

Kill Will

For a Libertarian Anomalous Monism

Abstract. Free will, it is often claimed, is killed by a classical dilemma : Determinism or Randomness, free will being incompatible with either horn. This dilemma rests on the supposed tie between explaining and necessity : randomness, and therefore inexplicability, would then be the sole alternative to determinism. I contest this tie : explaining a volition only demands that one provides a motivating reason, not a sufficient – i.e. necessitating – reason for the volition. Once the tie between explaining and inserting in a deterministic chain is severed, the dilemma is abolished : the volition is by no means random, for an explanation is provided ; nonetheless, it is not deterministically enchained either, whenever is motivated by reasons that are not sufficient grounds in respect of it. One can still call in question the nature of explanations by motivating reasons ; this, however, only could be done by means of independent arguments. The burden of the proof, then, has changed place. A suitable version of anomalous monism is proposed in order to allow non-random indeterminism to have ontological – and not merely epistemological – significance.

Note. In the following ‘randomness’ will denote the property of events of being random, i.e. lacking any ground and therefore any possibility to be explained howsoever, while ‘Randomness’ shall designate the thesis that volitions are events of this kind. We shall contrast Randomness with Determinism, conceived of as the thesis that volitions are events having sufficient grounds (given some previous events, a certain volition couldn’t but be taken – and that no volition could be taken without a grounding of that kind) ; ‘determinism’ is a thesis for events of any kind stating either that all events have a sufficient ground (full-blown d.) or that at least some lines of events do (moderate d.). So ‘Indeterminism’ will designate the negation of Determinism, and ‘indeterminism’ the negation of full-blown determinism.

Free will, it has been maintained, is killed by a dilemma neatly expressed by A. J. Ayer : for volitions, as for everything else, there are only two possible ways to be brought about, either by causation by something else, with which they are, then, deterministically enchained ; or by chance, i.e. by the ‘spontaneous’ – in fact random – production of a volition. No matter whether one thinks that the latter is a genuine possibility or not, the fact remains that, in principle, determinism has no other alternative than that. So : Determinism or Randomness – while free will is incompatible with either horn.

Determinism as to volitions, as well as the general thesis of determinism, is conceived of, here, as springing directly from the very notion of grounding : providing sufficient grounds for something would be as necessary for explaining it as sufficient for establishing its deterministic enchaining. Be determinism full-blown, i.e. embracing the whole universe, or moderate, i.e. relative to some lines of events in the universe ; be this as it may be, explaining an event is equated with construing it as a ring in a deterministic chain. Explanation is therefore claimed to be strictly tied to determinism : to drop the latter would make us lose the former. No indeterminism could be less than the admission of random events ; such an admission, however, is an abdication from understanding.

One can still wonder whether moderate determinism is a coherent position : is the admission of events having sufficient grounds compatible with the admission of events lacking sufficient grounds ? Can determinism be less than full-blown ? We shall not touch this issue, however : since our only concern are volitions, we shall ignore all those doubts and contrast Determinism, as a universal thesis about acts of will, and Randomness, stating that (at least some) volitions do lack sufficient grounds *and are therefore simply random, i.e. inexplicable*. However, the dilemma Determinism or Randomness (henceforth D/R), i.e. the alleged killing-blow purported to eliminate free will, far from consisting in the mere opposition of contradictory theses, supposes one assumption, namely that the only way to

explain a volition is to provide a sufficient ground for it. And therefore to construe it as something being necessitated in its happening.

My argument is as a priori as is the dilemma I am trying to refute ; i.e. is simply a priori. Nowadays one can easily feel bored with a priori arguments in philosophy of mind, most of all because of the luxurious flowering of mental experiments they often stimulate, which slippery slide from high sophisticatedness into heavy scholasticism. Not daring to defy the danger of such a fall, I do not propose any mental experiment ; my line of argument is nonetheless a priori, for my primary intent is to displace the burden of the proof back on the tenant of D/R. However, I am not content with merely *claiming* the existence of a third possibility neglected by him, namely of an indeterministic way to explain (vs. Randomness) volitions. In a somehow Kantian vein, I do not merely mention the *formal* possibility of a third way for volitions to be brought about : I also try to justify the *real* possibility of motivational explanations – and, thereby, of indeterministic motivated volitions. I try to perform such a Kantian task by using – and also modifying for use – Davidsonian tools.

The grounding relation between events that is appealed to is one which does require covering laws (that's Davidson's lesson), but *is not ontologically tied* with such a nomic explanation ; in other words, it does not warrant any one-sided ontological consequences one may be tempted to draw from nomic explanations. So, volition is free – is not necessitated – even though it is needed that the event described as a volition can be also described otherwise and explained nomologically. In my view, nomic necessity is itself a property of descriptions, and not barely of the event which bears different descriptions. In this version of anomalous monism, motivational explanations are allowed to have not merely epistemological legitimacy, but also ontological significance. For now ontological significance is equally distributed over different descriptions. The least involvement of ontology in the event – the lightest ontological burden for events – for the most ontological significance of its descriptions. Metaphysical neutrality of events for ontological commitment of each description.

The truth of a motivational explanation, far from leaving undecided the nature of the event, *does* 'decide', or rather imply, how it took place : the event *is* neither deterministic nor random (nor free) ; the event itself – and not its explanation! – is neutral. This neutrality distinguishes my version of anomalous monism from – *si parva licet* – the original, i.e. Davidson's : the latter implies causal determinism at the level of nude events and therefore gives birth to a (strongly) compatibilist theory of freedom ; while my extensional neutralism, even though it allows for motivational explanations to be matched by causal ones, warrants (at most) for something that only by courtesy may be called compatibilism.

If one construes freedom as a property of volitions-so-described, one tied up with the truth of (one at least) motivational explanation, then, when such an explanation is provided, there is no room for any residual randomness, as few as for nomic necessitation, for these simply do not apply to events as such. An explained volition is not random, and this eliminates randomness at a level as deep as a metaphysician may wish, provided he conceives of it and all the interrelated properties in the way I have suggested.

So, the point of my refutation of D/R is not merely epistemological, but as metaphysical as is the one of D/R itself. It's matter of *being free under some description* (and perhaps of being nomically necessitated under some other, respectively). Therefore, there is no metaphysical remainder (be it randomness or nomic necessitation) which would lie deep down, at the level of the event underlying different descriptions ; once metaphysics has surfaced onto descriptions, it penetrates that surface on deep.