

Free Will and the Recognition of Pleasure, or the Role of Desire

Post by “Charles” of April 19, 2020 at 8:53 AM

I mentioned once during the recording of last week's Lucretius Today podcast session of an argument about pleasure and free will being incompatible, having never fully understood the argument until this morning when I started reading "[Thérèse the Philosopher](#)" by [Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, the Marquis d'Argens](#) (A French philosopher who shared the court of Frederick the Great with La Mettrie, who also is familiar with Epicurus and Lucretius much like La Mettrie), I'll skip a summary of the novella to explain the argument and then paste some of the text with my interpretation of both, of which [the argument against free will] I had seen before and a peer of mine espoused to me once.

The argument is presented like so:

If pleasure is an innate or intrinsic good, then all decisions are bound by our desire for pleasure

Since all decisions are bound by an external factor, often expressed as what Nature provides or has laid out for us

Then by recognizing pleasure and living a life of pleasure, we do as what Nature intends and not of our own free will

Here's the text from Boyer that explained this to me in a way that I properly understood.

"Answer, deceitful or ignorant theologians who create our crimes at your leisure, who is it that put in me the two passions that I fought, the love of God and that of the pleasure of the flesh? Is it Nature or the devil? Choose. But would you dare suggest that the one or the other is more powerful than God? If they are subordinate, then it was God who had allowed these passions to be in me, it was his work. But, you answer, God gave you reason to enlighten you. Yes, but not to choose for me. Reason had indeed made me see the two passions with which I was agitated, it is through it that I later understood that, having everything from God, I had from him those passions with all their strength. But this same reason that enlightened me did not in the least help me choose. God however, you continue, left you mistress of your will, you were free to decide for good or for evil. Pure wordplay. This will and this so-called freedom only have degrees of strength, only act, in proportion to the degrees of strength of the passions and

desires which pull at us. I seem, for example, to be free to kill myself, to throw myself out the window. Not at all: whenever the urge to live is stronger in me than death, I do not kill myself. Such a man, you say, is the master of giving to the poor, to his indulgent confessor, a hundred pounds of gold he had in his pocket. Not in the least: the desire he has to keep his money is stronger than that of obtaining a useless absolution for his sins, he will necessarily keep his money. Finally, anyone can prove to you that Reason only serves to make known to Man the degree of desire he has to do or avoid certain things, combined with the pleasure and displeasure which he must get from these. From this knowledge acquired through Reason, comes what we call will and determination. But this will and determination are also fully subject to the degree of passion or desire as a weight of four pounds necessarily determines the side of a scale that has only two pounds to raise in its other bowl.

But, will say a thinker who only sees the surface, am I not free to drink with my dinner a bottle of Burgundy or Champagne? Am I not free to choose for my walk the avenue of the Tuileries or the Feuillant terrace?

I agree that in all cases where the soul is in a perfect indifference on its choice, that the circumstances where the desire to do certain things is in equal balance, in a just equilibrium, we cannot see this lack of freedom: it is a distance in which we do not discern objects. But go a little closer to them, these objects, we soon see clearly the mechanism of our lives' action and once we know one, we know all, since Nature acts by the same principle.

Our reasoner sits down to the table, he is served oysters: this dish makes him choose Champagne. But, it will be said, he was free to choose Burgundy. I say no; it is quite true that another reason, another desire more powerful than the first could induce him to drink that wine. Well, in this case, the latter would also have forced his supposed freedom.

Our same reasoner, on entering the Tuileries, sees a pretty woman he knows on the terrace of the Feuillants: he decides to join her, unless some other reason of profit or pleasure leads him to the broad paths. But whichever side he chooses, it will always be a reason, a desire that inevitably leads him to take one side or another, that constrains his will.

To admit that Man was free, we must suppose that he decides by himself. But if he is led by the degree of passion by which Nature and feeling affect him, he is not free, a degree of more or less intense desire decides him as inevitably as a weight of four pounds takes up one of three."

Clearly Boyer was influenced by Anthropic Mechanistic Materialism by the likes of Descartes and Hobbes as *Therese the Philosopher* was published in 1748, the same year in which La Mettrie's *Man a Machine* was published, the latter would've still retained his position as a hospital administrator, for when he published *Man a Machine*, the backlash that led to him being sacked came from chaplains within the French Army, La Mettrie would be exiled until he left for Berlin after his friend secured a position from Frederick the Great, so there is perhaps a

chance Boyer was inspired.

As for the argument at surface level it seems easy to dismiss it on grounds of, borrowing the words of Boyer himself: "Pure wordplay". Though the argument is not his alone, as I have mentioned before, and it has some aspects that aren't so easy to dismiss. A huge part of theory and pleasure, and even how some of it relates to Epicurean Philosophy is the inclusion of Nature as some entity that becomes apotheosized but not deified. This happens all too often within the Enlightenment, even within our own Epicurean Texts! Nature has become the new god that lays out everything we know about reality by virtue of how we attribute everything to it as well as providing our faculties and the other means in which we both recognize and attain pleasure.

