Editor's Introduction

Lehrer on Free Will

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Like many of us, I began life as a libertarian, believing that free will required indeterminism. I remember my first argument for the view: "Compatibilism is like riding on a roller coaster thinking you are free." The determinist Baruch Spinoza (1995) remarked that if a moving stone were to suddenly gain consciousness it would believe it was flying of its own will. Similarly, I thought freedom must be a phenomenological illusion were determinism true. I remained a libertarian until I took Keith Lehrer's seminar on his just released collection of essays, *Metamind* (1990). The first three chapters are the papers that have influenced my thoughts on free will the most.

Questions about free will are often framed metaphysically: "What are the necessary conditions for being able to do otherwise?" Lehrer has a lot to say about that, but he also taught me that philosophers can frame their inquiries epistemically (1960, 1966). We can ask: "Is it possible to know empirically whether a person could have done otherwise?" Lehrer responds in the affirmative. Such connections between free will and epistemology set the tone for the course of my research.

There are rhetorical gems in Lehrer's writings, which is why I always return to his work. For instance, if you satisfy a specific condition, and that condition both entails that you have free will and is consistent with determinism, then that someone has free will is consistent with determinism. Thus, one way to argue for compatibilism is to find a sufficient condition that is also consistent with determinism. Lehrer (1980) suggests that if an agent has a preference rating that is totally integrated – that is, any higher-order preferences contain preferences to have all the lower-order preferences – that is sufficient for freedom yet compatible with determinism.

Lehrer delivers another insight while providing a possible worlds account of freedom (1976, 1990). An *ancestrally determined action* is "one that is determined by an antecedent condition, that antecedent condition is determined

by an antecedent condition, and so forth" (1990, 76). He then argues that it does not follow that when an event is "ancestrally determined, then the sequence of ancestral determination will extend indefinitely into the past" (1990, 76). Here is the argument:

To see why not, suppose that I do not perform action A at t_n , and that this is ancestrally determined. There may be a condition C at t_i ($i < n$) that determines this, but the condition that determines C at t_i occurs a length of time earlier than t_i which is only half the length of time between t_i and t_n . It may then be that the condition that determines this condition precedes it by only half the length of time that the condition preceded the condition it determined and so forth. Shades of Zeno, but, I believe, without paradox. In fact, then, the sequence of events, rather than extending backward indefinitely into the past, will converge toward some point in time, a point in time that may be only ten minutes earlier than time t_n .

Causal chains can emerge within causally deterministic systems. Lehrer wonders whether "certain sequences of events initiated by human agents may only be explicable internally, that is, each event in the sequence has some explanation in terms of an earlier event in the sequence, but the sequence extends backward in time only to the initiation of the sequence" (1990, 77).

The above passage is reminiscent of libertarian agency theories, where possible chains of free action begin with agent causes. This is not too surprising given that Lehrer was a teacher of Peter van Inwagen and a student of Roderick Chisholm and Richard Taylor (Campbell and Lehrer 2018). Another wonderful aspect of Lehrer's work on free will is that it borrows from incompatibilists and compatibilists, from classical theorists who identify free will with alternative possibilities of action as well as Harry Frankfurt (1971), who thought otherwise.

It is arguable that Lehrer's contributions to free will were relatively underappreciated, at least compared to his contributions in epistemology. This is mysterious since the approach to both subjects – the particular problems that he focuses on as well as the solutions to those problems – are all part of the same cloth, the same fabric of philosophy. What they have in common is worries about the foundations of important philosophical concepts and a desire – better yet, a set of theories – to help put those worries to rest.

This collection of articles grew out of a session on Lehrer's work on free will at the 2019 Meetings of the Pacific Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association. It was a group meeting of the Society for the Philosophy of Agency, so we thank the SPA and the APA.

McKenna's contribution offers new thoughts about an old issue. A lot of people credit David Lewis (1981) with providing a compelling example that questions one of van Inwagen's arguments for incompatibilism (1975). Few know that Lehrer wrote a similar reply, referenced in Lewis's article. Here is an important quote (Lehrer 1980, 199):

If S had done A at *t*, then, of course, either the laws of nature would have been different or the state of the universe would have been different. But that is not to say that the person could have brought about these conditions.

McKenna discusses the nuances of the Lehrer and Lewis responses. (This introduction contains no spoilers.)

Corlett and Waller take up some core issues in Lehrer's positive view of free will, which focuses on the concept of *preference*. As noted above, Lehrer's work is inspired by Frankfurt. Where Frankfurt (1971) distinguishes between first- and second-order desires – wanting a cigarette but wanting not to want one – Lehrer talks about lower- and higher-order preferences (2004, 2016). Why talk about preferences instead of wants and desires? There are many reasons, but one illustrates an important difference between Lehrer and Frankfurt: why the former remains committed to the ability to do otherwise. Lehrer writes: "Preference is the preference within a space of alternatives, that is, preferring a course of action A is to prefer it to alternatives, if only to the alternative not to do A" (2016, 42). In other words, if free action is acting in terms of preferences, it essentially involves alternatives of action.

I'll end with that because for Lehrer it all just loops back around anyway.

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