

EXTRA RELIGIO-METAPHYSICAL CONCEPT OF FREEDOM AND NECESSITY IN DAVID HUME

Ikechukwu Anthony KANU
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Tansian University, Umunya
Anambra State
ikee_maio@yahoo.com

Abstract

A quick glance at the historical evolution of philosophy reveals a retinue of postulations about the relationship between freedom and necessity. From the ethical dimension, Socrates and Plato argue that it is ignorance that makes people do evil, insinuating elements of determinism in human actions. Some thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund Freud hold that man is not free because his actions are determined by psychological factors. There are also other philosophers who believe that man is entirely free without determinism. However, in the philosophy of David Hume, he makes a difficult synthesis of both freedom and necessity and argues that both factors exist in the same person. This piece studies his philosophy of the compatibilism of freedom and necessity and makes a critical analysis of it.

Introduction

Philosophy has been concerned with the task of providing answers to fundamental questions, to which however, no conclusive answers are given. In relation to the problem of freedom and necessity, a cursory glance at the historical development of philosophy reveals a retinue of positions. From the ethical dimension, Socrates and Plato argue that it is ignorance that makes people do evil (Stumpf, 1966), insinuating elements of determinism in human actions. Even though Thomas Aquinas argues for human freedom (Omeregbe, 1991), he still taught that just as the intellect is made for the truth, so is the will made for the good and is not free to reject it. This perspective suggests that people's actions are determined by what they see to be good?

Some protestant reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin (cited in Omeregbe, 1991), taught that God had predestined some people for salvation, as the elect or chosen ones. He gives them grace to live good lives. If grace is given

only to a few to live the good life, could it not be argued that some could be excused for their sinfulness? From the materialist point of view, man is part of physical nature and is determined by the physical laws of nature (Russell, 1975). Some thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund Freud (cited in Omoregbe, 1991) hold that man is not free because his actions are determined by psychological factors.

Amidst all these attempts at handling the problem of freedom and necessity, the question still lingers at the horizon of human enquiry, if man is the captain of his fate to any degree. This essay attempts at studying David Hume's effort at handling the problem of freedom and necessity.

The man David Hume

David Hume the greatest of all British philosophers was born at Edinburgh on 26th April 1711. In 1723 he was admitted into the University of Edinburgh, however, he left the university in 1726 without a degree. The next few years were spent studying at home. His burning interest in literature soon indicated to his family that he would not follow their plan to become a lawyer.

My studious disposition, my sobriety and my industry gave my family a notion that the law was a profession for me. But I found an insurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuit of philosophy and general learning (O'Connor, 1965, p. 253)

In 1734, Hume entered the office of a West Indies Merchant in Bristol. This venture was brief and half-hearted. He withdrew to France, and under the conditions of 'rigid-frugality' composed his treatise of human nature, which he published in 1739 in France. He was disappointed in its reception. On this he remarks; 'Never literary attempt was more unfortunate,' for the book 'fell dead born from the press' (Stumpf, p.296).

In 1745, Hume became a professor of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. In 1746, he served as a secretary to General St Clair in an abortive raid on the coast of France. In 1752, he became a Librarian to the faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh and thus was able to start work on his 'History of England'. By 1761, his literary reputation was sufficient for all his works to be admitted to the INDEX LIBORUM PROHIBITORUM in Rome.

In 1763, he served in the capacity of secretary to the British Ambassador in France. In 1766, he accepted the Under-Secretaryship of the Northern Department of the Secretary of State in London. This post he resigned in 1769 to retire finally to Edinburgh. In 1775, he was struck with a fatal wasting disease of the bowels. Unshaken in his assurance of annihilation, continuing to receive friends as affably as always and to send corrections of his works to the printers, he followed faithfully the family motto 'True to the end'. He died in 1776.

His works include *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739; *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748; *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 1751; *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion*, which was published three years after his death, in 1776.

The epistemological foundation of Hume's philosophy

Hume based the entirety of his philosophy on the experimental method and thus studied human nature by applying the empirical principles of the experimental sciences.

As the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experiment and observation (Omoregbe, 1991, p.92).

His predecessors, Locke and Berkeley, had claimed that all human knowledge derives from sense perception, but none of them was really consistent with his claim. Hume, the thorough going empiricist, makes the same claim and takes it seriously. He would therefore have nothing to do with metaphysics, which deals with knowledge that is not derived from sense perception. For Hume, metaphysics can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

All human knowledge according to Hume derives from the impressions made on us by physical objects during sense perception. From these impressions ideas are formed, which he says are copies, images or representations of our impressions. Owing to this he also rejects the idea of substance as taught by Locke and Berkeley, on the ground that all our knowledge derives from perception and we do not perceive substance. Hume extends this to the idea of God. Hume goes further to reject ideas that are abstract and general.

In Hume's philosophy, we see empiricism reaching its ultimate consequence and become scepticism. How then does this affect his ideas on freedom and necessity?

