

# Introduction

The philosophical controversy about free will and determinism is perennial. Like many perennial controversies, this one involves a tangle of distinct but closely related issues. Thus, the controversy is formulated in different ways by different philosophers. At different times in the history of thought the focus of attention has been on different issues.

The issue with which we are concerned in this work emerged most clearly in early modern philosophy. Jewish and Christian religious beliefs about man and moral obligation had shaped an interpretation of the common human experience of making choices. Within the theistic perspective, it seemed evident that whenever a person makes a choice he could equally well choose an alternative other than the one he does. Many early modern philosophers, such as Hobbes and Spinoza, replaced traditional theism with a naturalistic conception of the world and of man. This naturalistic conception became part of the worldview of science and gained increasing plausibility from the progress and fruitfulness of modern science. Within the naturalistic perspective, it seems evident that whenever anything happens, however contingent it might be, what does happen is the only possible outcome of conditions given prior to the event. The state of the world at a given time and the way the world works settles whatever is going to happen in the world at any later time.

As soon as the naturalistic view was applied to human choice the incompatibility between the modern view and the traditional one became evident. Either a person who chooses can equally well choose another alternative, or the alternative he is going to choose is settled prior to his very act of choosing. Philosophers like Hobbes faced this issue squarely and argued for the position—one unpopular at the time—that human choices are no exception to the determinacy of nature.

The heretical thesis of Hobbes is the orthodox position today. So much is this the case that most of the contemporary literature relevant to freedom and determinism is concerned with issues other than that on which Hobbes and his contemporaries concentrated their attention. However, we are as dissatisfied with the position prevalent today as Hobbes and others were with the position prevalent in their day. Thus, in this work we attempt to establish a thesis which few contemporary philosophers regard as defensible: that human persons can make free choices—choices such that only the act of choosing itself settles which alternative a person will choose.

“Freedom” has many other senses, but in this work we are not concerned except incidentally with questions about freedom in these other senses. The question whether someone can make a free choice has implications for morality and law, but in this work we are concerned only incidentally with such implications. Not only philosophers, but also scientists and theologians, have a stake in the controversy over free will and determinism. But in this work we not only concentrate on a single issue—whether someone can make a free choice—but we limit ourselves to philosophic methods of dealing with the issue. Even within the ambit of philosophical inquiry, we almost wholly avoid problems in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of religion. The present work belongs, then, in the field of philosophy of mind or philosophy of action.

In our attempt to show that someone can make a free choice, we use self-referential argumentation. We argue that any affirmation of the thesis that no one can make a free choice is self-refuting. Either the proposition that no one can make a free choice is falsified by any rational affirmation of it, or any attempt to rationally affirm it is self-defeating. The method of the argument we develop is called “self-referential” because the argument works by showing the implications of the *reference* which one who affirms that no one can make a free choice must make *to his own act* of affirming his position.

The following summary will indicate in greater detail what we are attempting in this work.

In chapter one we clarify the controversy. This clarification has two aspects. On the one hand, we define the issue with which we are dealing. There need be nothing tendentious or question-begging in defining an issue; we do not suppose that we settle any substantive question by the way we define the issue. We merely mark out the ground we claim and will defend; such a claim and defense in no way prejudices anyone else’s claim to some other ground. On the other hand, we clarify the issue by stating certain facts. Some of these concern meanings of “free,” some concern the experience of choice, some concern judgments which people sometimes make on the basis of this experience. None of these facts, so far as we can see, need be denied by any proponent of the thesis contradictory to that which we defend.

In chapter two we examine typical arguments proposed by previous thinkers for the position we defend. Most often arguments have been proposed on the basis of a person's sense of freedom and on the basis of moral responsibility. We find these and other arguments question-begging. Because of our own use of self-referential argumentation, we pay special attention to previous attempts to use this method to refute the thesis that no one can make a free choice. We initially thought that some of these attempts were sound, but critical examination of them forced us to the conclusion that they too are question-begging. However, we believe that self-referential argumentation is not inherently question-begging. We learned much from those who preceded us in trying to use this method.

