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John Searle and Richard Swinburne on the Nature of the Problem of Free Will and its Relation with Consciousness

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Abstract: *The problem of free will is still an issue and in the classical literature we find two extremes; either human have free will or they are determined to act. In the current debates over free will we find compatibilism as the best solution to the problem of free will. But compatibilism reveals a hopeless result and turns out to be a mere rational twist to defend determinism. On the other hand, naturalism's metaphysical thesis of a physical causal closure also defends determinism. Current philosophical literature reveals the compliance of the analytic philosophers with naturalism to a great extent. Thus the problem of free will is discussed deterministically in the current neurophysiological theories. It is suggested that the problem of free will can be resolved only if the problem of consciousness is taken into account. John Searle also complies with naturalism and defends his doctrine of biological naturalism and endorses the scientific explanation of consciousness. Richard Swinburne defends substance dualism as he also endorses the evolutionary notion of naturalism while discussing the emergence of consciousness. Both philosophers present different views about the problems of free will and consciousness. This article concludes that Searle's notion of free will does not cohere with his view of consciousness due to his compliance with naturalism's physical causal closure. Swinburne's 'personal explanation' is plausible to address the problems of free will and its relation to consciousness.*

Keywords: Free will, determinism, compatibilism, naturalism, physical causal closure, biological naturalism, soft substance dualism.

Introduction

It is normally thought, that everything in the universe that happens has a cause and human actions are also caused by prior conditions which can be taken as the causes of actions. What if we say that human actions are determined by prior conditions? If prior conditions are sufficient to produce certain human actions then we have every reason to suppose that one could not do otherwise. Causes of actions may be of two kinds; physical causes and psychological causes. Whether human actions are caused by sufficient physical or psychological prior conditions we can easily suppose that one could not do otherwise. This position is held by compatibilism and various neurophysiological theories of free will.

Compatibilism preserves determinism with freedom of choice but in essence, it reduces the libertarian view of free will to determinism. According to the libertarian view, given the prior necessary or sufficient conditions, one could do otherwise. Koch defines the libertarian view, “Let me offer one intuitive definition of free will: you are free if, under the same circumstance, you could have acted otherwise.”¹ Koch’s definition of free will opposes not only compatibilism but also the neurophysiological account of free will. Given the prior sufficient conditions whether one could or could not do otherwise, does not solve the issue rather we should seek a more substantive basis to look upon the issue.

It is the need of time that we should look upon the problem of free will from the standpoint of the problem of consciousness because human free will is anchored in the conscious experience. The problem of consciousness reveals that while discussing free will we normally ignore the status of consciousness. The problem

¹ Christof Koch, “Free Will, Physics, Biology, and the Brain,” in *Downward Causation and the Neurobiology of Free Will*, eds. Nancey Murphy, George F.R. Ellis, and Timothy O’Connor (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 33.

of consciousness is the hard problem of consciousness that David Chalmers proposes. Chalmers argues that “It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises.”² Chalmers points toward the issue that we normally think that the brain produces consciousness but how and why this all happens, is still a mystery. Because consciousness has a first-person ontology and how and why the brain’s physical third-person processes produce such a unique ontology is so hard to comprehend but the status of consciousness does reveal something about the status of free will.

A comparative analysis of John Searle’s monistic biological naturalism and Richard Swinburne’s soft substance dualism provide a good basis to deeply look upon the problem of free will and its relation with the problem of consciousness. This comparison also shows that the problem of free will needs a firm standpoint toward a better solution in terms of having a justified explanation of the actual status of human free will.

Either Determinism or Absolute Freedom of Choice

Is it justified to adopt either determinism or libertarian free will? Why cannot we think that things may appear in the grey shades? It is logically possible to think that humans are more-free and less determined to choose among alternatives. It is also logically possible to suppose that humans are less free and more determined to make a choice. But the classical literature reveals that either human are determined or absolutely free to make a choice.

² David Chalmers, “Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness,” in *Explaining Consciousness -The ‘Hard Problem’*, ed. Jonathan Shear (London: The MIT Press, 1995), 11.

Cartesian view of free will shows that the thinking substance (mind) is distinct from the physical extended substance (body) and the mind is not influenced by the body while choosing among alternatives. Descartes is of the view that

“For, in order to be free, I do not have to be able to be moved in either direction. On the contrary, the more I incline to one alternative, whether because I clearly understand that the good and the true are on that side, or because God so disposes my innermost thoughts, the more freely I choose it.”³

Descartes is clear at this point that his capacity to choose among alternatives is based on his rational scrutiny and he is not influenced physically or psychologically. Therefore, Descartes’ interactive dualism defends the absolute freedom of choice.

