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Book Review: Living Without Free Will

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BOOK REVIEWS

Living without Free Will by Derk Pereboom. Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. Xxiii and 231. \$54.95.

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Living without Free Will is an expansion of “Determinism *al Dente*” (*Nous*, vol. 29, 1995, pp. 21-45). Pereboom provides a sustained defense of hard incompatibilism—the position that freedom of the sort required for moral responsibility is incompatible with determinism and any type of indeterminism that is likely to be present in our world.¹ He argues that current scientific evidence gives us good reason to believe that factors beyond our control produce all of our actions, and therefore we are not morally responsible for anything. Living without free will is not as bad as it may seem; we may have to give up some significant beliefs about ourselves, but morality and human values remain largely intact. Our coming to understand the limitations of our capacities and the consequences of these limitations will bring about a net benefit. Consequently, our philosophical reflections need not lead us to recommend practicing a form of self-deception for the greater good of humanity. Pereboom’s new book is well informed, creative, and fills a gap in writings on freedom and moral responsibility. It will give those interested in the topic much food for thought.

Pereboom displays insight into the many nuances of recent discussions of conditions of moral responsibility (Chapter One). He gives a modest endorsement of Frankfurt-style arguments, but claims that the core incompatibilist claim—that moral responsibility requires indeterminism at some point in an agent’s causal history—is unscathed by Frankfurtian arguments. Though he rejects an alternative possibilities requirement for incompatibilist freedom, his argument for this claim is tentative and he acknowledges that a robust principle of alternative possibilities (PAP) including an historical component may not have a counter-example (p. 25). While recognizing the weaknesses remaining even in recent Frankfurt-style examples, he follows the lead of John Martin Fischer and argues that they ultimately refute the PAP due to the lack of robustness of alternatives that may be present in these examples.² This position will leave some incompatibilists unsatisfied, since it allows for the possibility that alternatives are necessary for moral responsibility, even if an explanation of why they are necessary is undeveloped.



Pereboom criticizes two forms of libertarianism in Chapters Two and Three. First, he argues that freedom grounded in event causation is incoherent due to the force of a regress argument. He develops a version of a familiar argument against libertarianism. An agent could not be responsible for her first choice, since this would be caused by a series of events over which she had no control. But a second choice would fair no better since it is caused by a series of events that she could not have been responsible for, and so on. The only way to avoid the regress argument is through an account of agent causation, which of course has also met serious criticism. Pereboom takes the unique position that agent causation is coherent and possibly true, but empirical considerations cause significant doubt that we have free will of the type an agent-causal view requires. Though he refrains from claiming that agent-causal theorists have successfully provided a robust account of agent causation, he claims there is "logical space" for their basic claims to be true, and regress arguments fail to show that agent causation is incoherent. Pereboom argues that if we actually had agent-causal powers of the sort necessary for moral responsibility, it would require the existence of some form of strong emergentism (SE) or non-physicalism. Thus if there is moral responsibility, either SE or non-physicalism is true. Pereboom considers and rejects arguments of Jaegwon Kim in opposition to an SE of a kind that may allow for agent causation.³ He then proposes a Kim-like argument that concludes SE is unlikely, though possible, and without a tangential discussion of the vast literature on the topic, he assumes that non-physicalism is possible. Thus, moral responsibility and agent causation are possible, but the libertarian must give an explanation of how agent causation fits in with empirical data. The proponent of agent causation has three options: 1) attempt to show how agent causation may be reconciled with science by a Kantian argument that assumes determinism, 2) attempt to show how agent causation may be reconciled with science, assuming indeterminism, or 3) attempt to show that agent-causes may exist even if this implies some deviations from expected findings given our current science. The last approach assumes that agent causation may produce statistical divergences from quantum probabilities that would be expected if no agency influenced the relevant events. (It is not clear why the agent-causal theorist must commit to one of the three options.)

Pereboom's best case is made for the failure of the first option. A weaker case is made for the failure of the second option, and an unsatisfactory case is made for the failure of the third option. The structure of the argument against the third option is that of an argument from ignorance: since there is no evidence from chemistry, psychology, or biology for statistical divergences of the type agent causation would produce, we should conclude that agent causation does not exist. The most significant problem with this argument is that there is no known method for attaining data that would confirm the presence of the minor divergences required for agent causation, so it is implausible to say that a lack of positive empirical evidence disconfirms it. Our knowledge of neurophysiology and human behavior at the level required to identify statistical divergences related to quantum theory is far too limited to make a successful argument from ignorance. We simply do not yet know how to find information relevant

to agent causation. Without the resources of science to confirm or disconfirm agent causation, we must rely on our humanistic beliefs such as our belief in moral responsibility (which, we are assuming, implies the existence of agent-causation and which Pereboom admits is a nearly universal belief and hard to divest of) in order to make a judgement on the existence of agent causation. Pereboom claims that it is not acceptable to count a belief in moral responsibility as evidence for agent causes (p. 86). But when science is at a stage where no evidence can be found confirming or disconfirming an hypothesis, it is rational to appeal to beliefs outside of science in order to draw conclusions about the plausibility of the hypothesis.

