

Sober's "weather vane" theory of free will

Sober wants to defend the compatibilist position. To do that, he needs to come up with an account of free will that makes it possible for us to have free will even if all of our choices are caused by our genes, learning, and the present environment. Hume's account of free will did that, but it was flawed. Like Hume, Sober wants to "reconcile" determinism and free will, but he wants to avoid Hume's mistakes.

Sober's "weather vane" theory says that free will is analogous to a "free" weather vane. Farmers distinguish free from stuck weather vanes. With both, the vane's "behavior" is caused by its set-up and the environment. But when it's "free," it's functioning the way it's supposed to. When it's "unfree" or stuck, it's malfunctioning. Sober proposes that analogously, we have a free will when our mind is functioning properly when we are making choices.

Sober distinguishes two parts or components of our minds: the part which causes us to form beliefs in response to evidence/data that we've received, and the part which causes us to have desires or preferences. He calls the former the "BGD" (belief generating device), and the latter the "DGD" (desire generating device). According to the weather vane theory, we have free will whenever the choices that we make are caused by a properly functioning BGD and DGD.

What is involved in their malfunctioning? Sober's proposal is that the two parts malfunction when they cause us to have beliefs and desires that are not good for us. The BGD's function is to give us true beliefs, because creatures who have true beliefs about the world are more likely to adapt successfully to it, to solve problems that threaten their survival, than creatures who have false beliefs. Our beliefs are more likely to be true, when they are formed in a way that's responsive to the available evidence. So the BGD is malfunctioning, when it causes us to have beliefs that are not supported by good evidence. (For example, the person who believes that Elvis is still alive because that makes him happier, even though all the evidence points to Elvis's being dead, has a malfunctioning BGD).

The function of the DGD is to "represent what is good for the organism." When we are dehydrated, it is good for us to drink water. So if the DGD is functioning properly, it will cause us to experience thirst (the desire to drink) when we are dehydrated.

Sober proposes that people stuck in the grips of "psychological compulsion"—for example, the kleptomaniac with an irresistible urge to steal, and the hand washer who feels compelled to wash his hands (because they "feel dirty") dozens of times a day—lack free will, because their DGD is malfunctioning. Kleptomaniacs want to steal even when they know that stealing is not good for them, and compulsive hand washers want to wash their hands even when know that their fear of germs is excessive and irrational.

The weather vane theory gives us a definition of free will that's different from Hume's. But the following seems to be a *counterexample* to its definition of free will:

Suppose that my brother has suffered kidney failure and will die unless he receives a new kidney from a compatible donor, and that I'm the only available compatible donor. To save my brother's life, I give him one of my kidneys. Giving him one of my kidneys is bad for me, but good for him. I do it, however, because I love him. Isn't this possible? If this happened, wouldn't we all agree that my decision to give him one of my kidneys was freely made? If so, then the weather vane theory can't be right. It implies that my DGD is malfunctioning when it causes me to have desires for *altruistic self-sacrifice*.

Are there other kinds of counterexample to the weather vane theory? It seems to me there are. In addition to altruistic desires, there are extremely foolish/misguided egoistic desires. Consider those people who choose to sit on their butts all the time/be physically inactive, to smoke, and to a diet that's too high in salt, refined sugars, starches, and "bad" fats. They're acting from desires that are not good for them. Therefore, according to the weather vane theory, their DGD has malfunctioned. Therefore, according to that theory, they lack free will. But isn't it incorrect to think that all of these people must lack free will? We think that people are responsible for the foolish lifestyle decisions.