

Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self”

The Metaphysical Problem of Freedom:

The conflict between the following ideas:

- 1) Human beings are responsible agents.
- 2) The deterministic view of action, i. e., that every event that is involved in an act is caused by some other event.
- 3) Some of the events that are essential to the act are not caused at all.

Solving the problem requires making important assumptions about the self or agent.

Assume that the one who performed the action (a shooting) was responsible for what she did.

Then it follows that:

- What was to happen at the time of the shooting was something that was entirely up to the agent. There was a moment at which (a) she could have fired the shot and (b) she could have refrained from firing it. Therefore, even though she did fire, she could have done something else instead.
- In general, if someone is responsible for an event or state of affairs, then that event or state of affairs was brought about by some act of hers and the act was something that was in her power to perform or not perform.

Therefore, the act could not have been caused or determined by any event that was not itself within her power either to bring about or not

bring about (e.g. by a second agent who forced her hand upon the trigger or who hypnotized the first agent and compelled her by some suggestion to pull the trigger.)

Suppose one speaks of the first agent's desires or beliefs as (internally) causing her to do what she did. If so, then the person herself was unable to do anything other than just what it was that she did do. This situation is no different from that in which the agent is externally caused to act as she does. If the cause of an agent's action is some state or event for which the agent is not responsible, then the agent is not responsible for "his" action.

The agent's action is then something that had to occur in just the same way that a certain poorly constructed dam had to break when a flood occurred and nothing else could have happened in its place.

If the agent is responsible for the beliefs and desires she happens to have, then perhaps she is responsible for the things that they lead her to. If she is responsible for her beliefs and desires, then there was a time when it was within her power either to acquire them or not to acquire them and this lead back to the general point.

There is at least one way in which some philosophers have argued that determinism is consistent with human responsibility. It is to argue as follows:

(a) "He could have done otherwise"

means

(b) "If he had chosen to do otherwise, then he would have done otherwise."

So, even if all of an agent's actions were causally determined, the agent would still be such that, if he had chosen otherwise, then he would have done otherwise.

Even though the murderer's seeing the victim together with his having certain beliefs and desires caused him to shoot the victim, he was such that, had he chosen not to fire, he would not have fired. Just as the dam would not have broken, had there been no flood or similar pressure.

Statement (b) is consistent with determinism and statement (b) means the same thing as statement (a). Therefore, (a) is consistent with determinism. Determinism and moral responsibility are compatible.

The trouble with the argument is in the claim that (a) and (b) have the same meaning.

It can be shown that (b) could be true when (a) is false. If so, then they could not have the same meaning and this argument for the compatibility of determinism and human responsibility fails.

Suppose that:

Jones would have done otherwise only if he had chosen to do otherwise, and

Jones could not have chosen to do otherwise

Then, it would make no difference if Jones is also such that, if he had chosen not to shoot, he would not have shot. In these circumstances, Jones could not have done anything other than what he did. From (b), we cannot infer "He could have done otherwise" unless we can also assert (c) "He could have chosen to do otherwise"

If we reject (c) then, even if we are justified in asserting (b), we are not justified in asserting (a).

Suppose the agent could have done otherwise. Then it follows that

- If he had undertaken to do otherwise then he would have done otherwise and
- There was no causal condition sufficient for his not thus undertaking to do otherwise.
- Given the latter consequences, ascribing responsibility conflicts with a deterministic view of human action.

It is evident of itself that ascription of responsibility conflicts with the view that some event essential to the action is not caused at all. We cannot be responsible for an event if it was a purely fortuitous happening.

What other possibility remains besides determinism and the idea that our actions have no cause whatever?

This: At least one of the events involved in the action is not caused by any other events, but is caused only by the agent.

Then, one need not say that the action is uncaused even though we say that it is not caused by any other events.

For inanimate natural objects, causation is a relation between events or states of affairs.

If the above suggestion is correct, then some events are not caused by other events, but by agents.

Objection 1:

There is no way of explaining what an agent's causing an event consists of if the event is not caused by any other event, not even a change in the agent's own state.

Reply: There is indeed no way of saying what an agent's causing an event to happen consists of. But this would be a problem only if the concept of an agent's causing something to happen were muddled or obscure. However, many philosophers have argued that causation of events by agents is more clear than causation of events by other events and that it is only because we understand what it is for an agent to cause an event that we can understand the concept of event causation at all.

Objection 2:

Suppose Jones makes event A happen. In addition to A, then, there is also the event which is Jones' making A happen. Either that event is caused by some other event or it is not caused at all or it is caused by the agent. If it is caused either by another event or not caused at all, then the agent is not responsible for it. If this second event is caused by the agent then it must be said that the agent makes it happen that he makes that thing happen. But this is absurd. We do not ordinarily cause ourselves to do the things that we do.

Reply: an agent's making event X happen is quite different from an agent's making something happen for the purpose of making some other event happen. An agent's ordinary actions are not such that it is necessary for him to do other things for the purpose of causing himself to perform them. That Jones makes X happen does not imply that Jones makes anything happen for the purpose of making X happen