



Rationality as a Pre-condition of Freewill

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Abstract : The freewill theories as well as our own common understanding leads us to believe that rationality is very important to freewill and reason guides us to be free in choosing our actions. However, several recent theories in the field of Philosophy of action and moral philosophy have suggested such analysis of human actions that the role of either rationality or freewill and sometimes even both is lost completely. In the present world of artificial intelligence (AI) and a mechanistic interpretation of everything that is going around the world, it is important to locate the presence of the concepts of rationality and freewill in understanding the concept of action as against events or occurrences. The present paper aims to analyse these two important concepts in philosophy and understand the relation between the two.

Keywords: Rationality, Freewill, Actions, Responsibility, Determinism,

Before setting out for an enquiry into the role of rationality in the sphere of the free-will or if it is the other way round. It would be a better approach if we ponder on firstly the two very important concepts of philosophy the study of who's relation I have set as my task.

Rationality: An attempt to understand rationality from the classical model gives us the concept of a separate cognitive faculty that leads to actions which are guided by our beliefs and desires. Another assumption that also was regarded as essential to the concept of rationality was that it consists in obeying rules. However, we'll find that these assumptions have not much strength and doubts have been raised regarding them and other such assumptions as well. It has been argued that largely, neither does rationality lie in the following of rules, nor are rational actions guided by beliefs and desires but its rather the irrational acts that are guided by passions and desires. Phillipa Foot develops this idea to show that all attempts to reduce the reasons for one's moral actions in terms of an agent's desires, interests and wants are unjustified. Morality, she points out is not just evaluative but also normative. One often chooses an action on moral considerations even when it is opposed to the agent's desires and wants. She explains the idea on the ground that:

Morality, or a large part of morality, has to do with a man's actions so far as these effect other men for good or ill. If it can be shown that we have reason to aim at the good of others, as much as we have reason to aim at our own, then we shall have reason to follow a great many of morality's laws.ⁱ

Socrates had said, "The world is a cosmos governed by rationality" thus it is rationality that gives meaning and order to the world. Rationality in general is supposed to lie in the fact that how people acquire their beliefs from evidence and connect reasons to actions. At the most basic level, it can be said rationality concerns the standards for truth and consistency. The concept of Rationality is normally used in a normative sense. That is, one that conveys condemnation or endorsement. To call an action rational means to say that there were good reasons to do an action and likewise to call an action irrational indicates that that there were some error or fault regarding how these actions came about.

Freewill: The term freewill refers to a philosophical concept that has many debatable issues attached to it. The most remarkable thing to note here is that while the term includes the word 'will', the freedom talked about here is the freedom of action and not the freedom of thought. Though, it can again be argued whether freedom of action is at all possible without freedom of thought. The two most important concepts related to freewill are that of freedom and responsibility. Freedom in the broad sense is understood as the absence of any interference and thus such actions that are not guided by some other person's interference or are performed in accordance to our own will are called free actions. However, , it is often pointed out, in our societies very often although we are free to do what we 'will' to, yet we cannot be called completely free because even without us being aware of it our will is sometimes severely limited. For, even though we may do what we 'will' to do we do not will freely. Thus a person loses his freewill in the absence of a free environment because freedom is all about developing one's capacities to the best of our abilities and thereby becoming your true self. Another important point is raised by Carl Ginet when he states that, "... the fact that my making decisions commits me to the assumption that I have freedom does not establish that I do have freedom. It is, after all, possible to be quite mistaken in assuming that a certain alternative is open to me."ⁱⁱ

Responsibility is another dimension from which the concept of freewill can be analysed. Every agent is responsible for the consequences of his actions if he has performed the act freely. But we find that our lives are very much chalked out by the influence of our social and cultural background, parenting and so on. In such a situation, how much of praise or blame, as the case may be, can actually be attributed to the agent himself, this is basically the problem regarding responsibility.

Theories related to free willⁱⁱⁱ- many different theories have been given in relation to the concept of freewill and a quick glance at them will enable us to have a better understanding of the concept as well as identifying the problems that are related to it.