We find Spinoza’s view regarding human free will. Spinoza holds,

“Insofar as a man is determined to some action from the fact that he has inadequate ideas, he cannot be said, without qualification, to be acting from virtue; he can be said to do so only insofar as he is determined from the fact that he understands.”⁴

Spinoza means when we come to understand the necessary conditions that cause us to act, thus, we achieve freedom. Spinoza is a dualist in terms of having two distinct entities of mind and body in his doctrine that go parallel and uninfluenced to each

³ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4th Meditation, 41.

other. He is a hard determinist and his parallelism is more complicated than Descartes' interactionism. A mere understanding of the necessary conditions of actions is not enough to make someone free. We are left with the option of 'self-determinism' but Spinoza does not mean this, we are bound to act in the face of the prior sufficient conditions and mere understanding of those conditions does not make one self-determined. In Spinoza's view, a self is bound to act not free to act, thus, self-determinism does not fit here.

Compatibilism struggles to reconcile libertarian free will and determinism but its result is hopeless. Searle describes the main thesis of compatibilism,

“What it says is that all behaviour is determined in such a way that it couldn't have occurred otherwise, all other conditions remaining the same.”⁵

It is intuitive to suppose that given the prior sufficient conditions if we could not do otherwise then we are compelled to do actions. If we put aside physical prior conditions then psychological conditions must involve as the determinants of our actions. If psychological prior conditions are sufficient to determine our actions but still we could do otherwise then it comes out of logical necessity that psychological prior conditions are not sufficient to determine actions. This is the point that Searle adopts and declares compatibilism a failure.

Compatibilism also runs contrary to our pragmatic view of free will. Human social discourse depends upon the distinction between

⁴ Spinoza, *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), IV-24, 333.

⁵ John Searle, *Minds Brains and Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 85.

a free act and a compulsive act. Koch mentions that “Criminal law recognizes instances of diminished responsibility where the accused did not act freely.”⁶ Koch means human society works well on the idea of responsibility that underpins the distinction between compulsive and free actions. Someone’s actions under the influence of drugs, mental illness etc. cannot be thought of as free actions so the person cannot be held responsible for them. Here we can remind of compatibilism’s main thesis that given sufficient prior conditions a person could not do otherwise. So a person under the compulsion of drugs and mental illness does whatever he/she does but cannot do otherwise.

The notion of a non-compulsive free action reveals that given prior sufficient conditions a person could do otherwise. Thus compatibilism can interpret a compulsive action but fails to interpret a free action. Compatibilism presents free will as an epiphenomenon and the determinism of Spinoza also reveals the same impulse. Descartes’ view of free will is outdated today because naturalism dominates in current debates on free will and consciousness. Naturalism also eliminates the scope of human free will and physical determinism gets strength. In this way, we are left with a choice that either humans have free will or they are absolutely determined to act. We will see that Swinburne’s account of free will makes a middle way.

Naturalism and Free Will

In the mid of the 20th century, philosophical naturalism found its place in the American Naturalist Project where Roy Wood Sellars as a member of the project presented his view about naturalism and various analytic philosophers, afterwards, adopted the naturalizing methodology in various disciplines and the

⁶ Christof Koch, “Free Will, Physics, Biology, and the Brain,” 34.

philosophy of mind.⁷ Roy Wood Sellars argues for a self-sufficient “*space-time-causal system*” and maintains,

“I mean that naturalism takes nature in a definite way as identical with reality, as self-sufficient and as the whole of reality. And by nature is meant the space-time-causal system which is studied by science and in which our lives are passed.”⁸

Sellars clearly shows that the physical world is a closed system and any event that happens to be in this system must have a physical cause.

The same view we find in David Armstrong as he establishes the definition that “Naturalism I define as the doctrine that reality consists of nothing but a single all-embracing Spatio-temporal system.”⁹ Armstrong’s definition of naturalism also points toward the metaphysical doctrine of physical causal closure. It means nothing non-physical or spiritual (supernatural) can influence the physical causal chain of events. Thus naturalizing consciousness not only leaves behind the Cartesian free will but also reduces consciousness to physical brain events. It logically entails that if consciousness is reduced to brain states then consciousness must be identical with no causal influence but appears as an epiphenomenon. If consciousness is an epiphenomenon then also

⁷ “This paper examines the naturalism debate in mid-twentieth-century America as a proximate source of contemporary naturalism.” Jaegwon Kim, “The American Origins of Philosophical Naturalism,” in *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28 (2003), 83, accessed November 01, 2021. <https://booksc.org/book/82590590/6f94a2>.