Pereboom considers and rejects two common approaches to compatibilism while continuing to build a case for hard incompatibilism in Chapter Four. Extending the work of others, he presents a strong case against one approach to compatibilism, a Humean/Strawsonian strategy that concludes determinism is irrelevant to responsibility. The second approach to compatibilism considered is a "causal integrationist" account developed in various ways recently by Harry Frankfurt, John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza jointly, and R. Jay Wallace (among others). In addressing this approach, Pereboom's claims may be overstated; he argues that a progression of cases (revised from "Determinism *al Dente*") rules out compatibilism of this type. The cases are worthy of further attention, and the details will need to be examined and discussed more carefully before a fair verdict can be rendered on their success or failure.

In a chapter focusing on practical application (Chapter Six), the implications of hard incompatibilism for dealing with criminals are developed in a way that does not shy away from recommending great changes in our legal system. Retributive punishment of any kind, capital punishment, and most prison terms are ruled out by hard incompatibilism. Still, Pereboom claims that rehabilitation and preventive detention are consistent with hard determinism and could be all that is needed in a well-functioning judicial system.

What may be Pereboom's most significant challenge for the general audience of this journal comes with his reflections on hard incompatibilism, morality, and the meaning of life (Chapters Five and Seven). While equanimity in accepting the divine will is palatable for most believers (as initially described in Pereboom's "Stoic Psychotherapy in Descartes and Spinoza," *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994), pp. 592-625), a rejection of our concepts of guilt, repentance and forgiveness is more difficult to accept. Pereboom does not address how rejecting these notions may have ramifications for one's religious beliefs. Since guilt, repentance and forgiveness are crucial components of the Christian Gospel, his conclusions force a radical revision of the Christian faith—a revision unwarranted in light of the arguments presented.

Living without Free Will deserves careful attention by anyone concerned with freedom and moral responsibility. The well-developed case for hard incompatibilism and the consideration of its implications provide good reason to become familiar with this work.

NOTES

1. Pereboom assumes throughout the work that there are various types of freedom, and specifies what type of freedom he is discussing in various contexts.

2. See John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Cambridge Mass Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 140-141, "Recent Work on Moral Responsibility," *Ethics*, vol. 110 (1999), pp. 93-139, and in Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 100ff.

3. The arguments he considers are largely from Jaegwon Kim, *Supervenience and Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists by John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock, eds. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. \$26.00.

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Process theists follow Whitehead in requiring that their theology be adequate in the sense that every item of experience, including the findings of science, can be interpreted in terms of their philosophy. Free-will theists have a rather different notion of adequacy in mind: it must be adequate to Scripture as broadly interpreted within the evangelical tradition.

Although starting from such diverse perspectives, they have much in common. In particular both endorse what is known as "open theism," that God does not know future contingents, not because there is some peculiar limit on divine omniscience, but because future contingents are simply unknowable per se. God knows the actual as actual, the possible as possible, but not the possible future as if it were already in some sense determinately actual.

Traditional treatments of omniscience attempt to preserve immutability. God's knowledge could only be immutable if it were already completely determinate. Such traditional accounts assume that God must be complete and fully self-sufficient to be perfect. That is the proper meaning for a perfect being. Process theism sees God as becoming, and therefore adopts a different standard of perfection: that which, no matter how great, can always be further enriched. Open theists recognize the extent to which God is portrayed as temporally engaged, facing an indeterminate future.

David Griffin and William Hasker, whose contributions frame the volume, explore the differences. One concerns creation *ex nihilo*. This is not in the first instance the cosmological question about the beginning of the world, although process theists need to take more seriously than they have the claim by astrophysicists that time and the world began with the Big Bang. It is more the question whether God can be complete and self-sufficient alone, or whether God requires some sort of world as a source of novelty and enrichment. It also concerns divine power, as pure persuasion does not appear able to explain creation *ex nihilo*.