In chapter three we examine typical arguments proposed by contemporary philosophers and earlier thinkers for the thesis that no one can make a free choice. Many philosophers who propose such arguments have called themselves or have been called "determinists." However, we are interested in all attempts to establish the thesis contradictory to our own, whether or not these attempts involve a general deterministic thesis. Like the arguments we examine in chapter two, those we criticize in chapter three seem to lack cogency. Most of them beg the question; often they do so blatantly. Those which do not beg the question are very weak.

In view of the state of the controversy revealed by our examination of arguments for both sides, we do not think there is any strong presumption, antecedent to our own effort, in favor of either side. Neither side makes a strong case for its position. The contemporary presumption in favor of the thesis that no one can make a free choice is a contingent cultural fact which has no more inherent rational force than did the presumption in favor of our position which prevailed in the time of Hobbes and Spinoza.

Today the most common approach to many of the tangled issues in the controversy over free will and determinism is some sort of attempt to reconcile human freedom with a deterministic worldview. Such attempts are often called "compatibilism." In chapter four we examine several versions of compatibilism. To some extent, compatibilists show that certain apparent issues in the controversy are not real issues. In other words, there are aspects of the complex controversy which require analytic dissolution rather than argumentative resolution. But to some extent compatibilists themselves confuse issues, and the confusion generated by their efforts must itself be dissolved. We try to show that when the fog clears the issue whether or not someone can make a free choice stands on the philosophical scene as mountainous and as solid as ever. An important reason for the irrelevance of compatibilism to the issue with which we are concerned is that compatibilism is mainly concerned with moral and legal responsibility, once it has been assumed that free choice is excluded. We are challenging the assumptions common to compatibilists and to those

who maintain without compatibilist qualifications the thesis that no one can make a free choice.

In chapter five we present the method of self-referential argumentation which we use in our attempt to settle the issue whether someone can make a free choice. Although there has been some attention to problems of self-reference in recent years, this topic has been treated in scattered works on other matters. Thus, we give a rather detailed account of the logic of self-reference and of the method of self-referential argumentation. We hope this exposition of our method will forestall objections involving common mistakes and misunderstandings of self-reference and of arguments based on it. In chapter five we also provide some other preliminary clarifications essential to our argument. These concern the affirmation of the thesis that no one can make a free choice—the thesis we try in chapter six to show to be self-refuting. Proponents of this thesis must affirm it if they are to be distinguishable from proponents of our own position. In affirming this thesis, its proponents must assume what we call “rationality norms.” A clarification of these norms in the final section of chapter five completes the background for our argument.

Before summarizing the argument we lay out in chapter six, we introduce the following abbreviations which we use throughout the book. “*Sfc*” will name the proposition that someone can make a free choice. “*Nfc*” will name the proposition that no one can make a free choice. These two propositions articulate states of affairs incompatible with each other. According to *Sfc*, there is nothing about the world which precludes a human capacity to make free choices, and at least some persons have this capacity. According to *Nfc*, there is something about the world—about the act of choosing, about human nature, about the natural world, or about the nature of things—which precludes a human capacity to make free choices. A proponent of *Sfc* is anyone who affirms *Sfc*, anyone who thinks the world and human persons to be such that *Sfc* is true or more reasonable to think true than its contradictory. We use “*PSfc*” to name the proponent of *Sfc*. Similarly, we use “*PNfc*” to name the proponent of *Nfc*—that is, anyone who affirms *Nfc*, anyone who thinks the world and human persons to be such that *Nfc* is true or more reasonable to think true than its contradictory. We need a name for the precise issue with which we are concerned, both to make it easy to refer to this controversy and to make it clear that the issue we are considering is distinct from all of the other issues involved in the controversy over free will and determinism. We use “*Sfc/Nfc*” to name the *controversy* between those who hold that someone can make a free choice and those who hold that no one can make a free choice.

