

Re: The Road with no Branches argument

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.logic/2004-10/0980.html>

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Date: 10/22/04

Date: Fri, 22 Oct 2004 13:18:57 -0500

On Thu, 21 Oct 2004 23:01:52 -0700, "Immortalist" <Reanimator_2000@yahoo.com> wrote:

>When we say that a person chooses among several possible behaviors is there
>really a choice or does it just seem like there is a choice? Do people just
>(through the action of their more complex brains) simply have better behaviors
>than wasps, while still being totally mechanical in executing those behaviors?
>Dennett gives his definition of determinism on page one: all physical events are
>caused or determined by the sum total of all previous events. This definition
>dodges a question that many people feel should not be dodged: if we repeatedly
>replayed the universe from the same point in time would it always reach the same
>future? Since we have no way of performing this experiment, this question is a
>long-term classic in philosophy and physicists have tried to interpret the
>results of other experiments in various ways in order to figure out the answer to
>this question. A related current fantasy game for physicists is to imagine that
>there are multiple universes and every time there is quantum indeterminacy each
>possibility occurs and new universes branch off. Since the 1920s physicists have
>been trying to convince themselves that quantum indeterminacy can in some way
>explain Free Will. Dennett dismisses this idea as silly. How, he asks, can random
>resolutions of quantum-level events provide people with any control over their
>behavior?
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>Since Dennett wrote *Elbow Room* in 1983 there has been a futile, but still
>on-going attempt by some physicists to answer this question by assuming that the
>brain is a device for controlling quantum indeterminacy so as to construct
>behavioral choice. Dennett argues that such efforts to salvage Free Will by
>finding a way out of the prison of determinism are wasted.
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>Dennett discusses many types of Free Will. Many philosophers have claimed that
>determinism and Free Will are incompatible. What the physicists seem to be trying
>to construct is type of Free Will that involves a way for brains to make use of
>quantum indeterminacy so as to make choices that alter the universe in our favor,
>or if there are multiple universes, maybe brains can choose among the possible
>universes. Dennett suggests that we can have another kind of Free Will, a type of
>Free Will which we can be perfectly happy with even if it does not give us the
>power to act in more than one way at any given time. Dennett is able to accept
>determinism and Free Will at the same time. How so?
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- >The type of Free Will that Dennett thinks we have is finally stated clearly in
- >the last chapter of the book: the power to be active agents, biological devices
- >that respond to our environment with rational, desirable courses of action.
- >Dennett has slowly, through the course of the book, stripped the idea of
- >behavioral choice from the idea of Free Will. How can we have Free Will if we do
- >not have real behavioral choice? Dennett tries to substitute control for choice.
- >If our mechanical brains are in control of our behavior and our brains produce
- >good behaviors for us, then do we really need choice? Is an illusion of
- >behavioral choices just as good as actual choices? Is our sensation of having the
- >freedom to execute more than one behavior at a given time really just an
- >illusion? Dennett tries not to beat his readers over the head with this issue,
- >but I think he should have.
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- >If all people have is an illusion of behavioral choice, if people are just
- >machines behaving in the only way they can, then what about personal
- >responsibility? How can we hold people responsible for and punish them for their
- >behaviors if they have no choice in how they behave? Dennett gives a two part
- >answer to this question. First, we hold people responsible for their actions
- >because we know from historical experience that this is an effective means to
- >make people behave in a socially acceptable way. Second, holding people
- >responsible only works when combined with the fact that people can be informed of
- >the fact that they are being held responsible and respond to this state of
- >affairs by controlling their behavior so as to avoid punishment. People who break
- >the rules set by society and get punished may be behaving in the only way they
- >can, but if we did not hold them accountable for their actions, people would
- >behave even worse than they do with the threat of punishment. This is a totally
- >utilitarian approach to the issue of responsibility, there is no need for moral
- >indignation when people break the rules of proper behavior. Is it, then, moral to
- >punish people who are unable to do other than break a rule? Yes, people have the
- >right to come together and improve their condition by creating rules and
- >enforcing them. We would be worse off if we did not do so. Again, an argument for
- >utility.
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- >One final issue, if people do not have real behavioral choices, why not collapse
- >into fatalism? Again, Dennett's argument is that we may not have behavioral
- >choice, but we do have control of our behavior. Dennett asks us to look around at
- >the universe and ask, can I even conceive of beings whose wills are freer than
- >our own? For Dennett, the answer to this question is, no, not really. In Elbow
- >Room he tries to explain why all the attempts that people have tried to make to
- >prove that people have behavioral choice have failed and are, in the final
- >analysis, not really important anyhow. As humans, we are as much in control of
- >our behavior as anything in the universe. As humans, we have the best chance to
- >produce good behavior. We should be satisfied with what we have and not fret over
- >our lack of behavioral choice.
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- >As usual, I find it very hard to disagree with Dennett. My largest complaint
- >about Elbow Room is that it does not satisfactorily deal with the issue of why we
- >feel so strongly that we do have behavioral choice. I agree with Dennett that we
- >do not have choice, but why do we feel like we do? My answer to this question is
- >that our sensation of having behavioral choice has been carefully selected by
- >evolution. The well developed human sensation of having Free Will and being able

