals, except when necessary for self-defense or protecting others from harm.

*See also: "What does quantum physics have to do with behavior disorders?" in the Journal Articles page on this site for more about self-agency.

For a related case history see: "Big Jim: a case history" in the Journal Articles page on this site.