⁸ Roy Wood Sellars, “Why Naturalism and Not Materialism?,” in *The Philosophical Review* 36, no. 3 (May, 1927), 217, accessed June 04, 2021. <https://booksc.org/book/21745116/033c8f>.

⁹ David Armstrong, “Naturalism, Materialism, and First Philosophy,” in *Contemporary Materialism: A Reader*, eds. Paul K. Moser and J.D. Trout (Routledge: New York, 1995), 35.

free will because physical determinism does not allow human actions influenced by any cause other than physical.

Searle and Swinburne on Free Will

Searle's view of free will does not coincide with naturalism, although, he defends biological naturalism. Naturalism treats consciousness the same way it treats the physical world. And the compliance with naturalism is in vogue today as we see not only Searle's naturalizing the consciousness but also Swinburne's dualism naturalising consciousness through an evolutionary conception of the emergence.

In the case of the human freedom of choice, Searle vehemently opposes compatibilism and maintains the view that given prior sufficient conditions a person could do otherwise. In this way, Searle not only defends free will but also points toward a gap that he calls a conscious gap. Searle remarks,

“Sometimes we feel ourselves in the grip of a compulsion, an obsession, or an addiction. But in most normal non-pathological cases, we experience a gap between reasons and decision”.¹⁰

Here Searle distinguishes between compulsive and free actions. In case of the compulsive actions, there is no gap because when we provide a causal explanation of compulsive actions then we find actions logically entailed by prior sufficient conditions or causes. But when we try to give a causal explanation of free actions then we find actions not logically entailed by their prior causes. So it shows a gap between actions and intentions to act.

¹⁰ John Searle, “Consciousness and the Problem of Freewill,” in *Free Will and Consciousness: How Might They Work?* Eds. Roy F. Baumeister, Alfred R. Mele, and Kathleen D. Vohs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 122.

Searle mentions three kinds of gaps. The first gap is between decisions to act and reasons for actions. Here decisions to act do not follow the reasons for actions. The second gap is between the actual actions and the decisions to act. Here also performed actions are not entailed by the decisions. The third gap is between the completion and initiation of actions. Here resulting actions are not entailed by the initial portions of actions.¹¹ Searle mentions these gaps in free intentional actions because prior conditions are not sufficient to produce actions. Searle, although, fills the gaps by postulating a self or personhood as he maintains, “To be more precise, in order to account for free, rational actions, we have to suppose there is a single entity...”¹² Searle's postulation of a self is a struggle to fill the gap because free actions are then easily entailed by the intentions of a person.

Reasons for a free action may be insufficient to cause an action but all the reasons for a free action are sufficient only if they belong to a person's intention. Thus, the idea of responsibility and rational free choice is justified, for Searle, if we take a continuing self into account. We must note here that ‘self’ is not a permanent entity for Searle, rather it is a centre of gravity of a unified conscious field that cannot be separated into parts.

Now we can better judge that Searle's treatment of the conscious gap of free will and then filling the gap with a postulated self creates issues. If free actions are entailed by the rational choice of a self then reasons for actions are still there in a self and those reasons are sufficient to cause actions. In the face of those reasons, we can say that a person could not do otherwise because those reasons of a self are sufficient to produce free actions. Even if we

¹¹ John Searle, “Free Will as a Problem in Neurobiology,” in *Philosophers of our Times*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 214.

¹² Searle, *Mind: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 295.

relate Searle's notion of free will with his view of consciousness then free will seems to be more in danger.

Swinburne's notion of free will seems quite adequate because of the dual entities of soul (conscious agency) and body that interact with each other. Swinburne acknowledges the fact that in the first place consciousness emerges from its physical base i.e. brain states. But consciousness becomes an independent entity that interacts with its emergence base i.e. the brain. How a distinct mental entity interacts with the causally closed physical system of the brain? At this point, Swinburne manages to prove the existence of libertarian free will while attacking the determinism of the closed physical system.

Swinburne accepts the power of a scientific worldview that causally explains and predicts physical events in a deterministic manner. But Swinburne does not acknowledge that determinism runs throughout the physical universe. He talks about the indeterminacy at the quantum level and its impact on the macro phenomena. Searle does not accept this notion and for him, quantum level indeterminacy is cancelled out at the macro level. Swinburne gives the example of a premium bond machine that shows the result on screen is caused by the processes at the quantum level.¹³ Swinburne provides another example of a multiplying device i.e. hydrogen bomb, that produces large effects at the macro level caused by an individual quantum event, therefore, the brain is a multiplying device.¹⁴ Swinburne proves that the physical universe is neither deterministic nor a causally

¹³ Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, rev ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 245.

