



The Free Will Scandal

JOHN SEARLE says it is a scandal that philosophers have not made more progress on the problem of free will.

“The persistence of the free will problem in philosophy seems to me something of a **scandal**. After all these centuries of writing about free will, it does not seem to me that we have made very much progress.”¹

Two centuries ago, IMMANUEL KANT called it a scandal that academic philosophers were so out of touch with the common sense of the masses when they doubted the existence of the external world.² DAVID HUME had criticized the Theory of Ideas of his fellow British empiricists JOHN LOCKE and GEORGE BERKELEY. If they are right that knowledge is limited to perceptions of sense data, we cannot “know” anything about external objects, even our own bodies. Kant’s main change in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was an attempted refutation of this idealism. He thought he had a proof of the existence of the external world. Kant thought it a scandal in philosophy that we must accept the existence of things outside of ourselves merely as a belief, with no proof.

“However innocent idealism may be considered with respect to the essential purposes of metaphysics (without being so in reality), it remains a **scandal** to philosophy, and to human reason in general, that we should have to accept the existence of things outside us (from which after all we derive the whole material for our knowledge, even for that of our inner sense) merely on trust, and have no satisfactory proof with which to counter any opponent who chooses to doubt it.”³

Kant said “speculative reason” must be investigated

“to prevent the scandal which metaphysical controversies are sure, sooner or later, to cause even to the masses.”⁴

1 Searle (2007) p. 37

2 Kant (1962) p. 11

3 Kant (1962) p. 12

4 Kant (1962) p. 11



MARTIN HEIDEGGER commented on Kant's scandal:

The “scandal of philosophy” is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again.*⁵

BERTRAND RUSSELL said this was an unsatisfactory state,

“Philosophy, from the earliest times, has made greater claims, and achieved fewer results, than any other branch of learning.”⁶

This knowledge scandal is closely related to the free will scandal, in that so many philosophers and scientists have thought that they could *prove* that free will, because of several imagined determinisms, does not exist. Free will is an illusion, they say.

MORITZ SCHLICK calls this scandal a “pseudo-problem,”

“this pseudo-problem has long since been settled by the efforts of certain sensible persons; and, above all... — with exceptional clarity by Hume. Hence it is really one of the greatest scandals of philosophy that again and again so much paper and printer's ink is devoted to this matter... I shall, of course, say only what others have already said better; consoling myself with the thought that in this way alone can anything be done to put an end at last to that scandal.”⁷

This most common proof that free will cannot exist is based on the two-part **standard argument** against free will, which we examine in Chapter 4.

The Standard Argument *Against* Free Will

- 1) If our actions are determined, we are not free.
- 2) If our actions are directly caused by chance, they are simply random, and we cannot be responsible for them.

Despite more than twenty-three centuries of philosophizing, I believe that the main reason that no progress has been made is

⁵ Heidegger (1962) p. 249.

⁶ Russell (196) p. 11.

⁷ Schlick (2008) Chapter VII, “The Pseudo-Problem of Freedom of the Will”



that most modern thinkers have not moved significantly beyond the second part, the problem of reconciling **indeterminism** and **free will**. They assume that choosing from random **alternative possibilities** makes the choice itself random. This is the mistaken idea that “free” actions are caused directly by a random event.

A Moral Scandal?

But there is a deeper and darker reason that failure to provide a plausible explanation for free will has become a scandal.

Ever since Hume, libertarian philosophers have expressed concerns that determinism implies a lack of moral responsibility and might, like a form of fatalism, even encourage irresponsibility.

In the past few decades, the “logical” standard argument against free will has been used by some philosophers - the hard determinists, illusionists, and impossibilists - to deny the existence of **moral responsibility**.

Others have reacted to these developments with an ancient concern - that people who are told they have no free will may behave less responsibly. Some recent psychological studies have actually confirmed such a laxity in moral behavior.⁸

Despite this concern, several philosophers and psychologists have openly called for our legal and judicial systems to recognize that advances in neuroscience ultimately will show that all human action is causally pre-determined, and that no one should be held morally responsible for their crimes.

One would hope that philosophers who are skeptical about the truth of modern physics, and claim to be agnostic about the truth of determinism or indeterminism, would be more circumspect and cautious about recommending drastic and unjustifiable changes in social policies based on little or no empirical evidence.

Beyond Searle’s scandal of little progress made, it is this moral scandal that I hope this book may help to resolve, in part by simply making some modest progress after all this time.

8 Vohs and Schooler (2008)