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>to select among possible behaviors has strong survival value. People who loose
>the feeling that they can plan alternative behaviors and execute their choice of
>possible behaviors tend to become fatalistic and stop struggling for survival. As
>Dennett writes, *Belief in Free Will is a necessary condition for having Free
>Will. When we are planning for the future and thinking about possible actions to
>take in the future, we are expending considerable amounts of biologically
>expensive resources (brain power). Evolution has designed us to feel strongly
>that all of our effort of planning pays off, that we control what we do. If this
>connection between our brains efforts to model reality and predict the future and
>so make possible good outcomes is disconnected from our sense of self and our
>will, then fatalism and self-destructive behaviors are close at hand.*

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>*So at the end of our philosophical hair-splitting, we reach the same conclusion
>as the average man on the street, but we have some additional baggage. If we
>accept Dennett's arguments, then we recognize that we have no real behavioral
>choices, but we continue to behave as if we do. I would say that when we feel
>like we are making a behavioral choice, this is a very convenient way for a brain
>to make sure that it keeps planning and struggling for survival. Our conscious
>thoughts never see the detailed working of our mechanical brains, we can never
>directly sense that we never really have behavioral choice, that our brains are
>deterministic machines. Our brains are designed to present us with a tantalizing
>array of apparent possibilities and the sensation that we have choice, while in
>reality there is only one way things will work out in the end. So, at the end of
>our philosophical journey we must be satisfied that our brains are in control and
>we must content ourselves with behaving as if we have behavioral choice, even
>though we know we do not. Nature has played a devious trick on us. Grin and bare
>it. It could be worse, think what it would be like to be a wasp.*

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><http://www.geocities.com/ResearchTriangle/System/8870/philosophicus/Elbows.html>
><http://www.geocities.com/ResearchTriangle/System/8870/books/HawkTime.html>

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One analyzes future possibilities of action and selects the one he likes best or hates the least. We always do exactly as we want. This is how we are made, and it gives us the illusion of freedom of choice. But to always do what one likes best is not freedom at all. It's a mechanism that utterly limits freedom. Real freedom would allow one to hate what he loves and to love what he hates. We're certainly not inclined, and therefor not Free to do any such thing. We're caught in our own web.

We're bound and determined by our inclinations and opinions to do what pleases us and to avoid what displeases us. And so we are easy to influence and manipulate by those who understand human nature. Salesmen always sell the sizzle and never the steak. They play on our attractions and aversions like a harmonica. Since we are gullible we accept substitutions of emotion for substance, and even imagine we have got the better of the deal.