

**THE CORNER TREASURY OF ARCANE AND NEGLECTED PHILOSOPHICAL GEMS  
(OF MY OWN MAKING).** *Michael Corner, Ph.D (Columbia University, 1964)*

Gem #2: FREEDOM, WILL, MIND & BRAIN: FINIS (hurrah!) TO A NEVER-ENDING USELESS STORY, WITH SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A FRESH START ON A NEW AND HOPEFULLY USEFUL CHAPTER.

© 2016 MIEV Amsterdam

With the recognition that the doctrine of 'free-will' is an essentially *negative* assertion – to wit: “voluntary actions are neither caused by strictly biological mechanisms nor deducible from deterministic laws of nature” – comes the realization that arguments purporting to support such a conclusion can only serve to inhibit further research on the subject. If contradictory hypotheses, namely, can already be convincingly demonstrated to be highly implausible, why take the trouble (and the risk!) to check them out anyway? It became incumbent on me, therefore, to critically examine lines of thought that would tend to have such a stultifying effect on neuro-psychological investigations into the deepest and most intractable aspects of the human mind and its relationship to the natural world. For this task, I found it to be quite unnecessary to engage in complicated logical exercises, since the *a priori* case against biological determination (of human wilfulness) turns out, upon closer examination, to be a transparent mixture of cultural bias and wishful thinking rather than of well-reasoned argumentation. I suspect that anyone permitting him/herself to ask, “honestly, how compelling would I find this line of reasoning were I not so desirous of accepting its conclusion?”, must come around to a similar point of view. This essay, then, serves the function of an “Emperor’s New Clothes” for a philosophically inclined audience.

In 2001 an ambitious book with the title, *Neurophilosophy of free will: from libertarian illusions to a concept of natural autonomy -an essay on freedom, responsibility, insight and compassion*, was published by the MIT Press. Since this is a serious work which has the goal of examining whether or not the hitherto intractable concept of 'free will' can be understood within a purely 'naturalistic' world-view, yet winds up being a compendium of the historical sources of confusion surrounding this question, it serves as an excellent template for examining the logical pitfalls which have prevented generations of thinkers from resolving it. By **naturalism** in this context is meant, reasonably enough, that all events are causally determined by underlying 'mechanisms' of some sort, unaided by supernatural powers. The concept of **freedom** (as applied to the will), on the other hand, conventionally implies a degree of independence from physical, c.q., physiological processes. The seeming irreconcilability of these two requirements is what has hamstrung previous discussions, and is what authors with a unifying bent of mind have unsuccessfully attempted to overcome. Clarification of the reasons for this perennial failure is the *raison d'être* of the present essay, which will pinpoint five major misconceptions – which I have called, respectively, the **semantic, atomistic, perceptual, psychological and sociological fallacies**.

The first order of business, naturally, needs to be a satisfactory semantic formulation which, in contrast to common practice, I propose to base on the question, 'freedom *from* ... (what, exactly?)', instead of the traditional 'freedom *to* ..... (do, whatever)'. Following

conventional practice, Dr. Walter's summary of possible definitions of "free will" consists of the following three **to's**: (i) to be able to *have acted otherwise*; (ii) to act in an *intelligible fashion*, and (iii) to *be the originator* of one's own actions. Although all of these will be disposed of *en passant* in the course of this essay, the book can nevertheless be highly recommended for its exhaustive examination of every conceivable argument for and against a 'libertarian' interpretation of voluntary action. It reaches the inevitable tautological conclusion that, while a strict interpretation of the concept of **free-will** is incompatible with a perfectly deterministic universe, the frequently adduced concept of *indeterminacy* is unsatisfactory as a synonym for *freedom* (except, of course, in a trivial statistical sense: as in "degrees of freedom").

The concept of *self-determination* by multiple 'prime movers' (viz., individual wills, human or otherwise) which are capable of initiating actions independent of external causation - an idea occasionally put forth in support of the proposition, which I'll brand **the semantic fallacy**, that the neuro-psychological concept *voluntary* is synonymous with the logico-philosophical concept *free* - equally fails as an explanation for 'voluntary' decisions. What we call voluntary behaviors, in fact, are simply those which appear to be characterized by consideration of available sensory information before an organism decides upon a course of action, as opposed to reflexively responding to 'releasing stimuli' in a pre-programmed manner. In this sense, it is indeed the nervous system itself which 'chooses' its own course of action, but it is a verbal trap to suppose that such 'free' choices imply independence from physiological determinants. Basic to a biological interpretation of volition is the brain's ability to speed up learning processes by calculating and testing possible appropriate responses, rather than waiting for trial-and-error conditioning to do the job 'naturally'. It is this capacity for accelerated learning by applied mental effort which implicitly sustains the notion of 'internal freedom', on the basis of which a consciously experienced 'self' can be exhorted to struggle against the dictates and limitations of its own biological nature. To the extent that higher brain systems operate in any sense 'independently', however, their apparent freedom is thus only from domination by hard-wired 'lower' mechanisms, and by no means from the 'laws' governing biophysical processes in general.