The compatibilism of freedom and necessity in Hume

David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature, Book II, Part III, Sections I-II* and *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Chapter VIII* are the *locus classicus* of "compatibilism," the position that "free will" is compatible with strict physical determinism. Hume argues that if one were to examine the controversy, one will find out that there is really no problem at all. The difficulties therein are not intricate to freedom and necessity; they are entirely due to metaphysical notions introduced by philosophers. All that Hume understands as necessity or necessary connection is that two events have been constantly conjoined, and that when we see one of them, we automatically expect or predict the occurrence of the other (Richard and Avrum, 1993).

When one particular species of events has always in all instances been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling once upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning which can alone assure us of any matter of fact existence. We then call the one object cause, the other effect (Hume, 1968, p.7).

In this case, there is necessity in human actions. Looking at history, Hume discovered that there have been regular sequences, which have been repeated over and over again, of a certain motive followed by a certain action. He argues that what moves a man into action are his passions, natural feelings, sentiments and natural inclinations. These he refers to as the motives of human action. And this for Hume is the most important aspect of an action from the moral point of view. These determine our choices, decisions and move us into action. For instance, if we blame a man for performing a wrong action, we are in fact blaming him for being influenced by the wrong motive. And if we praise a man for a good action, we are praising him for being influenced by the right motive. Thus, from this understanding, he argues, at least, in the ordinary meaning of 'necessity', there is necessity in human actions.

As regards liberty, Hume also argues that there is liberty in human action. Hume understands liberty as 'a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may' (Richard and Avrum, 1993, p.142). In this meaning

of liberty, there is no conflict in saying that human actions are necessary, in that they are regularly conjoined with certain motives and saying that human beings possess liberty, in that they can act as they wish, so long as they are not constrained. Human beings are both free agents, in that they can do as they please when not constrained, and at the same time, their actions are necessary, in that there are laws of human behaviour.

Freedom and necessity as a metaphysical complication

David Hume insisted that the problem of freedom and necessity is a problem brought in by metaphysics; and as soon as one turned from metaphysical constructions to a consideration of the problem in ordinary terms, the entire question, which has been long debated, disappears. Metaphysicians have complicated the issue, either by seeking to establish that every event, including human volitions, has a cause, in the sense of something that necessarily produces the occurrence of the event; or by claiming that there could be an uncaused causer of events in the world. Following his empiricist principle for determining reality, David Hume argues that since we cannot tell from our experience whether events are necessarily produced by another, and at the same time, we know from experience that event stands in conjunction with another, there is really no problem of opposition as the metaphysicians tend to present. For Hume, there was no need of studying the problem, since there is really no problem at all.

A critique of Hume's compatibilism

A glance at the work of philosophers after David Hume reveals that Hume's compatibilism of freedom and necessity had a great influence on most analytical and logical empiricist philosophers. If his ideas did not shape the philosophical direction of his successors, it at least led to new interpretations. His influence is evident in the works of John Stuart Mill, G E Moore, Bertrand Russell, Jeremy Bentham, A. J. Ayer, Moritz Schlick and even physical scientists like Ernst Mach.

The problem of causality takes a central place in the philosophy of David Hume. He took the position that causal principle is the foundation upon which the validity of all knowledge depends. This implies that if there is any flaw in the causal principle, we can have no certainty of knowledge. Neither Locke nor Berkeley challenged the basic principle of causality. But for Hume, the notion of causality is to be suspected. He approached the problem by asking the question: 'What is the origin of the idea of causality?' Here he applies his principles of

ideas and impressions. Since ideas are copies of impressions, how then does the idea of causality arise in the mind? Having found no impression corresponding to the idea of causality, Hume concludes that the idea of causality arises in the mind when we experience some relations between objects. For when we perceive anything we do not perceive in it the idea that it has a cause. If the idea of causality from which Hume develops the idea of necessity is to be suspected, it then means that his whole idea of determinism which is based on causality is also suspect.

At some point in Hume's analysis of the compatibilism of freedom and necessity, in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, he equates freedom with chance. He argues that to say that some actions are free is to say that they have no causes, meaning that they are simply the products of chance.

According to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation; and consequently liberty, by removing necessity removed also causes, and is the very same thing with chance. As chance is commonly thought to imply a contradiction, and is at least contrary to experience, there are always the same arguments against liberty or free will (Hume 1968, p.402).

Hume has a very wrong notion of freedom or free will since he equates it with chance (Omogbe, 1991). To say that an action is the product of a free decision is not to say that it is the product of chance, freedom is not chance. Freedom in the terms of the scholastics, is the absence of constriction (Mundin, 1998), while to say that something happened by chance is to say that it was not prepared for, it was unexpected. For instance, one can say, "I met Adamu in the toy shop by chance". Hume's somewhat inconsistency in the understanding and appreciation of causality affects his conclusions and makes them look inconclusive. And if we are to understand from his words that freedom and chance are the same thing, it also raises questions as to whether Hume really knows what he is talking about.

Conclusion

Freedom is a prerogative of the human person and a necessary presupposition of morality. And it is on this basis that moral responsibility for our actions are accounted for. Not minding the weaknesses in the arguments of David Hume, his analysis of freedom have raised philosophical questions as regards freedom, and the answers arising from these questions, either as thesis or antithesis or synthesis has led to the development of the concept of freedom in the historical evolution of philosophy.

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