Thus, “*Sfc*” and “*Nfc*” name the contradictory propositions which are the positions at issue; “*PSfc*” and “*PNfc*” name the persons, real or imaginary, who defend the respective positions; and “*Sfc/Nfc*” names the controversy over the precise issue with which we are concerned in this work.

We begin our argument in chapter six after having made clear in previous

parts of the book that *Nfc* is neither an evident matter of fact nor a logical truth. The *PNfc* cannot rationally affirm his position without offering some grounds for it. He has opponents who are not merely ignorant of facts nor merely without insight into logical necessities. The considerations which the *PNfc* adduces in favor of his position must be relevant to the issue and must have argumentative force. The *PNfc*, then, must assume some norms by appeal to which he can, if challenged, show the relevance and the argumentative force of the grounds he adduces for the position he defends. For example, the *PNfc* might suggest his thesis as a hypothesis which *should be accepted* because *Nfc* is simpler than *Sfc*. The norm in this case is some sort of simplicity rule. Again, the *PNfc* might suggest that *Sfc ought to be rejected* because the notion of free choice is somehow unintelligible. The norm in this case is some sort of principle that whatever is real must be intelligible.

Norms demanding simplicity in explanation and intelligibility in being are not easy to classify. They are neither factual descriptions nor formal truths. Their normativity or prescriptive force is odd. They do not have the normativity of a standard of psychological normality; one cannot simply write off one's philosophical opponents as mentally ill. They do not have the normativity of technical rules which make clear what will be required to achieve some optional goal; one cannot expect one's philosophical opponents to accept the same optional goals one accepts oneself. They do not have the normativity of certain rules of logic—those which cannot be violated without falling into incoherence; one who refuses to accept a conclusion drawn in accord with a rule of simplicity or some version of a principle of intelligibility does not fall into incoherence, even if he is unreasonable. They do not have the normativity of esthetic standards; one cannot refute one's philosophical opponents by showing that they have bad taste.

A *PNfc* maintains that his position is more reasonable unconditionally, and that everyone *ought* to be reasonable enough to accept *Nfc*. Yet he cannot maintain that *Sfc* is impossible, for it is a coherent possibility. Thus the *PNfc*'s affirming of his position depends upon some prescription which directs persons interested in the issue to accept one of two coherent possibilities and which directs with unconditional normative force. Such a prescription presupposes that persons to whom it is given *can* choose the option which is prescribed although some one *might not* choose it. In other words, the norms to which the *PNfc* must at least implicitly appeal when he tries to show that one *ought* to accept his position have no force unless one *can* accept it although one *need not* accept it. Thus, the normativity the *PNfc* needs to justify his own position and to exclude *Sfc* as less reasonable presupposes that some human persons have a capacity to choose freely, for no one can accept the *PNfc*'s demand that he be reasonable—a demand which is unconditional and yet can be rejected without logical absurdity—unless he can make a free choice.

Since a *PNfc*'s very affirmation of his own position implies the demand that

one be able to make a free choice, a *PNfc* cannot affirm his position without either falsifying it or asking that an impossible demand be met. If *Sfc* is true and one can meet the *PNfc*'s demand, then *Nfc* is false, and the *PNfc*'s position is falsified by the demand implicit in the very act of affirming it. If *Sfc* is false and one cannot meet the *PNfc*'s demand, then the *PNfc*'s act of affirming his position is pointless, for it is pointless to attempt what cannot succeed unless an impossible demand be met.

Since any affirmation of *Nfc* must be either false or pointless, there is in principle no way to exclude *Sfc*. If *Nfc* is false, then its contradictory is true. If any attempt to affirm *Nfc* is pointless, then no one can rationally affirm anything against *Sfc*. Yet there remains the common experience of choice, which grounds a judgment many people make: that they do choose freely. Furthermore, the normativity required to make rational affirmations is a fact, and this fact—unless it is illusory—implies *Sfc*. In this situation, *Sfc* must be affirmed to be true. To refuse to affirm it would be to dismiss the data which support it, although it is in principle impossible to have any rational ground for affirming *Nfc* and dismissing these data.