A curious omission plaguing the philosophical literature is the scant consideration given to the *nature* of that Self, the freedom of whose 'will' is the whole point of the debate. The subjective experience of one's Self, whether or not acting 'freely', is extremely fluid and may depend on a unique pattern of neuronal activity that is normally confined to those portions of the cerebral cortex that mediate the part of the conscious field that is experienced as being 'me' rather than the 'outside world'. Especially in connection with volition, I would have thought that inclusion of introspective evidence about how one

experiences oneself when in a 'willing' state of mind is an essential step in a philosophical undertaking such as this. Most authors shy away, however, from drawing the foregone conclusion that a 'will' which is free from causal physical antecedents must be devoid of any internal '*mechanism*' responsible for whatever that Self happens to will. The universe would then have to contain as many prime-movers/degrees-of-freedom as there are individual selves, souls, or whatever one wishes to call them. This contra-holistic deduction from the postulate of free-will (which can be characterized as **the atomistic fallacy**) unmasks its irreducibly dualistic presumption, and thus vitiates at the very outset any hope for a reconciliation with 'laws of nature'.

I hasten to add, in addition, that it is a blatant but widespread misconception – let's call it **the perceptual fallacy** - to suppose that a sense of being 'free to choose' is at odds with a purely material/energetic world-view: *failure to perceive the presence of something* is not equivalent to *perceiving its absence!* In other words, our conscious experience one of unawareness of whatever mechanisms might in fact be operating under the surface. This irreducible experiential 'blind spot' is therefore irrelevant to philosophical deliberations about the nature of volition. For this reason, I would actually have preferred the word *delusion* in the subtitle of the present essay, since Dr. Walter's "libertarian *illusions*" turn out to be more a matter of poor reasoning than of distorted perception.

Which brings us to the last of the three proffered criteria, viz., that of 'agency': the Self must itself be the source of its (voluntary) acts and decisions. It shouldn't take too much reflection to realize that this self(!)-evident criterion is in conflict with the 'laws' of nature only when *self* and *nature* are conceived to be in opposition to one another, but that the contradiction disappears when they are seen to be two sides of the same coin. The unfortunate misnomer 'law', when applied to the physical world, does not in fact imply any external constraints or insistence upon obedience to an external power, but merely entails a precise *description* of what a material/energetic entity, including you and me, does on the basis of its 'inner nature', i.e., functional organization. The quest to believe ourselves free from such 'dictates' - **the psychological fallacy** - thus betrays a deep-seated alienation from the natural world which can even express itself as an outright refusal to identify oneself with "that unappetizing overgrown blob of fatty substance", as someone once described the human brain. A universe filled with individual 'souls, egos or (free) wills' now stands revealed as an outmoded atomistic conception of the world - viz., as an empty space containing distinct objects that mysteriously interact with one another at a distance – which is then projected (call it *spiritual materialism!*) into a hypothetical supernatural/animistic domain. For this reason, I submit that it is a serious omission in any neuro-philosophical treatise dealing with volition to omit

consideration of the wide varieties of *altered states* of (self)-consciousness and their putative physiological basis.

One vexing question remains at this point, "what are we to believe/presume in the meantime?", considering that the ethical and moral basis of civilized behavior is felt by many to depend upon a quasi-dualistic answer to the question of '*personal responsibility*'. It's regrettable that a golden opportunity, not to say philosopher's obligation, to relegate this fiercely emotional factor in the free-will debate to the realm of colossal misunderstanding - **the sociological fallacy** - was once again passed up in the volume under discussion. Free-will as an ideological rationale for holding miscreants responsible for their 'dastardly deeds' is, to be sure, a concept which has mercifully evolved into a dictum of a *justified* degree of punishment, rather than permitting unbridled retribution towards offenders who, as we now recognize, may not have acted at a 'willful' psychological level at all but were victimized by 'extenuating circumstances'.

Nevertheless, the very notion of 'justification' puts punishments inflicted on such a basis outside the motivational domain of either effective negative conditioning ('behavior therapy') or protection of society ('preventive detention') and becomes, rather, a rationalization for inflicting a dosed amount of pain such that offenders get their 'just deserts'. This judicial philosophy has its bed-rock in ( you guessed it!) the concept of **free-will**, which was born and nurtured together with the biblical doctrines of '*original sin*' and '*eternal damnation*', and without which there would no longer be any ethical basis for perpetuating vestiges of these archaic vindictive beliefs.