Response to Glenn's "The Very Idea of Free Will"

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In his paper "The Very Idea of Free Will" (2011), Professor John Glenn responds to three popular arguments against the very idea of free will: one, that it is unnecessary for morality; two, that the idea doesn't make sense; and three, that it is not an idea worth wanting. Although Glenn's arguments have merit against these objections, lodged as they are in terms of conceptual analysis, the arguments are not generalizable. Once we free ourselves of the Oxford tradition of conceptual analysis, which has begun to fail us in matters regarding mental states and activities, we are forced to recognize that freedom of the will, if it can be said to exist at all, is a matter of degree, rather than an absolute. Before I offer my own sense of the situation, however, let me clarify a bit more fully Glenn's position.

Both the objections presented, Glenn says, are predicated on a particular, non-compatibilist, or libertarian, sense of free will. That is, an agent said to be free in this sense must be capable of an "exercise of free will," and not merely be capable of performing acts voluntarily. But on the concept of free will as defined by Glenn, as being capable of performing an exercise of free will, or, in other words, as a situation wherein the agent has the ability to do otherwise, even Leibniz, a compatibilist of the most conciliatory of natures, would agree that humans have free will. In fact, he uses exactly that language in several places. But perhaps Glenn means rather the stronger sense of "ability to do otherwise" as understood by Descartes and Kant, wherein the will itself is indifferent, unmoved by the inclinations and activities of the body, as well as by any plans of God's. In that case, it is difficult to see what moves the agent to act, as Leibniz points out. He claimed that a will in such a condition would have no more reason to act than Buridan's ass, and so would never act at all, like the *equus* in question. Without something to incline the will in one direction or the other, Leibniz thought, no account of choice could be given. This, incidentally, I see as indicative of the prevailing kind of problem inherent in thinking of wills as things: our understanding of human action then takes on entirely wrong-headed formulations and problems. But more on that later.

Nevertheless, this appears to be the sense of free will that Glenn wishes to defend, and first from the claim that such a notion is not necessary for morality. Glenn argues that a libertarian notion of free will *is* necessary

for morality, on the grounds that a morality derived from a more naturalist understanding of humanity would deprive us of a notion of unconditional obligation. That is, he believes that morality under anything but a libertarian conception of freedom would be a changed morality, a morality that would not fulfill our intuitions about what is special about morality. But this may just be what has to stand, for the presumption of an absolutist moral theory, what some call a *real* morality, presupposes that every rational agent understands the world in fundamentally the same way, and can (come to) see the truth of correct moral judgments. The *argumentum ad desireatum*, as I have heard this type of approach called, will simply not work. Just because we would have to have a particular kind of shared mental framework in order for us to have an absolute moral imperative does not make it the case that we do in fact have that kind of conceptual framework, or that we can have that kind of morality. In fact, given the psychological, anthropological, and neuroscientific explanations of how concepts are forged, from repeated exposures to similar patterns in an individual's experience, we cannot have such shared conceptual frameworks, nor is there any chance of our acting rationally without the involvement of individual emotional responses. Emotions are essential to the formation of concepts[1] and to human rationality, as has come increasingly clearer since the analysis of the case of Phineas Gage. People are responsible for their actions; absolute obligations, however, would have to be those that any rational being could come to see as holding objectively. But this is just what cannot happen, whether we would want it or not. So, just like Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians, we philosophers are stuck, if we argue in this direction, with becoming completely irrelevant to the real world, in deriving our theories from the outcomes that we desire. Unfortunately, although the morality that survives these advances in science may have some "demoralizing" potential in the eyes of some, the fact is, what we need to develop is a morality for real human beings, in our actual circumstances, rather than one for ideal human beings in an unrealistic situation created by our desires.

On the issue of motivations (the second objection), however, Glenn and I are much more closely aligned. Here the objector to free will in the libertarian sense says that such a position would provide no explanation for actions, since there would be no necessary connection between the past states of the agent and the action in question. Glenn grants that actions of a free agent are not generated *ex nihilo*, but, he says, neither are motives *causes* of actions; rather, the agent is better said to *act on* her motive or motives. Where we agree is that neither our character, understood with Aristotle as in our control, nor some assignable motives (understood

somehow as things inside us, as perhaps viruses, or inclinations) can be the *cause* of our actions. Given that we have many conflicting motives and interests, Glenn is correct in saying that one can neither be said to be moved simply by the strongest motive operant, since this cannot be defined *sans* circularity, nor can we be said to be moved by the motive most strongly *felt*. Indeed we are capable of actions toward we feel strongly reluctant, actions antithetical to our most powerful felt urges; again, the only way to deny this is to appeal to a win by definition.

Where Glenn and I disagree is that, in order for the action in question to be free in the sense that Glenn wishes, the agent would have to know what his motives are, and would have to consciously choose (without a motive for *that*, in which case we become involved in a regress involving Buridan's ass) to act on one or a set, rather than others. But that we don't know what our motives are, at least in a huge majority of cases (and that we don't know all of our motives in any case), even when we think we do, is supported by a vast literature of empirical studies. Self-reports of motivations for actions are notoriously unreliable: not only do people often confabulate their real reasons for acting or not acting with other reasons which cast them in a more favorable light,[2] they often do this promptly and completely naturally without having any idea that they are doing so.[3] In fact, such well-researched phenomena as the priming effect, suggestibility, familiarity bias, bias in favor of oneself, and retro-fitting motivations to be in line with what one would consciously take to be a typical judgment, or a reasonable judgment, have lead many scientific researchers to believe that humans may not be able to know their real reasons for doing what they do.

What is more, even our rational intuitions do not seem to be, as Kant would have them, universal, in-built, and free of all outside influences. Research by Weinberg et al. (2004), showed that people's intuitions (these were epistemic, rather than moral), far from being based on a universal rationality, seem instead evidently closely tied to one's culture, gender, social class, and even whether one has had philosophy classes. I would suspect that similar research into moral intuitions would have similar results, given that both sets of intuitions are said to derive from a universal, innate structure, but actually, according to the science, derive from each individual's experiences. In such circumstances, it seems to be hopeless to think that humans could be the kind of moral agents that those who desire an absolute morality would need for us to be.

This is not to say that I agree with the third objection to libertarianism, however—that free will as traditionally conceived, in the libertarian sense, isn't worth wanting. Free will may well be worth wanting. Who is to say what is worth wanting? The delimitation of what is worth wanting

will come, as does everything, within a complete conceptual framework. However, if the argument is, and it seems to be, that we must assume this kind of freedom in order to derive the kind of morality that we want, then I am afraid that we must give up what we want, at least in that area. Arguing from wants to conclusions has never offered any insight into reality. I am glad to read that Glenn remarks that Kant's particular notion of true morality, with its necessary presumption of our membership in a *mundis intelligiblis*, implies that personal moral improvement is unintelligible. On this view, we all already at root know the moral truth, and everyone can come to see it. In my estimation, any view that requires that the discoveries of our best science be dismissed, and has the result that all people can be brought to see the necessity of the absolute moral truth, is both false and dangerous. Although I cannot give an *a priori* argument against Glenn's very idea of free will, then, I will have to conclude that practical instantiation of the idea is neither plausible nor desirable, and that we imperfect, conflicted, semi-free humans will have to continue to do the best that we can.

Notes

[1] See for example Stanley Greenspan and Stuart Shanker (2004), or Evans (edited with Pierre Cruse) (2004).

[2] See, for one of hundreds of examples, Latané and Darley (1970).

[3] Johansson et al. (2005).

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