The preceding summary of this work, especially of its central argument, makes clear the main thing we are trying to accomplish. We are attempting to settle *Sfc/Nfc*, which we consider to be the core issue in one of the most interesting and important perennial philosophical controversies. A reader might wonder why we think we have a chance of success in so ambitious an attempt, when we think so many others have failed. We have several reasons for confidence.

In the first place, we focus on one well-defined issue. We do not try to deal with all the interesting, related questions; we avoid defending more ground than we must. The position we defend, *Sfc*, is modest compared with the position the *PNfc* defends. To maintain *Nfc* is to assume the burden of defending a universal negative proposition excluding in principle a certain capacity, whereas to maintain *Sfc* is only to assume the burden of defending a particular affirmative proposition that a certain capacity exists in some person or other. *Sfc* is considerably less ambitious philosophically than *Nfc*.

In the second place, there is by now a very extensive literature on the issue in which we are interested. Much of this literature has helped to clarify important points. We think that J. L. Austin's work on *ifs* and *cans*, J. R. Lucas's recent book on free will, certain articles of James N. Jordan relevant to free choice and self-reference, and other similar results of work done in the analytic tradition—liberally conceived—make important contributions to the solution of the controversy.

The vast body of work relevant to free choice is so extensive that serious work in this area would have been blocked had there not also been available to us certain comprehensive studies. Mortimer Adler's *Idea of Freedom*, for

example, has gathered together and organized materials from the broader controversy. His approach to the material has made it easy to define a precise issue, and has clarified what arguments are relevant to which issues. His work in itself shows the value of the method he used. Our use of his work, we think, shows that Adler's approach also can be fruitful in the way he originally hoped it might be.

In the third place, we are using in the present work the method of self-referential argument. Philosophical controversies consist, we think, largely of question-begging arguments. One escape from question-begging arguments is to accept certain assumptions as unquestionable and to try to develop a science of metaphysics. Another escape is to stay as close as possible to empirical data and to investigate fields which have not yet been preempted by some recognized science. Still another escape is to restrict oneself to analysis and clarification, with the hope of dissolving some insoluble problems.

We regard our own approach as a form of analytic philosophy. But we do think that conclusive argumentation is possible in philosophy. The trick is to find and clarify methods of argumentation which are properly philosophical. We think self-referential argumentation is one such method, and this project is a purposeful attempt to articulate and use this method. Thus, we believe we have a tool which most of our predecessors did not have or did not know precisely how to use.

Rather than talk about the potentiality of self-referential argumentation for resolving important philosophical controversies, in this project we have attempted to discover the power of this method by experiment. The work best shows what the tool can do. However, we did not choose *Sfc/Nfc* as a controversy in which to experiment with self-referential argumentation merely to demonstrate the power of the method. We are also interested in the issue itself. Few other philosophical controversies seem to us so worthy of the effort which must be expended in an attempt to resolve them.

Our interest in *Sfc/Nfc* partly arises out of the importance of the issue to ethics. Since ethics seeks to answer questions about the moral quality of human actions, and since free choice—if it obtains—is a property of certain human acts which conditions all their other properties, one's ethical theory will be distorted if one's position on *Sfc/Nfc* is mistaken. We realize that many hold otherwise: that the truth about free choice makes little or no difference to ethics. We disagree, although we do not argue this point here.

Another motive for our interest in *Sfc/Nfc* is theological and cultural. Judaism and Christianity view the human person as a responsible agent, made in the image of God, capable of making a free choice to accept or to reject God's self-revelation. If *Nfc* is true, this theistic view of the human person makes no sense. Likewise, we believe, the contemporary concern for the autonomy and dignity of the person makes no sense unless *Sfc* is true.