Freewill and Determinism: as understood in the simplest form of it the problem deals with the question that if our actions and characters are determined by such factors over which we hardly have any control, then can we really be termed as free agents? These factors may range from God, nature, scientific laws, heredity, to social and psychological conditioning. The conflict lies in the fact that whenever we think of our freewill we regard that we have deliberately chosen the particular course of action and the source of action is within us and not somewhere beyond. According to Aristotle, "when acting is up to us ; so is not acting." But once we accept determinism all our choices and reasons for actions are attributed to something beyond ourselves. However, this conflict is not the final word on the subject.

Different views have been held by different thinkers. Firstly, there is the question that, are all events determined? And secondly, is freewill compatible with determinism? The first question has been answered both in the affirmative and negative. The latter argue that with the development of recent quantum physics, it has been proved that one cannot even know and predict the behaviour of elementary particles. Something that was thought to be possible, earlier and hence universal determinism breaks down. But the determinists hold that, firstly we do not know that quantum physics is the last word in science and moreover, even if it is so, the indeterminism in the behaviour of elementary particles can hardly have any role to play in the context of human behaviour, which is the area of concern in freewill debates, and we can still regard human behaviour to be practically, near determined. Another possibility that arises is that, if, we regard these quantum jumps or other undetermined events have some effect on human behaviour this still is not going to help the case of freewill. These acts would be unpredictable and uncontrollable like the blinking of one's eyes, and such acts are the last thing that could be included in the sphere of free actions.

Rationality and Determinism: before trying to seek a compatible relationship between the two I will try to draw your attention to two very famous quotes by two very prominent philosophers. Firstly, Aristotle said, "Man is a rational animal" and the second is by Sartre who said, "Man is condemned to be free." The immense importance that these philosophers have attributed to man's rationality and his capacity to act according to his freewill shows how these must be the essential characteristics of human beings.

In general the question of freewill arises only with respect to human beings, or to be more specific, we do not even talk about the freewill of infants and lunatics. Thus expressing the fact that the question of freewill arises only when the agent is a rational being and employs his rational capacity in choosing a particular action, for it is not a necessary fact that a rational being always acts rationally.

Now if we try to analyse the role played by rationality in the different strands regarding determinism, we find taking the first case of universal determinism that if it is true, we can hardly define any role to rationality. If whatever we choose in our lives is already determined by factors that are way beyond our control, then it is futile to even think that the act deserves any appreciation or abuse of our rational faculty. But if we accept that indeterminism is true and a sudden quantum jump results in the performing of an act, then again there is hardly any role for rationality to play in this whole act.

One of the major debates with the issue of freewill is that whether determinism is compatible with freewill or not. The compatibilists answer to the question is that we can have freedom and determinism together. Most compatibilists argue that we are free when there is an absence of constraints or impediments. They argue that till the time we are not on gunpoint or tied down or so we are the free authors of our actions, whatever the laws of nature entail.

This idea definitely has some merit, for isn't it the case that we talk of free choice, only in cases where we have alternative before us. Many of our actions are such that they cannot be called rational, but they aren't irrational too. It is just that the question of rationality and freewill do not arise in the context of such actions. so, only when the action presents before us certain alternatives, is that rationality comes into play and then we consciously choose a particular course of action. Thus, classical compatibilists presented the idea that an action is free, till there is a possibility that the agent 'could have done otherwise'.

But modern compatibilists like Dennett and Frankfurt tried to establish that even when an agent could not have done otherwise, he is responsible for his acts. Dennett gave the example of Martin Luther who said that 'he could do no other' after initiating the protestant reform, but saying that he could do no other didn't mean that he was running off the responsibility of his act, but on the contrary, it meant that after all the thought and deliberation, he could not but do that thus being completely responsible for it.

Frankfurt argues that, "... our having a sense for acting may sometime cause it to be the case that movements of our bodies are guided by us in a manner which reflects that reason... The fact that we are

rational and self-conscious, substantially affect the character of our behaviour and the ways in which our actions are integrated into our lives.”^{iv}

Frankfurt tries to introduce the concept of person in the freewill debate. He claims that the question, what makes something a person, is related to the notion of freewill. His argument is that unlike other animals, persons have a ‘reflective self evaluation’. And this leads to second order desires. Animals, according to Frankfurt, have only first order desires and only persons are capable of this self evaluation. He says that, our ‘will’ is ‘free’ only when is in accordance with our second order desires. Such hierarchical theorists like Frankfurt argue that while the classical compatibilists theory talks only about freedom of action, i.e. being able to do what we will,, they also talk of freedom of will being able to will what we will.