¹⁴ Swinburne, "The Implausibility of Physical Determinism," in *Scientism: The New Orthodoxy*, eds. Richard N. Williams and Daniel N. Robinson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 120.

closed system and a distinct entity of the soul (conscious agency) can interact with brain states.

Against universal determinism, Popper also relates the view of the “self-transcendence of materialism”.¹⁵ Popper maintains that according to science atomic particles lie at the base of the material structure of things and the sub-atomic level lies at the base of the atomic level and this quantum level is not the material level, therefore, transcendence of materialism proves itself.

After the rejection of the absolute physical determinism Swinburne explains that mental substance has distinct properties from the properties of the correlated brain states. Beliefs, sensations, desires, thoughts and intentions are pure mental events in which only intentions are the active mental events, so while making intentions to do actions a person exercises free will. Swinburne remarks that

“I have argued that beliefs and desires are caused, and I shall assume that all other mental events (conscious or not conscious) with the possible exception of intentions are also caused.”¹⁶

Swinburne endorses the correlation of some mental events with brain states but intentions are active mental events and do not correlate with brain states.

Swinburne rejects the thesis of the neural correlates of consciousness and this rejection allows him to adopt the notion of

¹⁵ Karl Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and its Brain* (Berlin: Springer international, 1977), 07.

¹⁶ Swinburne, “Dualism and the Determination of Action,” in *Freewill and Modern science* (Oxford: Oxford University for British Academy, 2011), 05, accessed June 03, 2021. <https://philpapers.org/rec/SWIDAT-2>.

a libertarian free will. Searle's insistence on the physical causal closure does not allow him to have free will of this sort rather his view reflects 'quasi-compatibilism' because Searle endorses a tight correlation between consciousness and brain states. As far as Swinburne's notion of free will is concerned, we cannot give a causal explanation of intentions because they are not correlated with the brain states. But Swinburne, somehow, allows a causal scientific explanation of other passive mental events e.g. beliefs, desires, thoughts and sensations.

Why does Swinburne undermine a causal explanation of the intentions? It is because we cannot infer simple laws from the long list of correlations. And complex laws do not work well for the explanation of mental events. That is why mental events are contingently connected to brain states and all this entails that there is a lot of room for the freedom of choice.

Searle and Swinburne on Consciousness

To investigate the nature and relation of free will and consciousness we must ponder upon the problem of consciousness and then upon the problem of free will and to do so we have to compare and analyze the views of John Searle and Richard Swinburne because both philosophies look upon the problems of consciousness and free will differently. John Searle is a monist non-reductive naturalist and his view is called 'Biological Naturalism' as Searle maintains that consciousness "...is a natural, biological phenomenon. It is a much a part of our biological life as digestion, growth, or photosynthesis."¹⁷ Searle argues for the irreducible first-person ontology of consciousness, although, for

¹⁷ John Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (New York: New York Review Books, 1997), xiii.

Searle consciousness is generated from the neuronal activities in the brain.

Swinburne, on the other hand, is a dualist and under the aspect of an evolutionary view of the origin of consciousness, he goes contrary to any religious view of the eternity of the soul and defends a naturalist version of the emergence of consciousness. Swinburne uses the traditional term 'soul' for the conscious agency that has mental and conscious events. About the occurrence of consciousness, Swinburne holds,

“What is important, however, is to keep clear the factual and conventional elements involved in claiming that the soul comes into existence at a certain time.”¹⁸

Swinburne goes parallel to Searle in the case of the origin of consciousness and argues for the evolutionary and naturalistic view but then Swinburne changes his stance and develops the basis of his 'Soft Substance Dualism'. Swinburne emphasizes that “...what has evolved is different, radically and qualitatively, from that from which it has evolved.”¹⁹ In this way, Swinburne argues for the irreducible first-person ontology of consciousness but maintains that such an ontology is quite independent and different from the third-person ontology of brain events.

Searle holds the view that consciousness has some important features and subjectivity or the first-person ontology is the most basic of all. Searle argues, “The characteristic mistake in the study of consciousness is to ignore its essential subjectivity and try to

¹⁸ Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, 179.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 01.

treat it as if it were an objective third-person phenomenon.”²⁰ Subjectivity is the most essential feature of consciousness but Searle does not call it a distinct property of the brain states rather it is an irreducible feature. Brain states, for Searle, are lower-level features and the subjectivity is a higher-level feature. Searle avoids ontological reduction but endorses a causal reduction of subjectivity. Causal reduction means we can provide a scientific explanation because brain states generate consciousness. But subjectivity or the first-person ontology cannot be reduced.