Not wanting to prematurely derail this thread the focus on there being a "Natural" limitation that can only be achieved through reasoning, that can be the topic of another thread. Instead, I'd like to go back to the original problem that I had written out in syllogistic logic.

Immediately I can't claim that the argument brings arbitrary talking points because the logic is sound and not at all formal, despite me writing it as such. We can agree that caterpillars and spiders don't exhibit free will, and they do as what nature intended them to do, but if we recognize that pleasure is what nature set out for us to pursue, then we pattern the behavior of other animals who do as nature intends.

I disagree with the argument but can't easily conquer it without coming up with some contrived notion of free will and how causality behaves. That is to say I don't believe there is fate or necessity that goes anywhere near this, but instead a still undirected yet firm universal logic at play.

I'd love to hear some discussion.

Post by "Joshua" of April 21, 2020 at 1:15 PM

It *has* become rather fashionable among intellectuals to deny free will, hasn't it? Like Charles, I have a friend or two in that camp. Let me rephrase the syllogism in a way that balances the terms;

P1. Pleasure is the end (telos) in nature toward which human life is observed to incline.

P2. If there is an end observed in nature, then the decision to pursue that end is predetermined.

C. Therefore, the decision to pursue pleasure is predetermined.

It is a rather thorny question. Does the syllogism as I have expressed it assume (in premise 2) what it is asked to prove (in the conclusion)? In other words, does the second clause in premise 2 follow necessarily from the first clause? Could I not, for example, choose to pursue an unnatural end? Instead of a choice between pleasure and displeasure, could I choose a third way in which pleasure doesn't factor? Not because I expected a greater pleasure from this third way, but just for some other reason?

Another way of putting it; suppose I granted that pleasure as the telos provided a *rationale* for my decision; am I also granting, *ipso facto*, that my decision is predetermined? I'm not so sure.

To put it simply, I suspect that our imaginary interlocutor is begging the question.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 21, 2020 at 4:59 PM

Intuitively (since my skills as a logician are nonexistent) we know that this is false by observing any Stoic or Platonist, among others. Observing myself, having been reared in the yoke of the Platonic worldview, I find it quite challenging to re-orient myself to navigating life through pleasure. This doesn't necessarily mean that I'm exercising free will, but it would seem that one pursuing virtue, duty or the like would disprove the idea that pursuing pleasure is predetermined.

Post by “Charles” of April 22, 2020 at 7:51 AM

Good point Godfrey but that sort of brings us towards the arguments of those who say that free will does indeed exist, but not in the pursuance of pleasure. According to them, free will can only be exercised when you **will** yourself out of desire, say to uphold duty or maintain virtue.

It's both a double standard and very convenient.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 22, 2020 at 3:48 PM

This seems to confuse desire with pleasure.

From Google, desire is defined as "a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen." Pleasure is defined as "a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment."

The Epicurean pursuit of pleasure involves understanding and working with desire and could therefore be considered an exercise of free will.

Post by "Don" of April 24, 2020 at 7:15 PM

Wondering: Is the practice of "choice and avoidance" predicated on the fact that we are able to exercise our free will? Sometimes we choose wisely, sometimes we choose poorly in our desire to achieve pleasure. But it's up to us to make those choices?

Post by "Godfrey" of April 24, 2020 at 7:23 PM

That certainly seems to me to be the case! The circumstances of our birth are preordained, but I can't see how one can say that our choices and avoidances are not up to us. That's how I read Epicurus as well, though I don't have a quote at my fingertips.

If we have no free will then what is the point of philosophy?

Post by "Joshua" of April 24, 2020 at 8:05 PM

Quote

To refute the solipsist or the metaphysical idealist all that you have to do is take him out and throw a rock at his head: if he ducks he's a liar. His logic may be airtight but his argument, far from revealing the delusions of living experience, only exposes the limitations of logic.

I tend to overuse this bit from Edward Abbey, but free will is one of the problems it seems especially to apply to.

Post by “Charles” of April 24, 2020 at 8:11 PM

The issue we're facing is that for the rest of philosophy: free will is a matter of ontology, but for us its a matter of physics, coming from the swerve. The underlying reasons for each of these lead to very different sets of justifications and argumentation.

In our case, it further stresses that the physics of Epicurean Philosophy are "necessary" for learning ethics, free will comes into play during choice and avoidance.

Post by “Don” of April 24, 2020 at 9:14 PM

[Quote from Charles](#)

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I'll admit I'm still "iffy" on the swerve (in relation to modern physics), but free will being a "matter of physics" for us caught my eye. I agree. In light of that, I thought this [Scientific American blog post](#) was interesting. Of course , other posts said physics disproved free will, but I like [Charles](#) characterization here in any case.