Now, it is quite evident from these theories that the role of rationality cannot be denied here. Whether we talk of moral responsibility or reflective self evaluation, these concepts become meaningless if brought out of the sphere of rationality.

A few other views: But, that is only one side of the coin and before ending up our study it seems important to have a look on the other side as well.

Kant was a philosopher of human autonomy- the view that by our own understanding leads us to believe that rationality is very important to free will and reason guides us to be free in choosing our actions. But that is only one side of the coin and before ending our study it seems important to have a look on the other side as well. Kant was a philosopher of human autonomy – the view that by our reason , human beings can discover the basic principles of knowledge and action without any external assistance, not even divine support.

He claimed that every being with a will must indeed act under the idea of freedom. That is, they must not consider themselves as subject to determinism but rather to do what seems most rational to do, thus guiding their acts in accordance with the moral law – the rational law. Hence even though the term suggest that they are being guided by some external law giving agency , they are actually governed by the commands of their own reason.

Henry Sidgwick has pointed out a problem here and quite rightly so, he argued that if we believe that the real laws guiding our behaviour are rational and thereby moral, then any wrong doing could only show that an agent is not rational and therefore not responsible at all for the wrong committed. He also claims that the idea of categorical imperative leaves hardly any room for human freewill.

The main issue that arises here is that, ‘what does it mean to say that man is free when he is guided by reason?’ Kant had intertwined the two ideas so strongly that it appears that when you act in accordance with the moral law, you are actually being rational, but one cant really be free in obeying to a law and if you ignore the law and act freely, then you are not being rational.

In his famous essay, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, Berlin talks of reason and passion as two criterion of self. The higher self is guided by reason and leads to freedom while the lower self is guided by passions and leads to bondage. He claimed that when we act in accordance with our rational capacity, we are free in the positive sense. In general, man is not guided by reason but is rather a slave of his passions whereas the higher self is represented by bodies like the church or nation. Thus it is justified to take away all the freedom of a person, in the name of his freedom, on the argument that if he was to act according to his own rational will, he would certainly act in the manner that is told by the social whole.

It claims that these are your true desires and obeying them makes you free in the positive sense. Berlin finds this ‘positive sense of liberty to be a dangerous concept, for it presents rationality as a legitimate reason for taking away all your freedom.

Another prominent distinction that is made is between theoretical reason and practical reason. While the former is authoritative over beliefs, the latter is applicable to the sphere of actions. Issues of practical reason include questions like, how should we determine the means that are appropriate for our ends, how should we define our ends and so on. In recent times, the most compelling picture of practical reason is presented in the 'expected utility theory' given by the economists. In such theories, rational choice is that which yields the highest expected utility which is calculated by measuring the utility or the goodness/badness of possible outcomes, multiplying the utility by possibility of occurrence of that outcome and finally adding them together. Thus action that is most rational is the one that maximises utility in the manner just calculated. This is again not leaving much scope for the exercise of one's freewill. If an act is regarded as rational, it should be guided by these calculations and not our will.

The theories and concepts discussed above suggest a very restricted role of freewill in the moral discussions. Rationality, as defined by the above principles, is a concrete and calculated idea that leaves very little scope for the exercise of freewill. However, we need to rethink our understanding of the concept of rationality and once we have a broader understanding of the it, it wouldn't be difficult to track how the two concepts are so interrelated as well as closely linked to the idea of moral responsibility.

ⁱ Phillipa Foot, *Virtues and Vice*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978, p. 153

ⁱⁱ Carl Ginet, '*On Action*', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p 91.

ⁱⁱⁱ The discussions in this section are based on my readings of several essays from Robert Kane ed. *Freewill*, Blackwell Publishers 2002 and Donald Davidson ed. *Essays on Actions and Events*, O Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001

^{iv} Harry G, Frankfurt, 'The Problem of Action in Alfred R. Mele ed. *The Philosophy of Action*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997 pp 50-51

