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Random Choices

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DISCUSSION

RANDOM CHOICES

The claim that the doctrine of free will can be true only if the doctrine of determinism is false has often been attacked on the grounds that “what is random is no more free than what is caused.”¹ As A. J. Ayer argues:

Either it is an accident that I choose to act as I do or it is not. If it is an accident, then it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise; and if it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise, it is surely irrational to hold me morally responsible for choosing as I did. But if it is not an accident that I choose to do one thing rather than another, then presumably there is some causal explanation of my choice; and in that case we are led back to determinism.²

I wish to call attention to a common phenomenon that has not often been the subject of philosophical concern, but which upon examination suggests that a random act, though perhaps uncaused, need be neither accidental nor irresponsible. There is, of course, more to a free act than the absence of causation, but if we at least recognize the nature of random choices, we might give further consideration to what may be other uncaused, but reasoned, actions.

All of us at various times have been asked to make a conscious choice from among alternatives that are exactly equal in their degree of attractiveness or unattractiveness. “Pick a card.” “Choose a number from 1 to 10.” “Park your car in any of the available spaces.” “Have a cupcake.” No one normally has any difficulty making such a random choice. We make our decision, and that’s that. But how do we manage to perform this seemingly simple task? How do we decide which card to pick or which number to choose?

At a party you are offered a bowl of apples. You reach out, choose one, take it in your hand, and eat it. The following conversation ensues:

Host: “Why did you choose that one?”

Guest: “I just picked one, any one. You said, “Take one.” So I did.”

Host: “But why did you take that one? You could have taken any of the others. Don’t they look as good? What led you to make that particular choice?”

Guest: “I don’t know. I just chose.”

¹ A. C. MacIntyre, “Determinism,” *Mind*, LXVI, No. 261 (January, 1957), p. 30.

² A. J. Ayer, *Philosophical Essays* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1963), p. 275.

At the store you buy one box of corn flakes rather than another, although other boxes of corn flakes appear equally wholesome. In the park you sit on one bench rather than another, although others would serve equally well. While writing a philosophical paper you choose 'Jones' as an example of a proper name, although 'Smith' would be equally appropriate. None of these decisions causes you any anguish. In fact, they are all made with ease.

Can such random choices be explained? Of course, we can explain a person's deciding to spend his money on corn flakes rather than prunes, although some philosophers would say such an explanation must be ultimately causal in nature, while others would say the appropriate explanation would irreducibly be in terms of the agent's motives, purposes, or intentions. But can we explain a person's deciding to buy one particular box of corn flakes rather than another? To assert that we can seems no more than an expression of faith, for no evidence whatever supports the assertion.

On the one hand, to suppose that each time I am asked to choose a number there is a causal explanation of why I picked one number rather than another indicates one's faith in the universal scope of explanation, but it is to extrapolate wildly beyond available empirical data. On the other hand, to assume that there must be an explanation of my specific choice in terms of my purposes or reasons is to commit oneself to the view that if an individual has no reason to prefer one choice to another, then he cannot choose at all. But, in fact, we have no trouble making a random choice even in circumstances in which we would find it impossible, before or after the fact, to think of any reason to prefer one of the alternatives to another. Indeed, if we had to postpone making an apparently random choice until we could think of a reason to prefer one alternative to another, our lives would come to a virtual standstill. Should I listen to this record or that one? Should I open this letter or that letter first? Should I walk this way or that?³ Without the ability to make random choices we would be caught in a nightmare of indecision.

The fact is that we do possess the ability to make random choices. We are not condemned to the fate of Buridan's Ass, who died while, equally pressed by hunger and thirst, he stood motionless midway between a bundle of hay and a pail of water. What we would do in such a situation is to make a random choice. Faced with equally

³ See William James' intriguing discussion of his choice whether to walk home by Divinity Avenue or Oxford Street in "The Dilemma of Determinism," *Essays on Faith and Morals* (Cleveland, The World Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 155-157.

attractive or unattractive alternatives, we are not bludgeoned into inactivity by some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. We simply choose. And it would surely be misleading to refer to such a random choice as either accidental or irresponsible.

It is thus not correct to equate, as, for example, P. H. Nowell-Smith does, a random occurrence with "a *lusus naturae*, an Act of God, or a miracle."⁴ Nowell-Smith goes on to deny that a random occurrence would be an action at all. But, as we have seen, a random choice is an action, and in fact, it is a sort of action that each of us has performed on numerous occasions. Indeed, not only are random choices actions, they appear to be good candidates, although not the only ones, for membership in that class of actions we ordinarily designate as 'free.'

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⁴ P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1954), p. 282.