We can reduce the solidity of an object to its components because solidity is an emergent feature but its mode of existence is not different from its components. But the case of consciousness is different. Consciousness is also an emergent feature, for Searle, but its first-person mode of existence restricts its reduction to its components. Searle does not call subjectivity a property or entity and also consciousness does not play an influential role to cause behaviour because Searle’s compliance with naturalism’s physical causal closure prevents him to allow such an influence. It is the reason that free will remains a virtual feature in the brain states. If the brain generates consciousness and there is a tight correlation then Searle’s conscious gap of free will poses the issue of a gap in the correlated brain states. If Searle fills the gap by postulating a self then the self is causally explainable in terms of emergence base i.e. lower-level brain processes. Thus Searle's notion of free will and his view of consciousness do not cohere.

Swinburne’s soft substance dualism with the evolutionary concept of the emergence of consciousness regards free will as a genuine property of the distinct conscious agency. Swinburne

²⁰ John Searle, “The Problem of Consciousness,” in *consciousness and Cognition* 02, no.4 (1993), 317, accessed July 05, 2021.
<http://www.cis.umassd.edu/~ivalova/Spring09/cis412/Old/PROBCONS.PDF>.

holds, “There are different ways of making the mental/physical distinction, but I propose to make it in terms of the privilegedly accessible/public.”²¹ According to Swinburne, mental events have the essential property of being accessible to the conscious agency but brain states lack this access. Thus mental events are distinct and also the possessor of those events i.e. mental substance (the soul).

Mental substance, conscious agency or the soul are different expressions of the same entity in Swinburne’s dualism. The mental substance and its intentions are not tightly correlated with brain states, so free will is an obvious feature in Swinburne’s dualism. Swinburne rejects scientific causal explanations of intentional free actions but he provides a personal explanation instead. Personal explanation works well where a conscious agency is involved or we explain some action under the aspect of the intention of a conscious agency.²² Scientific explanation eliminates the conscious agency and just focuses on the happening of the actions. Such sort of explanation is unjustified for Swinburne.

We can easily provide a scientific causal explanation of an action e.g. Amir breaks the window with a hammer. In a scientific explanation, Amir’s intention to break a window is re-described by his brain state to move the muscles of his hand and grab a hammer and then break a window. Swinburne holds the view that ‘why Amir breaks the window’ is beyond the scope of scientific explanation because here conscious agency’s active and free

²¹ Richard Swinburne, “From Mental/Physical Identity to Substance Dualism” in *Persons: Human and Divine*, ed. Peter Van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 143.

²² Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev ed. (Oxford: clarendon press, 1993), 135-136.

intention to break the window with a hammer is involved. This can only be explicated by a personal explanation.

We cannot reduce or re-describe the intention of a conscious agency as Donald Davidson does. Davidson remarks, “To describe an event in terms of its cause is not to confuse the event with its cause, nor does explanation by re-description exclude causal explanation.”²³ Davidson talks about the re-description of an action that we can represent the intention of a conscious agency by causally explaining the action performed. But Swinburne does not accept the isolation of a conscious agency from its action and proposes a personal explanation. In this way, Swinburne defends free will by suggesting a personal explanation of intentional free action.

Conclusion

Compatibilism as a solution to the problem of free will does not take us in the right direction rather it leads us to more complexity. Cartesian libertarian free will has lost its grip due to the concept of the ‘physical causal closure’ suggested by philosophical naturalism. Modern neurophysiological theories also explain human free will in a deterministic manner. A comparative analysis of the doctrines of John Searle and Richard Swinburne reveals that debates upon the problem of free will are incomplete without taking into account the problem of consciousness. Compliance of the current analytic philosophers with naturalism is in fashion these days even Searle and Swinburne endorse a naturalistic approach to the problems of free will and consciousness.

²³ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 14.

But Swinburne holds naturalism when he talks about the emergence of consciousness otherwise he leaves behind naturalism afterwards. Searle's compliance with naturalism leads him to confuse the problem of free will with the problem of consciousness because the conscious gap of free will does not cohere with his causal explanation of consciousness. Swinburne, on the other hand, rejects any law-like relation between the brain states and consciousness and manages to prove that the distinct conscious agency's active and free intentions show the element of free will. According to Swinburne, mental events e.g. sensations, thoughts, desires, beliefs are passive mental events and only intentions are active events and we can causally explain all the mental events except intentions. We cannot provide a scientific explanation of intentions but only a personal explanation. Any attempt to isolate conscious agency from the intentional action is a hopeless idea and scientific explanations do this very well. Swinburne's notion of free will analyzed through the view of consciousness is justified and plausible enough to get us to the solution of the problem of free will.

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