

Introduction

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What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you?
(Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*)

The essays included in this monographic section were originally presented at a symposium organized by the Centre for Religious Studies of FBK (Bruno Kessler Foundation) at Trento in February 2011. The meeting marked the conclusion of a six years long research project devoted to “The Future of Human Nature.”

To the remaining two members of the team (myself and Jonathan Davies), it seemed almost mandatory to conclude the project by focusing on what is doubtless the core riddle of our species identity: the baffling coexistence of spontaneity and mechanism, activity and passivity, freedom and necessity, in human life. As is well-known, the issue is both stale, overworked, maddening, and timeless, challenging, often exhilarating – in a word: inescapable (at least for those who are concerned with the fate of our precarious lot). To evoke a Schopenhauer’s renowned metaphor, our uncomfortable sense of freedom is for us a *Weltknoten*, a knot of *our* life-world. Or, echoing a no less famous Merleau-Pontyan image, it is the chiasm that better epitomizes the human condition: its dazzling bistability. After all, I think that most people would agree with Georg Simmel’s thoughtful remark in his *Tagebuch* that “man is the inadequate, lost, restless being. As a rational being, he has too much nature; as a natural being, he has too much reason – what can come out of this?”

So far, this sounds indisputable, but what can one possibly be expected to add to this ageless philosophical wisdom? In a nutshell, our unpretentious overall aim was to explore the issue from different angles. Thus, the enframing title reference to the *varieties* of determinism is meant to express the widespread impression that we entertain various, and not easily reconcilable, ideas when we think about free will. A dense conceptual constellation is lurking just behind our backs. And therein lies a

number of antithetical intuitions that are embodied into thick notions such as, among others, “hard (or harsh) determinism,” “self-determination,” “sovereign freedom,” “situated liberty.” When one is confronted with such a degree of complexity, it seems a good idea not to forget Wittgenstein’s always relevant warning: “Im Rennen der Philosophie gewinnt, wer am langsamsten laufen kann. Oder: der, der das Ziel zuletzt erreicht.” (In philosophy the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets to the winning post last.) This amounts to say that a lot of time and effort is needed to mull over the meanings, assumptions, implications, historical and cultural backgrounds, of contemporary heated (and frequently “media hype”) disputes on the real impact of modern science’s challenges to free will and personal responsibility.

Hasty conclusions are not the only problem, here; it is above all the urge to say the last word which can prove fatal. So the call to beware of all the complexity at play is not an artful way to dodge the real (and clear) problems on the table, but one of the most effective means to boost our understanding. If a common element can be found in all the essays in this volume, it is the more or less explicit desire to substitute a model of reasoning based on the ideal of a cognitive saturation, or closure, with one aimed at an indefinite extension of our reflective equilibrium. As long as big metaphysical issues are concerned, it is very unlikely that we will ever be able to break away from a form of recursive reasoning where novel empirical achievements are constantly balanced by new degrees of understanding that are bound to redefine our original questions by recontextualizing them.

As for the issues dealt with in the essays, they are too numerous to be mentioned. Yet, since an editor’s main (and maybe only) duty is to act as a sort of *hors d’oeuvre*, I will try to whet the reader’s appetite by supplying a sweeping and somewhat idiosyncratic overview of the food (for thought) that can be tasted in the following pages.

In the opening essay, John Dupré lingers on the relationship between indeterminism and free will and comes up with an unusual opinion: that strict causal order is “an occasional feature of the world” and that the defender of free will, far from contenting oneself with the idea that the agent could (counterfactually) have done otherwise (even though – in light of her ends, principles, and so forth – it is unlikely that she *might* have done otherwise), can claim that personal deliberation and decision sometimes may make a difference and change the (patchy) causal order of our “dappled” world. Mario De Caro’s essay focuses, instead, on the re-

cent repeated attempts to “naturalize” the metaphysical issue of free will by subjecting it to an empirical test and dismisses them as deeply misguided. He especially insists on the fact that experiments such as those conducted in Berlin by John-Dylan Haynes and colleagues *do not* concern free decisions at all (neither in the objective, nor in the subjective sense) and that, therefore, their conclusions are “substantially ungrounded.”

Next, Klaus Müller draws attention to the “unthought” surrounding the question of the self in contemporary debates on free will. Relying on the work of Dieter Henrich, he argues for what he calls a “retranscendentalization,” i.e. a strong theory of the subject: “the notion of a self-conscious and free subjectivity, which is both shown to be irreducible and real and which also knows itself to be a contingent element of the world, [...] dependent on a ground that sets it free.” After a helpful review of several divergent formulations of the thesis of determinism that crop up in the free-will debate, Boris Rähme shows in his contribution why the problem of free will should be understood as a “hard” (that is, “moot,” open-ended) philosophical problem, rather than as a “mystery” (van Inwagen) or a humanly unattainable insight into the fabric of reality (McGinn).

In the last two papers, Jonathan Davies and Carlo Gabbani put on the table a couple of crucial theoretical questions: that, respectively, of emergence and of the principal of causal closure. Davies proposes an understanding of emergence, rooted in an analysis of the practices of biologists. His overall aim is to avoid some of the more worrisome metaphysical riddles arising from past attempts to explain emergent features. In particular, he focuses on the spatio-temporal distribution of causal factors (or functions) in the production of an emergent property or entity (endowed with novel causal powers) rather than on an ontology of levels. Gabbani, finally, takes up the difficult task of challenging one of the pillars of the “scientific image of the world.” He, thus, undertakes to undermine the common use of the thesis of the physical world causal closure as a principle with empirical content. After a long discussion, he rejects it as a consequence of the fallacy of hypostatizing some limited epistemic characteristics into an ultimately unwarranted meta-philosophical stance.

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